

terms of office, a requirement for a mandatory year off (except for full-time pastoral staff members who are elders) every few years, a requirement for periodic reaffirmation of an elder's selection, and a provision in the nominating process whereby nominations can be made by the members of the congregation (even if most nominations come from the elders themselves) would all provide additional measures of accountability to the congregation without forfeiting any essential aspects of governing authority over the congregation once elders are elected.

These factors would also provide some arguments against a self-perpetuating group of elders that is not subject to election or periodic reconfirmation by the congregation, but once again it must be said that no specific directives are listed in Scripture and there is room for variation at this point.

C. FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

In discussing forms of church government there is some overlap with the previous section on the method of choosing church officers, for the selection of officers is one very important aspect of authority in the church. Different philosophies of church government will be reflected in different methods used for selecting officers of the church, as explained above.

This is evident in the fact that forms of church government can be broken down into three large categories, which we may call episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational. The *episcopal* forms have a government by a distinct category of church officers known as a priesthood, and final authority for decision making is found outside the local church.³⁰ The Episcopal Church system is the primary representative among Protestants of this form of government. The *presbyterian* forms have a government by elders, some of whom have authority not only over their local congregation but also, through the presbytery and the general assembly, over all the churches in a region and then in the denomination as a whole. The *congregational* forms of church government all have final governing authority resting with the local congregation, although various degrees of self-rule are given up through denominational affiliation, and the actual form of local church government may vary considerably. We will examine each of these forms of government in the following discussion.

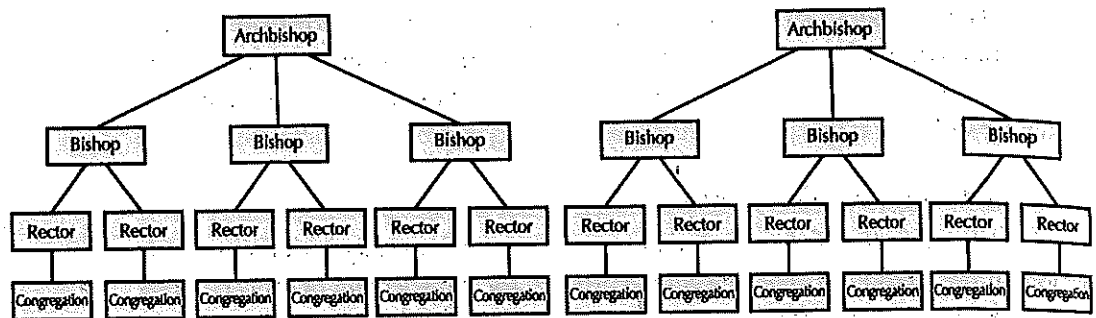
1. Episcopal

In the episcopal system, an archbishop has authority over many bishops. They in turn have authority over a "diocese," which simply means the churches under the jurisdiction of a bishop. The officer in charge of a local parish is a rector (or sometimes a vicar, who is an "assistant" or one who substitutes for the rector). Archbishops, bishops,

³⁰ The Roman Catholic Church also has government by a priesthood and is therefore "episcopal" in form of government. Sometimes an episcopal form of government is called

a "hierarchical" government, especially when referring to the Roman Catholic Church.

and rectors are all "priests" since they have all at one time been ordained to the episcopal priesthood (but in practice the rector is most often called the priest). However, Episcopalians understand the English word *priest* to be equivalent to the term *presbyter* (the Greek term for "elder"), while Roman Catholics understand the word *priest* differently, relating it to the Old Testament priesthood in its duty of offering sacrifices and representing the people to God and God to the people.



Episcopal Government

Figure 47.1

The argument for the episcopalian system is not that it is found in the New Testament but that it is a natural outgrowth of the development of the church that began in the New Testament and that it is not forbidden by the New Testament. E. A. Litton writes, "No order of Diocesan Bishops appears in the New Testament," but he immediately adds:

The evidence is in favour of the supposition that Episcopacy sprang from the Church itself, and by a natural process, and that it was sanctioned by Saint John, the last survivor of the Apostles. The Presbytery, when it assembled for consultation, would naturally elect a president to maintain order; first temporarily, but in time with permanent authority. . . . Thus it is probable that at an early period an informal episcopate had sprung up in each church. As the Apostles were one by one removed . . . the office would assume increased importance and become invested with greater powers.³¹

Moreover, since the office of bishop and the corresponding government structure found in the Episcopalian Church is both historical and beneficial, Litton argues that it should be preserved. Finally, the benefit of direct descent from the apostles is regarded as a strong reason in favor of the episcopalian system. Litton says, "The Apostles are the

31. Edward Arthur Litton, *Introduction to Dogmatic Theology*, ed. by Philip E. Hughes (1882-92; repr., London: Clarke, 1960), 401.

