

Examining the BIBLICAL Model of Church Government

Much has been said to this point regarding what was wrong with “Government” As it was practiced in the Worldwide organization. We now should investigate What the New Testament sets forth regarding this Important subject.

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Those whose religious experience exposed them to nothing other than a hierarchal approach to how their particular church was governed are at a loss to fathom how it could (or should) be any other way. Our generation views the situation as though it has – throughout history – always been as it is today, forgetting that the means of communication, as well as the religious persecution factor, from the second through the eighteenth centuries, would have made such a singular governing authority a virtual impossibility on any wide scale.

In the modern era, much has been made of a few passages which were taken as though justifying a chain-of-command authority structure within the Church. Those passages are primarily Ephesians 4:11 and 1st Corinthians 12:28.

It is a common conclusion that there must be governance in the church. True to a point, but what matters is the kind of governance. There are those forms which elevate those governing, while others place the governed in higher regard. There are approaches which totally subjugate the ecclesia ¹ while others have the membership being in control of their own concerns. Our challenge is to determine which approach is the more biblical.

Who Runs the Show?

Should it be a clergy class completely dominating the average members, or should it be the members choosing and being in control of their leadership? Or, is the correct biblical model one where both approaches are duly accommodated?

While various people make their case one way or

the other, we must seriously consider that Christ laid down a fundamental instruction that His disciples were to not operate the way most other organized entities normally do. His Church was to be very different, one which was unique in how it carried out its Mission.

IF You Love One Another

While there are people who insist the Church MUST have government, in support of their own idea of what is the accepted approach, (which is basically true) we should realize that it also must have LOVE. There are forms of government which incorporate love as a minor consideration, (especially the domineering kinds), where others provide an environment that accommodates a more ‘brotherly’ approach. Those that are of the domineering type want any love that is expressed to be reflected more toward those who lord-it-over them than toward one another! And, the unmotivated prefer never-the-less to fund those who take all authority unto themselves. ²

Let’s consider three basic instructions that should be foremost when envisioning a form of government that would meet the criteria Christ specified.

1. True disciples are identified by this evident quality: *“A new commandment I give unto you, That ye love one another; as I have loved you, that ye also love one another. By this shall all men know that ye are my disciples, if ye have love one to another.”*

¹ God’s elect are at times referred to by the Greek word “ecclesia” which is translated “called-out ones”.

² This is not a new thing, as we see in Jeremiah 5:31 *“The prophets prophesy falsely, and the priests bear rule by their means; and my people love to have it so: and what will ye do in the end thereof?”*

2. All are to regard themselves as “brethren”: *“But be not ye called Rabbi: for one is your Master, even Christ; and all ye are brethren. (Matt. 23:8) Neither be ye called masters: for one is your Master, even Christ.” (v.10) “Henceforth I call you not servants; for the servant knoweth not what his lord doeth: but I have called you friends; for all things that I have heard of my Father I have made known unto you.” (John 15:15)* Even the relationship of Christ with His disciples conveyed a personal relationship that is largely denied under a two-tier clergy / laity situation!
3. Each disciple is to be submissive to one another; *“Submitting yourselves one to another in the fear of God.” (Eph. 5:21)*

If we encounter any religious entity that doesn't incorporate these qualities, (may we call them the 'first principles'?) should we regard their form of government as not fully legitimate? That raises another question: Can a ministry that God seems to be using employ a form of government that He doesn't necessarily endorse? Are love, brotherly-level relationships and mutual submissiveness qualities important in the True Church of God?

A Right Foundation

It's from this perspective that we should view each of the additional factors that we accept as the appropriate form of government in the Church of God. When any accepted administration creates an environment which is not conducive to each of these: love, equality and mutual submission, we should qualify our support of such organizations, be they large or small. The Diotrephes situation as related in 3rd John 9-10 is one such example. In verse 11 John, continuing in context, labels such a situation as 'evil'. That man took preeminence to himself alone, even ragging on a true apostle who he saw as a threat to his elevated status should he have contact with people under 'his' jurisdiction. We need to ask, what would such interaction have done to Diotrephes' reputation or control?

