The Christian church in our day is about to self-destruct because of its abandonment of biblical church government. – Robert Reymond

Disclaimers

• What is the purpose of this lecture? – It is not the purpose of this lecture to study the functions and qualifications of the pastor. This lecture merely analyzes the various forms of church government and the Scripture’s conclusion on the matter.

• How important is the doctrine of church government?

1. Before we answer this question, it may be helpful to make a distinction between “minor” and “major” doctrine. Wayne Grudem gives this helpful guideline:

   A major doctrine is one that has a significant impact on our thinking about other doctrines, or that has a significant impact on how we live the Christian life. A minor doctrine is one that has very little impact on how we think about other doctrines, and very little impact on how we live the Christian life.

2. By the standard given above, what doctrines could we consider “major”? It would be right for us to consider as “major” such matters as the Deity of Christ, sola fide, substitutionary atonement, the resurrection, and the inerrancy of Scripture. To disagree on these would not only place people outside orthodoxy, but perhaps salvation all together. By contrast, doctrines such as the specifics of the Lord’s Supper, the rapture, the nature of the kingdom, and the forms of church government should be considered minor doctrines—not because they are insignificant or absent from Scripture—but because they have a relatively insignificant impact on our daily Christian lives.

3. Still, church government is important for several reasons.

   o Church government is important because it relates to the administration of the bride of Christ, which was purchased by Jesus’ blood. John Murray said:

      [The Church] was that which was captive to sin, Satan, and death, and Christ redeemed it as his own precious possession. It is not his body, and he is the head. How shall we dare to handle that body, how shall we dare to direct its affairs, except as we can plead the authority of Christ. The church as the body of Christ is not to be ruled according to human

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2 Wayne Grudem, Systematic Theology, 29.
wisdom and expediency but according to the prescriptions of him in whom are hid all the treasures of wisdom and knowledge.³

- Church government is important because it protects from chaos and confusion in the church. The New Testament shows the value of church order and the disaster of individualism (e.g. the Corinthians church). “Higher” church forms of government tend toward tyranny, and “lower” church forms can foster pastoral mavericks with no accountability. The hectic polity found in many congregations has given the church a black eye.

It is nothing short of tyranny when ecclesiastical [officials] lord [authority] over local congregations and force unwanted priests or ministers on them or refuse them the priests and ministers they request. One should not be surprised then when sexual indiscretions, a divorce rate among ministers as high as the national average, and financial mismanagement on the part of such church leaders follow. Power still corrupts.⁴

I. Presbyterian

A. Definition – authority for decision-making is in presbyteries, composed of clergy and lay elders from local churches. Presbyteries are linked to similarly structured larger bodies called “synods” and then to a general assembly.⁵

B. Summary

1. While the key office in the Episcopal Church is the bishop, the essential office in the Presbyterian Church is the elder. The word “presbyterian” is the transliteration of the Greek word presbyteros meaning “elder”. This word is found in Luke 22:66, Acts 22:5, and 1 Timothy 4:14.

2. Presbyterianism has a close connection to Covenant Theology, as it gathers some of its Scriptural support from OT examples of Israel—which is seen as the OT form of the church. Just as Moses set up a hierarchy of command with “the elders of Israel” (Exodus 3:16, 18; Deut. 22), so is there to be a hierarchy of authority with the elders of the NT church.

3. In this form of government, there are three basic levels.
   a. Level 1 – the members of a local Presbyterian church vote for the elders who will rule over them. This group of elders is called a session (also called a consistory in some Reformed churches).
   b. Level 2 – some or all of these elders are also part of a presbytery. These elders meet at various times to coordinate, advise, and exercise authority over several other churches in that area.
   c. Level 3 – some of the elders in the presbytery (who are also a part of the session in a local church) take part in the General Assembly, which usually meets annually and speaks as one voice regarding the matters in their denomination. Today’s General Assembly is viewed as the modern day version of the apostolic leaders who called for elders and leaders during the time of the Jerusalem Council.

