

“The Government of the Church”

(Part 1)

Selected Texts

- INTRO. - Throughout this summer we have been looking at what the Bible has to say about the church. We have dealt with a number of aspects, but we need to spend some time now on how the church is to be organized.
- For the next four weeks, we are going to be looking at the subject of the government of the NT church. We are going to see it in three stages: Today we will examine “The Plea For Biblical Church Government.” Then we will focus on “The Pattern For Biblical Church Government,” and finally we will look at “The Procedures For Biblical Church Government.”
- Now, the past few weeks have been more *preaching*, but much of this will be more *teaching*. Someone said that the main difference between preaching and teaching is that with preaching you yell more...
- Perhaps that’s true, but on this particular topic we are going to carefully examine the passages relating to the biblical model for church government in more of a teaching style.
- Now, I don’t know how interested you are in the subject of church government. My guess is that the average church member may think that this is as

relevant as screen doors on a submarine. But I believe that this is very important for us as a church.

- Some of the worst havoc that has been wrought in the church in modern times has been due to an unscriptural form of church structure. I don’t think we would want a steady diet of teaching on this subject, but I think this is critical for all of us to understand this issue.
- We need to line up with God’s Word in this area, just as much as we need to in any other area, because whenever we do something God’s way we have His blessing. When we do it *our own way*, we have problems.
- We’ll take today’s study in 4 parts: The Exploration, The Examination, The Expressions, and The Example. Let’s begin with:

I. THE EXPLORATION
- For quite some time now, I have been concerned that the popular democratic model for church government (or polity, as it is properly called) is *not* in line with the biblical model.
- When we began this church and constituted it (nearly 21 years ago), I began to think about the way the church should be structured, but with so many other things involved in starting a church, I didn’t really

have the time to fully examine it, so we basically copied some other churches' constitutions and began with the basic congregational form of church government that is typical of Baptist churches in our day and time.

- But even back then, it began to bother me, because we started this church on the primary premise that whatever we see in the Word of God we want to line up with, and I wasn't quite sure this was in line with the biblical pattern.
- We Baptists have always claimed to be "people of the book," and I believe for the most part we are. But in this area of polity, I think we may have missed it.
- And every time I would teach the New Member Orientation class I would say to myself, "I really need to study that further." But I never seemed to have the time to devote to it until a few years ago, when I finally took the time to research it.
- And as I began to dig into it, it became abundantly clear that there is one clearly delineated form of church government in the NT. In fact, it was so clear that I wondered how I could have missed it.
- I since have learned that there is a rich heritage of plural eldership among Baptists (and even Southern Baptists) and that there are a large number of Baptist churches that have some form of elder government.

- In fact, I have heard that 25% of all SBC churches have now gone to some kind of elder system, and I believe, that is because other pastors are doing exactly what I have done, and that is to go to the Scripture and see what the NT pattern is.
- If you go to the NT and honestly ask, "What is the pattern of church government that I find here?" there is *absolutely no doubt* that it would be a council of *elders* overseeing and shepherding the flock of God. So I began a thorough *examination* of this issue:

II. THE EXAMINATION

- When I first began to study this issue, I tried to find anything I could on Baptist church polity. I wanted to see what kind of biblical arguments there were for the way we do things as Southern Baptists.
- It was very difficult to find anything. I did a very thorough search and found five books, but three of them were by the same author. Now, recently there are some newer books that have come out on this issue, but there weren't many resources when I first researched this topic.
- The primary source for explaining Baptist polity (at that time) was a book written by a man named James L. Sullivan. His book was held up for many years as the *standard* for documenting our denomination's

position on this. But the book was very disappointing to me.