We should also note that in this abnormal situation Diotrephes never would have regarded himself as subject to any superior leader. Just in the fact that John didn't oppose the man on that basis suggests

the early Church didn't see itself as having one. Why refer to a man's self-assigned preeminence, if they'd known that another individual had the preeminence, but failing to mention it?

Does that situation suggest that the man wasn't teaching the truth correctly? John makes no reference to his theology, only his jealous regard for his status among 'his' people. So, may we deduce that the man was teaching the truth correctly, but had a problem in another area?

There are multiple lessons to be drawn from this one briefly related example. The relevant question is, does it have application in our time?

Authority or Service?

It's when we move into the “apostles / prophets / evangelists” area of interpretation where peoples' presumptions can form a basis for an approach to government that places the above three important principles aside in some peoples' thinking. It is no longer love, equality and submission, it shifts over to be mostly a matter of authority, with a capital A. As some people read Ephesians 4:11 and 1st Corinthians 12:28, they, in their minds, interpolate into it the idea of ascending ranks of authority. While cross-comparisons between these two key passages should raise a question or two as it might regard an ascending ranks idea, yet the fundamental presumption holds among those who advocate a “two-tier” governing structure.

My study paper “*Ministry Chosen by God*” presents an analysis of what each “office” involves (if we can call them that). We all too often don't make any clear distinction between each separate service function other than to assign them ascending levels of authority. In other words, it is posed that an apostle is highest in rank, higher than a prophet, a prophet is higher than an evangelist, and an evangelist is superior to a lowly pastor!

Of course, the “first – second - third” order in 1st Corinthians 12:28 contradicts the idea in that it skips over evangelist and pastor, placing a specific hard number on just three. If prophet is second, and teacher is third, then where do the others rate? It must be fourth or lower (if a ranking system is in fact the point – which it is not).

When we correctly understand what Paul is saying in each of these places, and when we identify each as a service function involving differing personal proclivities and spiritual gifts, not really a ranking system at all, then the true significance of the functions comes to the fore.

Honoring the Local Pastor

When we notice verses like Hebrews 13:7 & 17 and 1st Timothy 5:17, we are instructed in something very important. We are instructed as to how we are to regard those who serve among us personally. These instructions are more often assigned to those who serve in the highest offices, where they actually apply to those who serve us in their / our respective congregations: the local pastor! The greater honor is due those who know us and work with us on a personal basis, not so much to those who serve in some far-off office, with whom we never interact, who likely don't even know our names, let alone must they give personal account for our spiritual state under their watch as must the local pastor.

These instructions obviously direct our regard to the local pastor, not some high-ranking administrator off in another part of the world. Of course, there were no such people in the early church, at least, not like the situation we have today. Administration then was local, of necessity. There may have been occasional visits by travelling apostles, prophets or evangelists, but they moved on. Their authority was in the Word, not in any established structure.

“Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine.” (1st Tim. 5:17) “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation...”

Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. (Heb.13:7 & 17)

The passage in 1st Timothy 5 is interesting as it makes two points: those who rule locally (the elders) are to receive our highest regard, but also are due

financial consideration for their service. And from where would that come? There was no central treasury in the early Church. Such remuneration would have been provided by the local congregation in appreciation for their Elder's service, the quality of which being well known to them!

When we realize that congregations in the early church were all 'local', these verses are seen in a very different light. It also explains how the Diotrephes situation could have existed.

In Hebrews 13, the identity of the local Pastor or Elder is even more apparent. They are held to account for the spiritual conditions of those in their care. Our highest regard is directed toward them, not some remote administrator or high - ranking official. But even more interesting, these passages make oblique reference to the same essentials: love, equality and submission.

