

## A Consideration of New Testament Church Polity

What is essential to know about church polity?

- ◆ There is a divine pattern
- ◆ For utilizing qualified people
- ◆ Following an effective process
- ◆ To enable the church to be the church.

Is New Testament narrative and teaching of church organization and function descriptive or prescriptive (i.e., does it merely describe first century patterns which were only appropriate for that cultural context or does it prescribe abiding principles that are universally applicable)?

- ◆ A well-known CB pastor, author and speaker has stated that church polity is a matter of sociology, not theology.
- ◆ Nadab and Abihu made the same false assumption concerning Old Testament worship in Leviticus 10:1-2.
- ◆ The Apostles – forming the “foundation” of the church (Ephesians 2:19-20) – clearly saw their teaching and ministry as having more than local church significance.
- ◆ Paul prescribes beliefs and practices to be observed “in all the churches” (I Corinthians 7:7, 14:33-34).
- ◆ If the same polity (developing out of Jewish forms and practice) is applicable to Greeks as well as Jews, it is evidently universally applicable.

Does that mean every church is a “carbon-copy”?

No! If we understand that the 6 billion people alive today share the same 206 bones without a single exact duplicate, it is clear that local churches are “fleshed out” in unlimited different ways, using the same biblical “skeleton” structure of covenant relationships, qualifications for members, church discipline, qualifications for leaders, and church polity.

Who are the “qualified” people the New Testament places in leadership?

The biblical offices in a church are overseer (bishop)/pastor and deacon who together function as the elders of the church.

Isn't “elder” an office?

- ◆ Elder is an Old Testament term that originally referred to age, then came to mean one qualified to lead by virtue of the wisdom and experience of maturity.
- ◆ Elder was not an office per se but a function of leadership or a pool of leadership composed of men who held various offices – heads of families, heads of clans, heads of tribes, judges, priest, etc.
- ◆ The term “leader” could be substituted throughout the Old Testament for “elder” without doing historical or grammatical violence (compare the NIV and KJV renderings of II Kings 19:2)
- ◆ When the church began, this was the pattern of leadership that was assumed. Leadership developed through the following phases:
  - The initial leaders were the Apostles in Acts 1-5, a group limited to 12 men.
  - The first expansion of leadership occurs in Acts 6 with the selection of the first deacons: a group of seven spiritually qualified men chosen to administer a broad provision of services to a body of as many as 10,000 (note Acts 2:44-45; 4:32-37),

in addition to conducting effective spiritual ministries (at least the two who are spot-lighted – Stephen and Phillip – in Acts 6-8).

- Acts 11:30 introduces the next transition: introduction of the term “elder” for the first time.
- The function of the elders in that passage was to receive financial resources that had been collected to alleviate the needs of believers in Jerusalem – exactly the same role of the deacons of Acts 6, lending credence to identifying the “deacons” as the “elders.”
- As the New Testament developed in response to questions and conflicts in the churches, instruction was given concerning support for spiritual leaders (I Timothy 5:17-18); discipline of spiritual leaders (I Timothy 5:19); the role of spiritual leaders in essential areas of ministry (James 5:14-16); and counsel from the Apostle Peter, himself an elder (I Peter 5:1-4).
- The fact that Paul directs the instructions of I Timothy 5:17-19 to elders - the general term for leaders - when that term is not included in the discussion of the offices - the specific terms for leaders - in chapter 3 is an indication that those instructions apply to overseer and deacon. Otherwise, there is no such counsel relating to those offices.
- Finally, Paul deals with qualifications for the specific offices in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. In Titus 1 he considers “elder” generally and “overseer” specifically (perhaps because the churches of Crete did not have a large enough leadership base to develop the office of deacon yet) and in I Timothy 3 he gives the most detailed development of the two offices which would function in the church (note Philippians 1:1, the only letter that mentions the officers of the local church in its address).

So what does this leadership pattern look like?

- ◆ Elder is a general term for leadership with general qualifications for character and conduct. All qualifications for elder are restated as qualifications for both overseer and deacon. A church’s elders would include those holding the offices of overseer and deacon (and perhaps some who hold no formal office but are elder-qualified).
- ◆ Overseer implies a single individual with broad executive oversight responsibility – spiritually and administratively. Overseers are subject to all qualifications relating to elders, share additional qualifications with deacons, and have several qualifications unique to their office – see attached chart. Certain roles, especially relating to the Word, shepherding and prayer, are specifically assigned to the overseer in his function as Pastor.
- ◆ Deacons are the functional administrators of the church and meet all the qualifications of elders, those shared with overseers, and additional qualifications assigned to their office. They function with the Pastor (overseer) as the elders of the body. Their role is directed to administering the ministries and structures of the church and to assisting the Pastor with shepherding the body.

What does the “effective process” involve?

The “effective process” involves a means for making spiritually dynamic decisions through the function of godly leadership and a covenant community that is revealed to be the “temple of the Holy Spirit” (I Corinthians 3:16). This establishes the local church as the Holy Spirit’s base of operation in the world, and the instrument through which He works.

How do we know what this decision-making process looks like?

- ◆ Begin by examining how decisions were made in Old Testament Israel:
  - Some decisions were made by God speaking “face to face” with Moses and other leaders (Exodus 20:18-22ff). That doesn’t happen today, but we do have the complete revealed Word of God.
  - Some decisions were made by a purely democratic process without proper input from Israel’s leaders (Exodus 32:1ff). These decisions always ended in disaster.
  - Some decisions were made by leaders after prayerful deliberation and careful attention to input from the whole congregation (Numbers 27:1-11; 36:1-10).
  - Some decisions followed careful and prayerful deliberation by godly leaders, but the final decision was made by the entire congregation (Note Exodus 19:8; Joshua 24:14-26; II Kings 23:2-3; Nehemiah 8:1-10:39).

Does the New Testament teach “congregational church government?”

- ◆ Yes, but not as it has often been practiced. Two points are crucial: not every issue has to be decided by the congregation; and it is never appropriate to make congregational decisions without the involvement of and careful attention to the biblical leadership of the church.
- ◆ Biblical leaders have a key role in all decision-making in sifting options, seeking direction, advising and formulating recommendations.
- ◆ But the New Testament congregation seems to have a more substantial role in decision-making than in Old Testament Israel, likely because of the role and ministry of the Holy Spirit. The local body is said to be the “temple of the Holy Spirit” which indicates that He speaks and acts through the body corporately.

Then what decisions are made by the congregation?

- ◆ The New Testament provides for godly leaders so that they may lead. It is appropriate that they be empowered to make decisions relating to the life and ministry of the church that are not specifically reserved for congregational action.
- ◆ As was true for Israel, there are some decisions that must be made by the entire congregation acting corporately. An examination of passages that record the New Testament church making corporate decisions (Acts 6, 13, 15, I Corinthians 5, 16) develops a picture of the process in such instances: the church received recommendations from their leadership forged out of consideration, study, debate, and prayer. The congregation then affirmed or adopted those recommendations and implemented them.
- ◆ These passages further delineate the specific decisions that require congregation affirmation:
  - Acts 6 – Selection of elder-level leaders;
  - Acts 13 – Selection and sending of missionaries;
  - Acts 15 – Resolving major biblical/doctrinal issues;
  - I Corinthians 5 – Membership issues including discipline (This is reinforced in Matthew 18:17-18, and presumably would also apply to discipline of a leader [I Timothy 5:15-20; Romans 16:17-18]);
  - I Corinthians 16:1-4 – Financial priorities (this was to be a ministry of the body, not of individuals, and the church was to select men to travel with the gift for accountability).