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³ From Robert Reymond’s *New Systematic Theology*, 896.
C. Models

D. Arguments for:

1. Acts 15 is the central passage. The apostles (i.e. General Assembly) brought in Paul, Barnabas, and elders from all around that region to assist in making a decision on the issues of circumcision and salvation. After the decision was made, it was embraced by all the other churches. Reymond remarks, 

   The “general assembly” meeting in Acts 15, did not ask the several local churches in Syria and Cilicia if it might issue a dogmatic letter to them. The Jerusalem assembly believed it had the authority to do so, and accordingly it did so.⁶

2. In Acts 8:14, Peter and John were sent by the apostles to check things out in Samaria. This shows elders from other congregations having an influence on local church matters.

3. Gifted elders should have a more widespread influence than just their local church.

4. National government shows unity among believers. In their thinking, all that individual, splintered, and independent churches communicate to the world is disunity among believers.

5. It the most efficient form of government to prevent doctrinal error.

E. Arguments against:

1. We have no example in Scripture of elders having authority over any other body of believers except their own local congregation.

2. Acts 15 is not sufficient evidence to prove the Presbyterian model. Here are two reasons:

   a. This was a unique situation because the apostles were involved. Today’s Presbyterian model has no apostles to exercise such authority. Stated another way, the Jerusalem Council was apostolic in nature and thus, non-repeatable.

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b. Though there were elders from the surrounding area who drafted a decision affecting various churches, Scripture also says that “the whole church” had a say in the matter (Acts 15:22). No one, of course, would argue that whole churches have authority to make decisions over other assemblies.

3. It is difficult to make decisions on a knowledgeable, intimate basis. By the time a matter reaches the General Assembly, the situation is quite far removed from the local church. How can they vote clearly and wisely when they are not intimately aware of the issues?

4. As with the Episcopal model, the Presbyterian’s greatest strength is also its greatest weakness. Just as a doctrinally sound General Assembly can have tremendous influence over a large number of churches, so a liberal assembly can force orthodox churches to accept doctrines they do not embrace.

F. Popular Members
1. John Calvin
2. R.C. Sproul
3. Many of the Reformers

II. Congregational Model

Disclaimers

- Think of Congregationalism as the center of a bike wheel and its different forms as the spokes that emanate from it. The central component is the authority to make decisions within the local church itself. Some models of congregationalism make stray farther from the center than others, but they all embrace this central component in one way or another.

- Many proponents of the Congregational model (and other models as well) recognize that there is great flexibility at this point. Daniel Akin, while arguing for the single-pastor led church position, wrote:

> I am convinced that the number of elders or deacons is not the issue but that persons meeting scriptural qualifications is what is crucial. In the context of elders, who is giving leadership and direction of the church is far more important than how many are involved in this assignment.⁷

A. Single-Pastor Model
1. Definition – the pastor is the only elder of the church with authority.

2. Summary – the single-pastor model of church government is most common in Baptist churches. Some forms of this have the deacon board merely serving as advisors to the pastor, while other forms have the deacons sharing authority with the pastor. This does not mean he is the only pastor in the church, only that he is the only one who has authority. Some of the biggest Baptist churches in America use the single-pastor model of church government.

3. Denominations –

⁷ Chad Owen and R. Stanton Norman, Perspectives on Church Government, 26.
a. Many fundamental, independent Baptist churches in America.

b. Many churches in Africa

4. Models

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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Pastor</th>
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<td>Deacons</td>
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<td>Congregation</td>
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5. Arguments for:

- A. H. Strong offered the first four defenses below in his *Systematic Theology*

  a. The NT nowhere *requires* a plurality of elders. The fact that “elders” (plural) are so often seen in Scripture is due only to the size of their churches.

  b. James appears to be the single pastor of the church at Jerusalem.

  c. “Bishop” is sometimes found in the singular (1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:7).

  d. Revelation 2 and 3 talks about the “angel of the church”. This most likely refers to the pastor of the local assemblies and this would indicate that there was only one.

  e. Even if the plurality of elders is ideal, it is often not realistic. Many churches around the world are small and struggling to strengthen the believers. Is such a group of believers not allowed to form a church until a plurality of elders is established? This position maintains that there are no commands by Scripture that a church *must* have a plurality of elders.

6. Arguments against:

  a. We find a plurality of elders in every congregation (“every church”, “every town”) when reading Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5, James 5:14, and 1 Peter 5:1.

  b. Acts 15:2 shows that James was not the only elder in the Jerusalem church.

  c. Though Titus 1:7 may refer to “bishop” in the singular, just two verses earlier it uses “elders” (Titus 1:5).

  d. It is doubtful that “the angel of the church” means a single pastor, as we know that there were “elders” in the Ephesian church (Acts 20:17).

  e. Most pastors who use this method either get addicted to the power and authority, or collapse under the responsibility and pressure placed upon them.

7. Popular Members

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8 Taken from Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*, 928-29.
a. Many churches whose pastors promote the Prosperity Gospel (e.g. Benny Hinn, Pastor Chris, Kenneth Copeland)

B. Plurality of Elders Model

1. Definition – a plurality of elders governs the church and has authority over it.

2. Summary – a group of men in the church who have met the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 are voted on by the congregation. The elders of the church form an “elder board” and are responsible for guiding the affairs of the church. For smaller churches, there is often a senior “pastor” who is in charge of teaching and preaching each week, and is usually the only elder being paid by the church. Elder rule does not mean that the elders make all the decisions within the church. The congregation chooses the elders, administers church discipline (Mt. 18:17), and excommunicates erring members (1 Cor. 5:4).

3. Denominations
   • Many Bible and Baptist churches

4. Models

   ![Elder Board](diagram)

   ![Congregation](diagram)

5. Arguments for:
   a. The most spiritually mature men are guiding the church. In the democratic model, the most carnal member of the congregation has a vote worth just as much as the senior pastor’s vote.
   b. Scripture repeatedly speaks of “elders” (plural). Paul seemed to establish them in every church and city he visited. Paul’s team appointed elders in every church (Acts 14:21-23) and commanded Titus to do likewise (Titus 1:5).
   c. Peter exhorted the elders to “exercise oversight” within their churches (1 Peter 5:1-4).
   d. The author of Hebrews encouraged his readers to obey their leaders and “submit to them” (Hebrews 13:17).
   e. A plurality of elders maintains accountability among the pastors while escaping hierarchal structure of Presbyterianism/Episcopalianism.

6. Arguments against:
   a. How elders are chosen and maintained is a point of contention. Many believe that the congregation being allowed to vote for elders but not involved in the bulk of the other decisions of the church is inconsistent. Furthermore, it is somewhat unclear exactly what decisions the elders are responsible for what and what decisions the congregation is responsible for.
   b. Church history does not favor this form of church government.
   c. It is unrealistic; many small churches are struggling to find just one qualified pastor.
   d. This form of government has no method to deal with heresy or carnality within an elder board.
e. It remains ambiguous what areas the congregation can and cannot be involved in. For example, does the congregation get involved in church discipline? Always or just sometimes? Do they initially chose the elder, or do the elders to this? Why or why not?

7. Popular Members
   a. John Piper
   b. John MacArthur
   c. Wayne Grudem
   d. Conrad Mbewe

C. Democratic Model

1. Definition – the congregation has the authoritative vote over significant matters in the church.

2. Summary – James Garrett Jr., in defending the Democratic Model, writes:
   Final human authority rests with the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, finances, missions, property, relationships, and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated by the congregation to individual members or groups of people.\(^9\)

3. Model

4. Denominations
   a. Evangelical Free
   b. Southern Baptists
   c. Full Gospel
   d. Church of God
   e. Lutherans
   f. Plymouth Brethren

5. Arguments for:
   a. Matthew 18:15-20
      • *Summary* – Commentators embrace a variety of views on this highly debated passage, but the majority of scholars see verses 15-17 as referring to the discipline of a believers within the confines of the local church—with verse 18 authorizing congregational excommunication. Many modern commentators see verse 19 as referring to heavenly approval of disciplinary action\(^10\), not to prayer. Stated another way, the traditional approach to verse 20 (i.e. it’s referring to prayer) sees it as having no connection with the disciplinary passage in 15-17ff.

b. Acts 6:3

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\(^9\) Chad Brand and R. Stanton Norman, *Perspectives on Church Government*, 157.

