

ECCLESIOLOGY
THE LOCAL CHURCH
Lesson 11

Types of Church Government

- I. **THE ISSUE** Since Christ is the supreme ruler of both the universal and local church, to whom has Christ committed or mediated authority to run the church? Who are the proper subjects of church power?

II. EARLY DEVELOPMENT OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

“But as early as the latter part of the second century there was a perceptible change. The rise of heresies made it imperative to name some characteristics by which the true catholic Church could be known. This tended to fix the attention on the outward manifestation of the Church. The Church began to be conceived as an external institution, ruled by a bishop as a direct successor of the apostles, and in possession of the true tradition. The catholicity of the Church was rather strongly emphasized. Local churches were not regarded as so many separate units, but simply as parts of the one universal Church. The increasing worldliness and corruption of the Church gradually led to reaction and gave rise to the tendency of various sects, such as Montanism in the middle of the second, Novatianism in the middle of the third, and Donatism at the beginning of the fourth century, to make the holiness of its members the mark of the true Church. The early Church Fathers, in combating these sectaries, emphasized ever increasingly the episcopal institution of the Church. Cyprian (200-258 AD) has the distinction of being the first to develop fully the doctrine of the Episcopal Church. He regarded the bishops as the real successors of the apostles and ascribed to them a priestly character in virtue of their sacrificial work. They together formed a college, called the episcopate, which as such constituted the unity of the Church. The unity of the Church was thus based on the unity of the bishops. They who do not subject themselves to the bishop forfeit the fellowship of the Church and also their salvation, since there is no salvation outside the Church.” (Berkhof, *Systematic Theology*, p. 558).

III. EPISCOPALIAN (Authority passed on the Bishops)

- A. Christ, as the Head of the Church, has entrusted the government of the church directly and exclusively to an independent order of bishops, as successors of the Apostles.
- B. The bishops are a separate, independent, self-perpetuating order, and the community of believers have absolutely no share in the government of the church.
- C. Episcopal form of government is found in the Church of England, Methodist Church, and AME Church, among others.
- D. Objections to the Episcopalian form of government:
 1. There is no succession of the Apostolic office. Because the Apostolic office was not permanent, it passed out of existence after the first century.

2. The New Testament makes no distinction between the office of bishop and elder (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5, 7). Therefore, the office of bishop cannot be a separate office of the church.
3. There is no evidence in the Bible for the concept of apostolic authority being passed on to others.
4. The bishops, under the Episcopalian system, have been given more power than the Apostles had in the first century.
5. Many modern day Episcopalians do not recognize Apostolic succession but do acknowledge Apostolic authority in the Bible and believe that rule by bishops is the most effective means of government.

IV. ROMAN CATHOLIC (Authority passed ultimately to the Pope)

- A. Roman Catholicism is the episcopal system carried to its logical conclusion.
- B. The Roman Catholic system claims not only successors to the Apostles, but also a successor to Peter, who is said to have been primary among the Apostles, and whose successor is now recognized as the special representative of Christ. The Church of Rome is of the nature of an absolute monarchy, under the control of an infallible Pope, who has the right to determine and regulate the doctrine, worship and government of the Church.
- C. Under the Pope there are inferior classes and orders, to whom special grace is given, and whose duty it is to govern the Church in strict accountability to their superiors and to the supreme Pontiff. The hierarchy consists of a broad circle of lower clergy (priest and other inferior functionaries); then a smaller circle of Bishops; next a still smaller circle of Archbishops, and finally the most restricted circle is the College of Cardinals.
- D. The officers of the Church are a separate class in contra-distinction from ordinary members of the Church.
- E. The people have no voice in the government of the church.
- F. Objections to the Roman Catholic form of government
 1. The Apostolic office was not of a permanent nature and went out of existence after the first century.
 2. There is no evidence in the New Testament for Apostolic succession.
 3. The Bible does not make the office of bishop a distinct office.
 4. While Peter was the leader of the Twelve because he was the oldest, there is no evidence that he was the first Pope or that he was even in Rome. Certainly it is clear from the Book of Romans, that the Roman church looked to Paul as their Apostle, not Peter.
 5. The New Testament gives no place for a liturgical priesthood, for it knows only of the spiritual priesthood of believers (1 Pet. 2:9-10).
 6. The massive organization of the Roman Catholic Church cannot be sustained on a Biblical basis.
 7. The Roman Catholic church defines the external and visible church as consisting not of the whole body of the faithful, but of the hierarchy, consisting of the priests with the higher orders of bishops, archbishops, cardinals, with the Pope in supreme authority as Christ's vice-regent.

V. ERASTIAN SYSTEM (Authority lies in the State)

- A. The church as a society owes its existence and form to regulations enacted by the state.
- B. The officers are merely instructors, without any right or power to rule except that which they derive from the civil authorities.
- C. The State governs, exercises discipline and excommunicates if necessary.
- D. Objections to the Erastian System
 - 1. Ignores the kingly headship of Christ.
 - 2. Ignores the independence of the church from the state.

VI. CONGREGATIONALISM (Authority vested in an independent congregation)

- A. Each local church is regarded as a complete church, independent of every other.
- B. As independent, each congregation, including its officers, is independent of all external authority or control, subject to no control whatsoever from any other body. The governing power rests exclusively with the members of the church.
- C. Christ gives authority to the local church and the officers are merely the organs or functionaries of the local church, having no power than that which is delegated to them by the membership.
- D. The membership possess the right of regulating all the affairs of the congregation, as distinguished from the office-bearers.
- E. The pastor is the one elder in the congregation, and the helpers of the elder and the servants of the people are the deacons. Both the elder and the deacons are elected by popular vote.
- F. Congregational churches generally recognize a community or conference of churches who are of like mind.
- G. Congregational form of government is practiced by Baptist, Independents, Lutherans, Congregationalist, Churches of Christ, etc.
- H. Local autonomy and congregational government are not synonymous. However, most groups who believe in local autonomy usually practice some form of congregational government.
- I. Support for congregational government
 - 1. Support for one elder (pastor) in a local church.
 - a. In 1 Tim. 3:1, Paul mentions the office of elder (bishop) which is in the singular, and in 1 Tim. 3:8 mentions deacons in the plural.
Refutation: In 3:1, Paul is using the singular because he is referring to the office of elder (generically) not the number of elders. The number of elders is spelled out in other passages.
 - b. There was one church in each city but the church met in various units in individual homes. Possibly each house church had one elder (singular) and together the church of the city had elders (plural).
Refutation: In some places like Iconium (Acts 14:1, a multitude believed and it might have been necessary for many elders to be in one house church. But in Lystra and Derbe, the response was not so great

and there were not many converts. Yet, on their way back to visit these churches, Paul appointed elders in all these churches (Acts 14:23). Apparently even the cities which had only one home church had a plurality of elders. There are also other verses which teach a plurality of elders (1 Tim. 5:17).

- c. In Revelation 2-3, the Apostle John addresses the seven angels of the seven churches and always addresses them in the singular. The word “angel” could be translated “messenger,” referring to one pastor for each church. Refutation: In an elder form of government, there is one particularly gifted teacher who would be the pastor-teacher or teaching elder, but he is just one of several ruling elders.
 - d. Practically, a flock of sheep only respond to one shepherd. Refutation: That is true and they will respond primarily to the leadership of the teaching elder (pastor teacher) but the government is by a plurality of elders.
2. Support For Congregational Government
 - a. Acts 6:1-8, is the first mention of deacon. The congregation at Jerusalem were to pick out seven men who could do the physical tasks of the ministry while the Apostles gave themselves to prayer and ministry of the Word (Acts 6:4). The deacons were chosen by the people proving congregational government. Refutation: The authority was resident in both the congregation and the Apostles, for the Apostles gave the congregation the authority and had final approval of candidates who were chosen (Acts 6:2,3,6). Also we cannot be positively sure that Acts 6 is the election of deacons for the word “deacon” never appears, although it is implied through various word root meanings.
 - b. In the matter of church discipline, it appears that the church was involved (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:1-5, 13; 2 Thess. 3:14) to some degree. Refutation: We are not told a vote was taken but the congregation was somehow to discipline the wayward brother.
 - c. In Acts 1:15-26, Matthias was elected by the disciples to replace Judas as one of the original Twelve Apostles. He was elected by drawing lots. Just how this was done, we do not know but it was certainly participation by a congregation. Refutation: This whole passage is not clear.
 3. Problems with Congregational vote
 - a. Congregational government can often end up in a power struggle between the congregation and the pastor.
 - b. A pastor in a congregational government often has to become dictatorial to get things done.
 - c. Congregational voting becomes nothing more than a popularity contest. There is probably never a vote taken where someone is not hurt emotionally if he loses.
 - d. Congregational vote may subtly divide a congregation.

- e. Congregational government puts too much authority in people who are immature in the faith.
- f. Congregational vote leads to many church splits.
- g. Pure congregationalism often has little respect for authority residing in leaders.
- h. Congregationalism has no protection for a pastor. When the pastor is experiencing problems in the church he has no place to appeal his case or get help

VII. PRESBYTERIANISM (Authority is in the Church as a whole through the agency of elected elders with the consent of the congregation)

- A. Jesus Christ is the Head and King of the Church and He exercises His authority by means of the Word.
- B. Authority is committed by Christ to the Church as a whole, that is to the ordinary members and the elders alike; but in addition, elders receive special authority to carry out their perspective duties in the Church.
- C. The elders are voted on by the congregation, so there is rule with the consent and concurrence of the people.
- D. The Session (plurality of elders in a local church) are representatives, not mere deputies or delegates of the people and are chosen by congregational vote.
- E. Presbyterian government consists of a Session (local church level), Presbytery (elder representatives from a number of local churches in a given locality) and General Assembly (representation from each of the Presbyteries). Therefore, ecclesiastical authority is implemented through a series of graded courts.
- F. Presbyterianism recognizes a relative autonomy of the local church. The presbytery can exercise ecclesiastical authority over a local church if action is necessary.
- G. In modern day Presbyterianism, there are two streams of thinking about church authority:
 - 1. Prelatical Presbyterianism believes authority is vested in the highest court (General Assembly) and is delegated downward making all decisions of the higher court binding on the church. Under this system, there is an aristocratic rule and hierarchy in matters concerning the local church like continued owning of property, internal affairs, election of officers, discipline, etc.
 - 2. Democratic Presbyterianism believes that authority is vested in the lower courts (Session), recognizing the importance of the local church. In terms of ecclesiastical authority, Democratic Presbyterianism sees the denomination to be hierachial but in terms of civil powers it is democratic. NOTE: The difference between these two Presbyterian views is whether authority comes from the top down or from the bottom up. This may seem trite but it has huge implications.