- In the entire book, there is very little reference to Scripture at all. There is a lot about history and about the way we do things as Baptists, but very little biblical basis for congregational rule.
- In fact, here is a direct quote from Sullivan's book, (he says) "Southern Baptist polity is essentially our Southern Baptist way of doing things." He goes on to say, "Baptist polity is virtually unique in modern evangelical Christianity." (That made me feel real good – does that mean we are the only ones who are interpreting the Bible in this way?)
- Of the Scripture Sullivan *did* refer to, much of it had no direct bearing on the issue, and every reference he gave was a passage that *could* be interpreted as supporting congregational polity, but *more likely* should be interpreted a different way.
- For example, he points to Mat. 18:17 (which is discussing the issue of church discipline) and includes the phrase "tell it to the church" to mean that they were to have a business meeting and let everyone vote about it.
- Well, I guess that *could* be taken that way, but it doesn't necessarily *have* to be interpreted that way. It *could* mean that they were to take the matter to the

church leaders who would then inform the church body to go after that sinning brother in an effort to restore him to fellowship.

- In fact, that is the way I would interpret that verse. Church discipline is always for the purpose of restoration, and the reason you "tell the church" is so that the whole church can go after that sinning brother or sister and appeal to them to repent of their sin and be restored to the fellowship.
- Another example is Mat. 28:18-20 (the Great Commission). He says that the authority (to go make disciples) was given to Christ and then it was passed to the church (to the body, *not* the pastors).
- Again, you *could* interpret it that way (if you were trying to make a case for a democratic form of government), but it doesn't *necessarily* say that God's authority (given to His church) cannot rest *primarily* upon appointed spiritual leaders (as we see indicated elsewhere in Scripture).
- Besides that, this doesn't have anything to do with the congregation voting on anything, but has to do with the fact that all believers have the responsibility to evangelize the lost.
- Moving to another passage, Sullivan says that Titus 1:5 means that the elders were elected by the

congregation. But the text does *not* say that. It says that Titus was to “appoint” elders in every city.

- Turn with me for a moment to Titus 1:5. Here’s what it says: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and *appoint* elders in every city as I directed you...”
- The Greek word “kathistemi” has nothing to do with a vote of the congregation. It is talking about Titus doing the appointing under the authority of the Apostle Paul. Again, this passage does *not* clearly point to some form of congregational rule.
- In Acts 10:47, Sullivan says that the church gave the approval for the baptism of the Gentiles. But go back and read that passage. It doesn’t say that at all. Look at Acts 10:47. (pause)
- Peter was making his point that they should be baptized (as any other believer in Christ) when he made the statement in v. 47, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?”
- And then in v. 48, it says that “he (the Apostle Peter) ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.” It doesn’t say anything here about them taking a vote.

- And we could say the same thing about Acts 6. This is where the first deacons were appointed. Sullivan says that this passage *proves* that the early church was a democratic body, because *they* “chose” the 7 and brought them to the Apostles to ordain.
- But if you study that passage, it *could* be taken a *number* of ways. We aren’t told *how* they “chose” the 7. Could this mean that they “nominated” them (like we do here)? Verse 5 makes it clear that the entire congregation was *involved* in the selection, but we don’t know *how* they were involved.
- Verse 5 tells us that there was a unanimous agreement that this was the right thing to do, but we are *not* told *anywhere* that they took a vote. In fact, you will look in vain in the Bible to find the word “vote” in connection with the church (unless you have one of these really loose paraphrases).
- The only place I found the word “vote” in Scripture was in Acts 26:10, where it is talking about Saul (before he became the Apostle Paul) voting against the Christians in the Sanhedrin.
- However the word “appoint” is used several times. The word “select” is used a couple of times, and the word “approval” is used here in Acts 6. But beyond that, there is very little to support a democratic system of church government from biblical evidence.

- Now, in *contrast* to that, there is a *mountain* of evidence to support biblical eldership. It is *everywhere* you look in the NT! Biblically, the focal point of *all* church leadership is the elder.
- Listen to the number of passages in the NT that talk about elders providing spiritual leadership in the church: Acts 11:30, Acts 14:23, Acts 15 (the entire chapter), Acts 16:4, Acts 20:17-31, Phil. 1:1, 1 Thess. 5:12-13, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 4:14, 1 Timothy 5:17-20, Titus 1:5-9, Heb. 13:17, James 5:14-15, 1 Peter 1:1, 1 Peter 5:1-4...
- There is more teaching in the NT on elders than on such important subjects as the Lord's Supper, baptism, the Lord's Day, or spiritual gifts. It literally "jumps out at you" from the pages of Scripture that this is the singular form of church government in the NT.
- There are *many* today that would claim that the Bible is really silent about church government, and therefore we can simply *choose* what we believe is the best structure and organization for the church.
- *Some* would say that we cannot conclude that there is one singular biblical model for *all* churches. But I don't believe that fits the biblical evidence. I believe eldership is clearly the pattern of the NT church, seen all through the epistles of Paul, Peter, James and elsewhere.
- The NT records evidence of pastoral oversight by a council of elders in nearly *all* of the early churches, covering a wide geographical area, all the way from Jerusalem to Rome. There is a single, consistent pattern of plural elder leadership in nearly every NT church.
- In Acts 11 and James 5 we see that elders were found in the churches of Judea. In Acts 15 we see them at work in the church at Jerusalem. In Acts 14, we see them in the churches at Derbe, Lystra, Iconium and Antioch. In Acts 20 we see them in the church at Ephesus.
- By the way, it is *significant* that elders are present in the church at Ephesus, because *all* the churches of Asia Minor were extensions of the ministry of this church. There is no doubt *their* leadership structure followed the same pattern.
- In Phil. 1 we are told that they existed in the church in Philippi. In Titus 1 we are informed that they were present in the churches on the island of Crete.
- In 1 Peter 1 & 5 they are mentioned in the churches of northwest Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia. In 1 Thess. 5 we see them in the churches of Thessalonica, and in Heb. 13 we see them in the church at Rome.

- *Not only* does the NT provide *many* examples of elder-led churches, but it also contains many explicit instructions to elders, and to the churches about how to respond to their elders who lead them.
- And I won't give you all these (for the sake of time this morning) but there are around 15 of these passages from Acts, James, 1 Timothy, Titus, 1 Peter, 1 Thess. and Hebrews.
- The contrast between reading Sullivan's book and a book entitled *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch was like night and day. In Strauch's book, there was Scripture *everywhere* (multiple references on every page).
- I believe the biblical evidence is overwhelming. Everywhere you look in the NT you see one singular form of church government, and that is through elders serving as shepherds, overseers, pastors, and leaders of the NT church.
- Now, that leads us to one of the most commonly asked questions in regard to elders: Are elders, overseers, bishops, shepherds and pastors all the same person, or are they separate positions? Well, let's look at:

III. THE EXPRESSIONS

- Let's look at the various terms that are used in the NT in reference to church leaders. There are 3 primary

Greek terms that are used in the NT to refer to the spiritual leaders of the local NT church. A careful study of Scripture reveals that they are *all* referring to the same person.

- The Greek word for "elder" is "presbuteros." It is used around 70 times in the NT. It was a familiar term in the NT days, because of the Jewish tradition of elders as leaders in Israel.
- The NT church was initially Jewish, so it would be natural that the concept of elder rule was adopted for use in the early church. The term "elder" was the one term that was used of leadership, that was free from the connotations associated with *either* the monarchy or the priesthood.
- So, of all the Jewish concepts of leadership, the *elder* best transfers to the kind of shepherding leadership that God has planned for the church. This term (presbuteros) is used nearly 20 times in Acts and the Epistles, in reference to a unique group of leaders in the church. It is (by far) the most common title for a leader in a NT church.
- But in addition to the term for elders (presbuteros), there is the term *bishop* or *overseer* (which in the Greek is the word "episkopos"). Now, today, we are wary of that term "bishop" (in Baptist circles) because it has come to mean one who presides over a number of churches, and we are uncomfortable with its threat to local church autonomy.