\(^10\) See the commentaries by Carson, Gaebelein and Garland and lecture notes by Jerry Hullinger.
• Summary – the Seven were chosen by the whole congregation.

c. Acts 13:2-3
• Summary – the entire congregation was involved in the commissioning and sending out of Barnabas and Paul through prayer, fasting, worship and fellowship.

d. Acts 15:22
• Summary – many view the entire church as the ones selecting Judas and Silas to take the news to Antioch regarding the decision at the Jerusalem council.

e. 1 Corinthians 5:2
• Summary – the excommunication called for in 2b was the responsibility, not of the bishops or elders, but of the entire congregation. Such power was given to the church as a whole, not just the leaders, because it entailed a problem within the “body”, not just the “head”.

f. 2 Corinthians 2:6
• Summary – “the majority” is another example of Congregational polity.

g. Other Arguments
• If the priesthood of the believer (all Christians have direct access to God through Christ) as taught in 1 Peter 2:9 is true, then it follows that they should have a significant role in the decision-making of the church.
• If all believers are to practice and develop their gifts within the local church (including wisdom, knowledge, administration etc.), then it follows that those gifts could be best used in the decision-making of the church.

6. Arguments against:

a. Too much authority is given to the church, several (many?) of whom are carnal. Should the vote of a babe in Christ count as much as that of a mature elder? Curt Daniel wrote:

The local church is not a pure democracy, in which every person has the same vote as everybody else. That idea is from pagan Greece, not the Bible. It is even questionable whether members are allowed to vote at all, except on the approval of deacons. What if a majority of new believers outnumbered the mature believers, and took over and went off onto strange fads? Children don't rule their parents. Members are to follow their leaders (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24). The leaders are not to be dictators, but to imitate the loving serving leadership of Christ (I Pet.5:2-3).¹¹

b. It is impractical to place many decisions before the congregation, especially in a large church. For example, it would be chaos to have every member have a say regarding a disciplinary matter between two church members.

c. Tony Evans said,

¹¹ Curt Daniel, “Church Government” in Basic Bible Doctrines, no. 44.
The Bible does not teach congregational rule (i.e. democratic model). However, the Bible clearly teaches congregational involvement, but not congregational government in which the church body at large has the final authority. Why is this? Because you don’t want to have carnal people voting on the will of God. There is this assumption in the church that if we put a matter before the people, they will have the spiritual insight and biblical knowledge to make a right decision. Now this may be the case with some people, but God’s will should never be subject to majority vote.12

III. Episcopal Model

A. Definition – authority in church government should reside in a body of bishops who oversee a diocese (churches under the authority of a bishop).

B. Summary – the word *episcopal* is derived from the Greek word *episkopos*, meaning “overseer, bishop”. "This form of church government calls for a distinct category of church officers, generally known as a priesthood, comprised of archbishops, bishops, and rectors (vicars), to govern the church and to have final authority in decision-making in the local church.”13 All of the officers within the Episcopal Church are in the “priesthood” and therefore are considered priests. This long line of priestly succession goes back to the apostles themselves.

C. Denominations

1. Roman Catholic – the most complete system, which adds another office above the archbishop, that being the office of the pope.

2. Greek and Russian Orthodox

3. The Church of England

4. The Episcopalian (U.S.A) – Anglican Church in the US.

5. United Methodist (U.S.A) – this is the simplest form, which has only one level of bishops.

D. Model

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12 Tony Evans, *Theology You Can Count On*, 971.