Local but Not Entirely 'Independent'

While each congregation was self-administered in many ways, each was not entirely autonomous, as some protestant churches insist upon being. What brings this to our awareness are the passages in 1st Timothy, chapter 3. There the terms “bishop” and “deacon” are how the terms were translated. These can leave a modern reader with certain misconceptions in that these terms are not correctly rendered, at least not in the KJV, which was translated under the oversight of King James and with the understandings of the time. (And we should note that it was the local congregation that evaluated their qualifications, not elders from some other area.)

Bishop should be rendered as “**overseer**”. That would be a seasoned minister who had other local pastors (Elders – and hopefully elders in a truer sense) within his realm or responsibility. More of a “senior pastor” role. This may equate to a “regional pastor” situation.

Deacon is another term which is greatly misunderstood. Most regard a deacon as the lowest level servant in the church, where no New Testament scripture supports that.³ (The first supposed “deacons” in Acts 6 (the original Greek does not

³ The first mentioned was soon martyred, the second named was sent on an extraordinary evangelistic mission shortly after!

refer to them as that) were actual stand-ins for the Apostles, and, they were all nominated by the membership!) My co-authored article “*Doctrine of Deacons*” presents a very revealing analysis of this “office”. No, a deacon is not a low-level servant, he is a “**servant**” or “minister”. That’s what the Greek word deacon means. By leaving it untranslated, the apostate church was able to change the meaning to suit its own ‘hierarchal’ purposes.

A deacon is more correctly defined as, and applied to, the local elder, serving as minister over a flock. They typically would serve one congregation, where the overseer would mentor and watch over more than one congregation within his sphere of interest and influence. But a deacon is a title appropriate to anyone who serves, not just to someone who attends to menial tasks.

The challenge in this age is how to adapt these considerations to the modern world. With all the means of communication that we have today, and with the greatly expanded mission that is now possible, how do we organize these efforts for maximum effectiveness?

On To Greater Organization

While collaboration involving a larger contingent of believers has its merit, and is a logical development, when so doing, which of the previously mentioned aspects are to be forfeited? Should love be diminished or redirected primarily toward the leadership? Should “brotherly” equality be dispensed with? Should submission be made applicable to the various levels of administration and not generally among all of God’s called-out ones?

Individuals or congregations may choose to associate with an outreach ministry, but should they surrender their senses of discernment in order to do so? Congregations may also be raised up by such a ministry involving people who were drawn by their message. Are these then not subject to those ‘first principles’ that applied in established pre-existing congregations from the beginning of the Church eras?

How DO Organizations Factor-in?

It is here that we need to define the role of organizations (ministries) and the leadership structure that history (and scripture) shows, come and go over time. When a man, or group of men, is used of God

in proclaiming His truth, what regard should we have for them and what regard should they have for others being used similarly? (This would be an unthinkable question in some organizations which regard themselves as being God’s sole ministry.) It is at this point where ministries can go ‘off the reservation’ (which may be an apt way of wording it).

Much depends on who the minister thinks he is working for. Is it for those God the Father has called, or is it for themselves and their personal prestige? Is he using the people for his personal aggrandizement, or is he working to make them fit vessels of service by God? There are those who may say one thing, but effectively do the other.

The other major area of concern is how much of our personal and congregational responsibilities are forfeit when affiliating with that particular ministry? Does congregational oversight become inappropriate should they choose to affiliate with a particular ministry? ⁴ Once an organization is formed, can it be counted upon to self-correct? If the members are to “know them BY their fruits” and if they are to “prove all things”, if they are to “honor those who rule over them”, they **MUST** continually evaluate their actions, their teachings and their results (or lack thereof). Are we to honor the dishonorable, and faithfully follow the fruitless?

Growth in Grace, Knowledge and Service

More than these considerations, we must also know the fruits of the organization in general. One important question we must always be attentive to: Does the organization provide an appropriate environment for spiritual growth? Are members being allowed useful service opportunities and are they being trained to themselves be fishers of men?