- In fact, “elder rule” is often rejected by many as being the “Presbyterian form of church government,” because the Presbyterians have Bishops who are *above* the local church in structure.
- And that is *not* the biblical model, because originally this term referred to the “overseer” or “guardian” of a local church. A “bishop” is *not* someone who oversees a number of churches. He is an overseer in one local church.
- The NT uses this term 5 times. In 1 Peter 2:25 it is used of Jesus Himself, who is seen as the “episkopos” of our souls. That is, He is the Shepherd or Guardian of our souls.
- The other four times the word “episkopos” is used, it is used to refer to church leaders. In the NT, the role of the overseer (or bishop) is to teach, feed, protect, and generally nurture the flock of God. It is a synonym for elder. There is no difference at all in the role of the elder and the role of the bishop (or overseer).
- There is a third term that is also used...that of the shepherd. The Greek word here is the word “poimen.” Most often it is translated in our English versions as “shepherd,” but one time (Eph. 4:11) it is translated “pastor.”
- In Eph. 4, (as we saw earlier), it is combined with the word “teacher,” (so that) it is seen as a pastor who is a teacher. The emphasis is on the pastor’s role as a teacher.
- This term “poimen” emphasizes the pastoral roles of caring and feeding, although *leadership* is also inherent in the word for “shepherd” as well. The word “poimen” has more to do with the shepherd’s heart, or the attitude in which he serves, than with the role he functions in. Twice in the NT, this term is used of Christ (Heb. 13:20-21 & 1 Peter 2:25).
- Now, Scripture is very clear that all three of these terms are referring to the same person. Bishops and pastors are *not* distinct from elders. There are several passages in which all three terms are used to talk about the same leaders.
- For example, the qualifications for *bishops* in 1 Tim. 3 are almost identical to those for *elders* in Titus 1. In fact, in Titus Paul uses *both* terms to refer to the same man in v. 5 and v. 7.
- 1 Peter 5:1-2 brings all three terms together. *Here* Peter instructs *elders* to be good *bishops* as they *pastor* (or shepherd). Look with me at 1 Peter 5:1-2, “Therefore, I exhort the *elders* (presbuteros) among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, *shepherd* (poimaino) the flock of God among you, exercising *oversight* (episkopeo) not under

compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God...”

- Paul also uses all three terms interchangeably in Acts 20. Look with me at Acts 20. (pause) In v. 17, he assembles all the *elders* (presbuteros) together to give them a farewell address, and in v. 28 he says, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers* (episkopos), to *shepherd* (poimaino) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.”
- So we clearly see that all of these terms are referring to the same person, while the only *other* NT leader is the *deacon*, and he is to serve as one who “waits tables” or performs other practical service that frees the elders up to fulfill their responsibilities.
- *Neither* the elders nor the deacons are to serve as a “board of directors” (in the modern usage of that phrase). And one of the main problems with this whole issue, is that every term we might use is loaded with some kind of mental baggage.
- Although the term *elder* is the predominate NT term, it often conveys something very *different* from what the biblical model is all about. People (today) often think of elders as lay church-board members, who are *separate* from the professional ordained pastors.

- You might call these “board-elders.” They are advisors, committee men, executives, and directors. But a true biblical elder is *not* a board member. A biblical elder council is a scripturally-qualified group of godly, mature men who jointly shepherd a local NT church.
- So to communicate the NT concept of biblical eldership, we *either* need to re-educate ourselves as to the NT usage of the term, or we need to choose a different term altogether. But since that term “elder” is the primary NT term, *that* is the term I believe we should use.
- The fact of the matter is, the *other* terms for this spiritual leader (in the church) are also “loaded” terms as well. Whether we use the title “pastor” or “bishop” or the term “elder,” we *all* have a pre-conceived idea of what that means, which is often more or less than the biblical concept.
- And while most of us would be *uncomfortable* using the term “bishop,” we certainly *could* use the term “pastor,” as long as we understand that this consists of both paid, “on staff” pastors, and unpaid lay pastors.
- But whichever of these terms we decide to use, we are talking about the biblical office of pastor/overseer/elder. And whatever term we use, we need to understand that the *pattern* for the roles of these men must come from the instructions of

Scripture, and *not* from our own pre-conceived notions.