13 Reymond, *A New Systematic Theology*, 904. Further, Reymond calls this “hierarchical” government, coming from the Greek roots “heir” (having to do with priestly things) and “arch” (beginning, first). This means literally “the power or authority of the high priest”. This refers to the authority that the priests have in descending order of rank.
E. Arguments for:

1. Apostolic succession – they argue that there is a direct line of succession from the NT apostles to the modern day bishops. Because the NT apostles were the ones who “appointed” elders (Acts 14:23), it follows that their modern day successors would have that same authority.

2. Episcopalians openly acknowledge that there is no NT support for their system. Because tradition is a viable source of truth, they claim that its government is the natural outgrowth of the development of the church.

3. Scripture does not forbid it. As the Very Reverend Doctor of Theology Paul F.M. Zahl says, “there is no one governing New Testament ecclesiology”. For Zahl and other bishop-led promoters, essence of church government in Scripture is a wax nose that can be adjusted in any way the church finds best. Thus, Episcopalianism is acceptable.

F. Arguments against:

1. Bishops, elders, and pastors are one and the same in Scripture and are almost always referred to in the plural. Scripture never indicates that there is one bishop who has superior authority over others.

2. There is no indication in Scripture that bishops followed in the line of apostolic succession. Paul never attempted to pass on his “apostleship” to other pastors such as Timothy or Titus (1 Tim. 4:14).

3. The greatest strength of the Episcopacy is also its greatest weakness. One bishop, in one diocese, can lead the charge; if he is orthodox, passionate, and gifted, he can make a tremendous impact with little to get in his way. The true mission of the church can be hastened and promoted. On the flip side, if he is liberal and lazy (as many have been), heresy and chaos will creep in very quickly.

4. Because the bishops are elected in many denominations, they must please the majority to get in.

5. The Church rarely disciplines Bishops who have become visionary mavericks—those straying from the teaching of the Word of God.

G. Popular Members

1. C.S. Lewis
2. J.I Packer
3. J.B. Lightfoot
4. Desmond Tutu

IV. Important Questions to Ask

A. Who should choose the leaders in the church?

   • Let’s Review:

   1. Episcopalian:
   2. Presbyterian:

3. Congregational:

B. How clear are the Scriptures directions on church government?

- It is important to have a balanced approach on this matter. It is incorrect to say that the Scriptures give us no system of church government to follow or that the church must be guided by what is most needful at that particular time. Conversely, it is also incorrect to assert that there is a clear, systematic model of church polity within the Word of God. Rather, churches should recognize and obey the general guidelines of church government and allow the specific criteria for carrying these out to be left to the consciences of the local church.

C. Is this a means for separation?

1. No; church government is a minor doctrine (see definition above).
2. No; church government is not as clear as other doctrines in Scripture.
3. No; Christians should learn to disagree amicably on this matter. We must admit that various forms of church government work fairly well within their denominations.
4. Yes; Christians should not participate with those forms of church government that have no Biblical support. We as evangelicals would separate from the Roman Catholic Church because of its doctrine, though the doctrinal aberrations within the Catholic church are directly linked to their views of church government and how they relate to the infallibility of the pope ex cathedra. J.I. Packer recently split from the Anglican Church over doctrinal matters, even though the problems were escalated by an unbiblical form of government. The Presbyterians may not garner enough Biblical support to persuade us to their side, but they do offer a host of verses and therefore I do not think that separation from a Presbyterian on matters of church government is right.

D. What forms of church government are most common in Africa?

- Erickson wrote:

Two situations call for some qualification of our conclusion. (1) In a very large church many members may not have sufficient knowledge of the issues and candidates for office to make well-informed decisions, and large congregational meetings may be impractical. Here a greater use of the representative approach will probably be necessary. Even in this situation, however, the elected servants must be ever mindful that they are responsible to the whole body. (2) In a group of immature Christians where there is an absence of trained and competent lay leadership, a pastor may need to take more initiative than is ordinarily the case. But he should also constantly work at instructing and building up the congregation so that they might become increasingly involved in the affairs of the church.\(^{15}\)

\(^{15}\) Erickson, *Christian Theology*, 1086-87.