

CHURCH POLITY

by Pastor Ron Crisp

Christ Jesus instituted the church and placed it over the work of His kingdom. As with any organization the church must operate under some type of polity. The founders of our nation were very careful as they chose the form of government for us to use and enjoy. Can we believe that our Lord was any less careful in giving direction and instruction to His churches? History reveals that church government is indeed a critical issue. Error in the polity of a church will lead to error in the gospel of a church.

THE HEADSHIP OF CHRIST

True churches are unique among self-governing societies in that they operate under the Lordship of Jesus Christ. He is the head and only lawgiver over the assembly (Ephesians 1:22). The church is His property (Matthew 16:18). Christ is to rule supremely through His Word and through the leadership of His Holy Spirit (Revelation 2:7,11,17,19; Revelation 3:6, 13, 22). Neither a pastor nor a people are to seek or have any intent or concern other than doing the will of Christ. He is Lord over God's house. We are but stewards and servants.

FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Christ's Lordship does not negate the need for church government nor does it lessen the importance of this study. We submit to Christ's rule by obeying His Word. Jesus is Lord; therefore, His church must govern itself according to scriptural order.

What then is the Biblical form of church government? Most Bible teachers consider it helpful to compare and contrast the forms most common in "Christendom." These are: The Presbyterian Form The word "presbyterian" comes from the Greek word that is translated "elder" in our English Bible. James Pendleton has described Presbyterianism in this way:

Presbyterianism recognizes two classes of elders— *preaching* elders and *ruling* elders. The pastor and ruling elders of a congregation constitute what is called "the session of the church." The "session" transacts the business of the church, receives, dismisses, excludes members, etc. From the decisions of a session there is an appeal to the presbytery; from the action of the presbytery an appeal to the Synod; and from the action of the Synod an appeal to the General Assembly, whose adjudications are final and irresistible.

Presbyterianism errs from scriptural order in these three particulars:

1. Presbyterianism names two distinct orders of elder—the ruling elder and the preaching elder. Ruling elders are laymen who are part of the "session of the church."
2. This form of church government is not democratic. The church is ruled by the "session" which handles all matters of membership, discipline, etc.
3. Presbyterianism holds that the local church is part of a larger structure. In this way the local church is not the final court of appeal and does not hold the keys of the Kingdom.

The Episcopal Form

The word "episcopal" comes from the Greek word translated "bishop" or "overseer" in our English Bible. Those who hold to this form of polity teach that there are three positions in the ministry—the deacons, the elders, and the bishops. The bishop is a man who superintends an entire district of churches. The Roman Catholic Church

holds to an Episcopal polity. It has also created a more extensive hierarchy that includes deacons, priests, bishops, archbishops, patriarchs, cardinals and finally, a pope.

The Episcopal form of church government errs from scriptural order in these three ways:

1. Deacons are not an order of clergy.
2. Elders and bishops are not a separate order of clergy. Both elder and bishop refer to the same office. Elders are the bishops or overseers of the church (Compare Acts 20:17 with Acts 20:28). This Episcopal concept of bishops developed in the second century A.D.
3. Those who hold to this form of church government believe that the local church is but only a part of a larger national or worldwide church.

The Congregational-Independent Form

The Bible teaches and Baptists believe in a congregational-independent form of church polity. The term "congregational" means that the power and/or direction of the church lie with its people. In this sense, the church is a democracy. The label "independent" means that the local church is complete and autonomous. The church is not a part of a larger entity and there is no appeal from its authority.

PROOF OF CONGREGATIONAL - INDEPENDENT POLITY

The congregational nature of church government is seen in the way that the first New Testament churches carried out their work. These early churches chose their own officers. Acts 1:15-16 tells of the selection of men as candidates to fill the place of Judas. Note that in Acts 6:3-5 the deacons were chosen by the members of the Jerusalem church.

The early churches had sole power to discipline their members. The majority inflicted the discipline of members of the Corinthian church (2 Corinthians 2:6-7). Paul did not doubt that the man in that church who was involved in an incestuous relationship needed to be disciplined but Paul left the act of exclusion to that local assembly. See I Corinthians 5:4-5.

Even in situations where apostolic churches cooperated in the Lord's work, the local church retained its autonomy. Each individual church chose men to carry out particular talks and to act as messengers. See 2 Corinthians 8:19,23 and I Corinthians 16:3.

Congregational polity is also in accord with other Biblical revelations concerning the church. For example, the New Testament teaches that there should be a regenerate church membership. Membership is voluntary and is restricted to those who know and love Christ. Church members as believer priests can discern God's will. Is it really any surprise that churches which have infant and other unconverted members do reject the congregational-independent polity?

Congregational polity is also implied in the nature of the ministry. Elders are not clerical priests or spiritual lords over God's people. Elders rule by teaching truth and by setting an example of obedience to Christ. Ministers labor among brethren, not among serfs. See Matthew 20:25-27 and Matthew 23:8.

The scripture is equally clear concerning the independent nature of the church. Again, the churches described in the New Testament were local assemblies. There was never any mention of any church being a part of some larger organization or entity. Nowhere in the Bible were a group of churches in a locality or the aggregate of churches on earth referred to as "the church" (Galatians 1:2). Each assembly was a body of Christ and a house of God. One may speak of the Presbyterian or Episcopal Church of America but such a label or title cannot be applied to Baptists. The Baptist concept of the church

forbids it. Baptists may use the word "church" in an institutional sense or they may use it in referring to an actual assembly.

The New Testament describes each local church as one that exercised the responsibility of having the keys of the Kingdom. Each New Testament church elected, ordained and sent out preachers. Each one also received members, disciplined, conducted business and did God's work. Matthew 18:17-18 tells us that there was not an appeal regarding decisions of the local church. Furthermore, each church answered for its own actions and doctrines. Christ Jesus wrote to each of the seven churches in Asia Minor (Revelation 2-3). He did not write to a regional board or bishop. Paul also wrote to individual churches such as the church at Corinth.

New Testament churches appointed "messengers" (2 Corinthians 8:23). These were not "delegates." There is no scriptural evidence that any church felt at liberty to delegate its authority to any man, committee or board. These churches were truly autonomous and were themselves the instruments that God used to carry out the Great Commission.

Present day Baptists need to be cautious and to beware of losing their true independence by delegating away their power and responsibilities. Dr. D.M. Lloyd-Jones has made an insightful comment in his sermon on church government.

And then, finally, there is the view of church government which we call *congregational or independent*. It is rather difficult to handle this subject nowadays because not one of the descriptions which I will be giving is strictly in correspondence with what is actually in practice today. Here I am beginning to talk about independency or Congregationalism. But there is very little of such a quality to be had today. The Congregational-ists—those who believe in the congregational system—affirm that every local church is an entity in itself, that it has supreme power to decide everything itself. It is a gathering of Christians who believe the Lord is present and is the Head of the Church, and who believe

that, as they look to Him and wait upon Him, He, by the Spirit, will guide them and give them wisdom they need to decide about doctrine and discipline, and so on. The local church is autonomous, it governs itself, and does not look to any higher body, be it a bench of bishops, a presbytery, a general assembly or anything else.

But, I ask, how many such churches are there today? Originally, the description applied to the so-called Congregationalists and to the Baptists, for the Baptists believe in congregational church order, independency from the standpoint of government. But, in general, today both the Congregationalists and the Baptists have adopted the Presbyterian idea with their sustentation funds and their control over the local church through funds. They are no longer Congregationalists but have become Presbyterian, with power given to a higher body which can influence the local church. But ideally, and originally in the seventeenth century, Congregationalism or Independency conformed to the pattern which I have just been describing.

Many boards, associations, fellowships and conventions claim to be "servants" of the churches while usurping the local church's authority. For example, mission boards will allow churches to ordain missionaries while reserving to themselves the authority to send them. They by doing this are merely "tipping their hat" to the local church.

Some have pointed to the convocation described in Acts 15 as being in contradiction to the Baptist view of local church autonomy. However, scholars who write without bias recognize that in this passage the church at Jerusalem was only giving brotherly advice to the church at Antioch.

CONCLUSION

Church historians are amazingly unanimous in their views in regard to the congregational-independent polity of the apostolic churches. We as Baptists of the third millennia must be vigilant in adhering to the New Testament pattern for our local churches. This issue is of a more serious nature than many of us assume it to be.