Isn’t this what the Church is ultimately for: to provide a training environment? Does the ‘official’ ministry mentor and encourage individual growth, or does it pointedly suppress personal initiative, interpreting such to be only an expression of self-promotion and prideful vanity? Do they restrict teaching functions to themselves only? Hierarchal structures tend to erect a clear barrier between the

⁴ One travelling minister insisted “God would never reveal anything to the likes of you”, which exposed the general disrespect of that group’s membership.

“clergy” and the “laity”, jealously guarding their sole “God-ordained” status, as they see it.

The “I will make you fishers of men” promise could not have been made with only the original apostles in mind. If it were just them, the Work of God would have faded out late in the first century. So, obviously no, they were to train their replacements and those train the replacements to come into the Truth after them. Training the upcoming generation in the ways of God and the true Doctrines is a never-ending activity. It will always be the dynamic that perpetuates the Work of God on Earth.

WHO’s the Major Interest with God?

The problem arises when the leadership sees itself (or even worse, himself) as the major entity, over and above the ‘lowly’ membership. When human vanity overwhelms the structure, creating a “we only”, or worse yet, a “Me only” syndrome, the full function of the Church of God isn’t achieved. The congregation loses the dynamism that each Spirit-led member would otherwise contribute to the Body. Such a deficiency is endemic within hierarchal organizations. That’s one reason why Christ instructed His disciples to NOT BE THAT WAY! ⁵

Jesus specifically addressed the natural desire of men to see themselves as superior to their peers. (Spiritually superior or authoritatively superior, we never made the distinction). He did so because He knew what the result would be. Knowing where it would lead, He specifically prohibited them from employing that approach. It arose even among His disciples (which brought the matter to the fore) where there was a desire of some disciples to be regarded as ‘the greatest’. He made it clear that He would recognize as greatest those who served the most, never those who postured and stepped on others to gain preeminence.

To comprehensively understand government as it should be in the Church of God, we must factor-in the role of the congregation. This is the part that is typically abrogated by the people, rather than for them to engage in doing what their calling obligates them to do.

Go Into All the World


⁵ Luke 22:24-27; Matthew 20:25-28.

Besides overseeing the performance of their Elders, the local congregations are to also be active in proclaiming the Gospel in all the world. Such activity is not the exclusive domain of the ministry.

In Thessalonica the congregation was commended for its outreach in its region in imitation of their Judean counterparts. We read of that in the first two chapters of 1st Thessalonians, particularly chapter 1 verse 8. Quite notable is the absence of mention of any local pastor in this effort. Was it because they had none, or was it more a group effort, not a minister dominated activity?

In Corinth, there was a situation where Paul had corrected the congregation. Incredibly, the whole congregation responded appropriately, repenting of their attitude. Again, no local minister is credited for facilitating this response. Their repentance was a reflection of their collective conversion, not an imposition by “someone in charge”. (2nd Cor. 7:)

Early on when there was an obvious need in the area of service to the brethren, such as we read in Acts 6, the congregation then was called-upon to set forth those who had proved themselves as able, to assist (actually stand-in for) the apostles at the time.⁶ They would have been in the best position to know them by their previous services. Such an approach is not maintained in most modern organizations. Would we have been better served had it been maintained? These were not some low-level appointees, as we can see from what happened with at least the first two named: Stephen ⁷ and Philip ⁸.

It was the exclusion of those truly called of God from their proper role in God’s Church, instead, choosing to create a ministerial class to rule over them (in contradiction of what Jesus told them) that accounts for the sad conditions in the Churches of God in this age. But without maintaining the fundamental elements: love, equality and mutual submission, those efforts can be little better than sounding brass and a clanging cymbal! ⁹ 

⁶ It is commonly believed that these were mere “deacons” who served meals. Request the article “Doctrine of Deacons” which better explains what the real situation was.

⁷ Acts 6:8 through 7:60.

⁸ Acts 8:4-8 & 8:26-40.

⁹ 1st Corinthians 13: