

Intro:

This message is the one I was working on when I got sick a few weeks ago. The whole experience turned out to be a blessing in many ways, but now I am ‘catching up’ on this little series of messages I have wanted to work on.

Our subject matter has to do with philosophy of ministry, or as I am putting it, “what marks our church?” What makes our church unique, aside from the unique people who make up the body!

Today, then, we come to the second point, one of ‘church governance’. Most of what I am teaching in this series begins with the philosophy statement of Mount Calvary Baptist Church in Greenville, SC. This point, while compatible with what they say in their statement is not the same as their statement:

We believe in pastor-led, congregationally governed church governance (Ac 6.1-6, 20.28; Phil. 1:1; Rev 1.20, 2.1, 8, 12 etc.)

Mount Calvary elaborates here considerably on the notion of ‘plurality of elders’ where they will have a full-time pastoral staff who are elders and laymen who are also part of the elder board. They also have deacons who serve in other ways.

While I don’t see anything sinful in this approach, I disagree that it is mandated in the Bible. The question is something of a matter of debate among Bible believing Christians.

Regardless of that debate, we do believe in definite and defined leadership and in congregational church government.

I am going to use a passage to suggest our title. The passage really isn’t about church government. It is about a man’s faith in the power and authority of Jesus Christ.

However, it speaks to the man’s understanding of his role in life. The idea contained in his viewpoint of himself is one that embodies what we believe about church governance:

Luke 7:8 “For I also am a man placed under authority, with soldiers under me; and I say to this one, ‘Go!’ and he goes, and to another, ‘Come!’ and he comes, and to my slave, ‘Do this!’ and he does it.”

These are the words of a Roman centurion. He is a ‘man under authority’. He answers to men; he has men who answer to him. He points to his view of authority as a confession of faith in the authority of Christ.

People of the church need to view their authority structure in much the same way, so I am taking this title:

Men Under Authority
or, *the genius of local church government*

Let's go, then to Acts 6, which will form our primary text in this message.

Read Ac 6.1-6

Proposition: We believe in pastor-led, congregationally governed church governance (Ac 6.1-6, 20.28; Phil. 1:1; Rev 1.20, 2.1, 8, 12 etc.)

I. Insights from church governance passages

A. Foundational passage on church governance: the institution of the office of deacon (Ac 6.1-6)

1. The revelatory issue: the administration of the care of widows (1)
 - a. The sudden emergence of the Christian church created a social problem for some of its members
 - b. Many would likely have been 'put out' of the synagogue, *i.e.*, no commerce at all allowed within the Jewish community
 - c. Economy is difficult, and widows may be cut off entirely from family social network
 - d. A complaint arose that the 'Grecians' were not getting fair treatment from 'Hebrews'
 - 1) All of these people are Jews
 - 2) The 'Grecians' would be Jews from abroad, from the Greek speaking world

Now, note that I called this point, "the revelatory issue" — I mean that God used this issue as an occasion to reveal proper church practice in matters of government.

2. The apostolic solution (2-4)
 - a. The role of apostles as leaders was primarily to focus on the ministry of the Word of God, not to wait on tables (2)
 - b. The instruction of the apostles was to call the congregation to select spiritual and skilful [*i.e.*, wise] men for the task (3)
 - c. The apostles intended to devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (4)

Now, note that the apostles are not relinquishing authority: they will put the congregationally selected individuals in charge (3)

Note, however, that the apostles are dividing labours and delegating responsibility in accordance with congregational instruction.

3. The congregational reaction (5-6)

- a. The people chose (5)
- b. The apostles ordained (6)

Now remember our title: *Men Under Authority*

- The people remain under authority to their God appointed leaders.
- The leaders remain under authority to God.

Now, before we make more application, I want you to see another passage and get more biblical data...

B. An instructive passage for church leadership: Paul's farewell message to the elders of Ephesus (Ac 20.25-31, esp. v. 28)

1. In v. 17, we see that the crowd Paul is speaking to are the 'elders' [presbuteroi] of the Ephesian church
2. In v. 28 we see that God has made them 'overseers' [elsewhere trans. 'bishops']
 - a. Bishop: episcopos – etymology: epi = upon, scopos = to look or observe closely ('scope out')
 - b. Thus the activity of this office holder is one who 'scopes out upon' — the one who keeps 'watch over your souls' Hb 13.17
3. In v. 28, the elders/bishops are instructed to 'shepherd' the flock of God, *i.e.*, to 'pastor' the flock
 - a. All three terms for church leadership are used in one passage of the same people
 - b. Elder, Bishop, Pastor = same office
 - c. It is possible to have more than one pastor / elder/ bishop in a church, but it is quite clear that there is an office of oversight that these terms refer to. Each term refers to different aspects of ministry:
 - 1) Elder: qualifications

- 2) Bishop: position
 - 3) Pastor: means and method
4. The function of the pastors in this passage is to be on watch and on guard, protecting the flock
- a. Be on guard (28)
 - b. Wolves will come (29-30)
 - 1) From without
 - 2) From within
 - c. Be on the alert (31)

Now you can see by these commands from an apostle that these men are *Men Under Authority*.

- Men under apostolic authority [boundaries of authority defined by the Word of God]
- Men under divine authority [the church is God's church, it is bought with Christ's blood, it belongs to Him, not to men]

One more set of passages...

- C. A set of warning passages to churches and pastors: the words of Christ to seven churches in Asia (Rev 1.20, 2.1-3.22)
- 1. In the vision of Christ in Rev 1, John sees Christ standing in the midst of seven candlesticks and holding seven stars. Jesus explains that aspect of the vision (1.20)
 - a. Seven candlesticks are seven churches
 - b. Seven stars are 'angels of the churches'
 - 1) Could be literal angels
 - 2) 'Angel' = 'messenger'; thus taken to refer to 'pastors', which, in light of messages in ch. 2-3, I think is correct
 - 2. The Lord has messages for each of the angels (pastors)
 - a. 2.1
 - b. 2.8
 - c. 2.12
 - d. 2.18
 - e. 3.1
 - f. 3.7
 - g. 3.14

3. The character of the messages shows that the Lord holds pastors accountable for what goes on in churches (and for what they do themselves)
 - a. Messages of commendation
 - b. Messages of condemnation
 - c. Calls for repentance
 - d. Calls for faithfulness

In particular, we see these churches, led by men, and all are *Men Under Authority* — in other words, there is someone churches have to answer to.

- There is an accountability to the will of the congregation through church governance procedures
- There is an even greater accountability to the will of Jesus Christ, he of the flaming eyes, at the judgement seat of Christ (2 Cor 5)

This gives us the bare bones of the biblical structure of church governance, division of labours, and accountability.

Now a couple of points of application...

II. Extreme forms of church governance we want to avoid

A. We want to avoid the 'Pastor as Dictator' syndrome

1. Some pastors insist on total control of everything (this is not the same as pastoral leadership in decision making, but total control)
 - a. Decisions and new directions are 'announced' not voted on
 - b. If there are any committees, they exist as 'rubber stamps', no true independence

I have heard of very extreme examples of this where the Pastor owned the church property ... and on occasion 'fired' the church.

2. Now, remember that the pastor is to be on guard and watch out for wolves in his ministry of the Word
 - a. From this, I believe the Bible gives the pastor authority and accountability for *all* the teaching ministries of the church

- b. The pastor, then, is responsible for the pulpit
 - 1) And the Sunday school
 - 2) And the music
 - a) Though not pretending to be an expert!
 - b) Yet being accountable, with consultation with more skilled individuals we set general guidelines and policies
 - c. Occasionally, the pastor may be required to make corrections (or apologies) for what goes on in the pulpit

Never forget pastor Handford interrupting a message for an inappropriate joke...

- B. We want to avoid the ‘Committee Run Church’ syndrome
 - 1. Every decision goes through a committee process
 - 2. Nothing gets down without multiple approvals (and often, just nothing gets done)

Again, I have heard of churches who had to have a vote to approve the purchase of paper towels for the kitchen.

So you see, the Bible gives us guidelines and patterns, from that we must use wisdom to apply ourselves in our own ministry so that we live in proper relation to the Biblical guidelines.

III. Implications concerning church governance we particularly wish to keep ‘top of mind’

- A. Pastor led
 - 1. Administration is in the hands of the pastor
 - 2. Delegation is made (at congregational direction) to selected leaders in the congregation
- B. Congregationally governed
 - 1. The Annual General Meeting provides the framework for administration
 - 2. Extraordinary measures require Special Business Meetings

3. A larger church may require more frequent General Meetings (Semi-Annual or Quarterly) or more committee meetings (all accountable to the General Meeting)

Conclusion:

I'd like to conclude with a quotation from a Baptist book on the church. He sums up the ideal of what church governance ultimately should look like. This is what we are after!

Let Baptists be not weary in well-doing. Our inability to enlist all our people in all our work at all times is discouraging to a superficial view. If our ecclesiastical machinery could be so adjusted and oiled as to run without a jar it would doubtless save trouble and please the esthetic faculty. But there is a profound reason why such adjustment can only come slowly: we are dealing with persons and not with things—with human wills, not with wood and iron. When you step into a great power plant you admire its smooth running. The ponderous machinery answers to a human ideal as the planets in their orbits answer to the will of God. But this is because a human will has impressed itself upon material things. When the ideal has been perfected in the mind of the constructor the rest is simply a question of mechanical execution of details. But the process is far more complex in an orchestra. The players on the various instruments conquer each his individual harmony and his place in the general effect by slow and painstaking effort under the direction of the leader. It requires much time and much patience and persistent practice after a high degree of proficiency has been reached to maintain a high standard of musical perfection.

Now it is the ideal of the orchestra and not that of the machine which must control in religion. Not one human will stamping itself upon other human wills by authority, but Christ's will leading his people to the unity and harmony which will reproduce his own moral ideal.¹

¹ E. Y. Mullins, *The Axioms of Religion* (Roger Williams Heritage Archives, 1908; 2003). p. 218-219.