- So, to wrap up this point about the terms (or *expressions*), we *could* say that the term “elder” emphasizes who the man *is*. The term “bishop” (or overseer) emphasizes what he *does*. And the term “pastor” (or shepherd) emphasizes the *attitude* with which he does it. But all three refer to the same spiritual leader. Now, we’re almost out of time for this morning, but very quickly, let me mention fourthly:

IV. THE EXAMPLE

- What I want to say *here* is that the *biblical norm* for church leadership is a *plurality* of God-ordained elders. It is the *only* pattern for church leadership given in the NT. Nowhere in the Scripture do we find a local assembly of believers ruled by majority vote or by one man.
- The NT provides conclusive evidence that the pastoral oversight of the local church is to be a team effort. The term “elder” is *always* in the plural. In several places, the word “church” is in the singular while the word “elder” is in the plural -- indicating that each church is to have a plurality of elders (cf. James 5:14, Acts 14:23).
- Of the 18 passages which speak of church leadership in the NT, 15 of them refer to elders in the plural. Of

these 15, seven of them *definitely* speak of one single congregation.

- Only three passages talk about church leadership in singular terms, and in each of those passages the singular may be seen as fully compatible with plurality. In all of these passages, there is *not* one single passage which describes a church being governed by one man.
- You know, it is interesting that no one ever debates the plurality of deacons, but there are often those who would debate the plurality of elders.
- And yet, there are many benefits of having a plurality of elders -- such as mutual accountability, complimenting others weaknesses, strength in numbers, safety in many counselors, iron sharpening iron, etc., etc.
- Now some of you may be wondering, “Does this mean that we have a multitude of senior pastors? Is there anyone at the top of the leadership structure?”
- Well, let me answer that in a couple of ways. First of all, we need to be reminded that Jesus Christ is really the “Senior Pastor.” He is the head of the church. He is the Chief Shepherd. He is the Lord of the church walking among the lampstands.

- But as far as earthly undershepherds, I *do* believe that the principle of “first among equals” is found in the biblical model. And I won’t spend a lot of time on this, but we see this modeled in the Apostles (first of all) and we also see it in how the congregation is told to honor their elders.
- Although *all* the apostles were equal in terms of their office and privileges, we know that there were three or four leaders that stood out above the others, and there was *one* that emerged as the spokesman for the entire group.
- Scripture records 4 lists of the apostles. Each list divides the 12 into three groups of 4 names. The three sub-lists always contain the same names.
- Although the order of the sub-lists differ from one account to the other, the first name in each group always remains the same. In the first group, the leading name is always Peter. In the second group it is always Philip. And in the third group it is always James.
- And we could give all kinds of evidence that out of the entire group, Peter emerged as the over-all leader. That did *not* have anything to do with *superiority* in any way, but only in terms of function and role. (This certainly does *not* mean that Peter was the first Pope – that’s another sermon...)
- But this is simply pointing to the fact that a position of leadership does *not* imply spiritual superiority. It does no disservice to the equality of the 12 that one of them would give special leadership to the entire group.
- In spite of his outstanding leadership and speaking ability, Peter possessed no legal or official rank (or title) above the other 11. They were *not* his subordinates. Peter was simply a leader among equals.
- And we could see something similar in regard to the way the Bible speaks of how those elders who work especially hard at the teaching of the Word are worthy of double honor, but we’re out of time.
- Next week, I want to come back and look at the *pattern* for biblical church government...
- PRAYER