first link in the chain, and there is no reason why a succession, as regards to the external commission, should not proceed from age to age, the existing body of ministers handing down the official authority to their successors, and these latter in turn to theirs.³²

But there are arguments that may be given on the other side of this question. (1) It is significant that the office of "bishop" is not a distinct office in the New Testament but is simply a synonym for the name "elder," as Litton himself agrees.³³ There is no *single* bishop in the New Testament, but bishops (or overseers) are always plural in number. This should not be seen merely as an incidental fact, for even among the apostles Jesus did not leave one with superior authority over the others, but he left a group of twelve who were equal in governing authority (and to whom others were later added, such as Paul). Though some apostles, such as Peter, James, and Paul, had prominence among the group, they did not have any greater authority than the others, and even Peter was rebuked by Paul in Antioch (Gal. 2:11).³⁴ This may well reflect the wisdom of Christ in guarding against the abuse of power that inevitably comes when any one human being has too much power without sufficient checks and balances from others. Just as Jesus left a plurality of apostles to have ultimate (human) authority in the early church, so the apostles always appointed a plurality of elders in every church, never leaving only one person with governing authority.

(2) The theory of a group of bishops established to replace the apostles is not taught in the New Testament, nor is there an implication of a need for *physical* continuity of ordination through the laying on of hands by those who have been ordained in an unbroken chain of succession from the apostles. For example, in Acts 13:3, it was not the Jerusalem apostles who ordained Paul and Barnabas but people in the church at Antioch who laid hands on them and sent them out. In fact, there is very little evidence that the apostles had any concern for a line of succession. Timothy apparently was ordained not simply by Paul but also by a "council of elders" (1 Tim. 4:14), though this may well have included Paul as well (see 2 Tim. 1:6). More importantly, ordaining is ultimately from the Lord himself (Acts 20:28; 1 Cor. 12:28; Eph. 4:11), and there is nothing in the nature of "ordaining" (when it is simply seen as public recognition of an office) that requires that it be done *only* by those previously ordained in *physical* descent from the apostles. If God has called an elder, he is to be recognized, and no concern about physical descent needs to be raised. In addition, if one is convinced that the local church should elect elders (see discussion above), then it would seem appropriate that the church that elected the elder—not an external bishop—should be the group to confer the outward recognition at election by installing the person in office or ordaining the pastor.³⁵

32. Ibid., 390.

33. Ibid., 400.

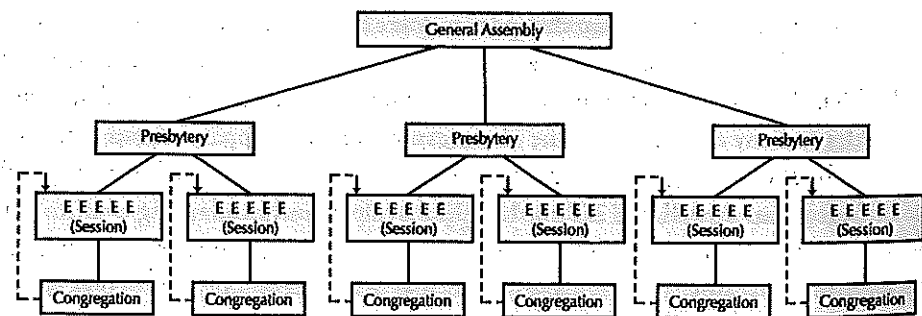
34. Roman Catholics argue that Peter had greater authority than the other apostles from the beginning, but the New Testament evidence does not bear this out. (On the "power of the keys" in Matt. 16:19, see chapter 46, pp. 1097–1100.)

35. Episcopalians, who favor appointment of officers by a bishop, would of course not agree with the premise of this last consideration.

(3) While it may be argued that the development of an episcopalian system with single bishops in authority over several churches was a beneficial development in the early church, one may also argue that it was a deviation from New Testament standards and a result of human dissatisfaction with the system of elected local elders that had been established by the apostles and that had apparently worked very well from AD 33 to 100 throughout all of the New Testament church. But one's evaluation of the historical data will of course depend on one's evaluation of earlier arguments for and against an episcopalian system.

2. Presbyterian

In this system, each local church elects elders to a session (E in figure 47.2 stands for elder, and the dotted lines indicate that the whole congregation elects the elders). The pastor of the church will be one of the elders in the session, equal in authority to the other elders. This session has governing authority over the local church. However, the members of the session (the elders) are also members of a presbytery, which has authority over several churches in a region. This presbytery consists of some or all of the elders in the local churches over which it has authority. Moreover, some of the members of the presbytery are members of the "general assembly," which usually has authority over all the presbyterian churches in a nation or region.³⁶



Presbyterian Government

Figure 47.2

The arguments in favor of this presbyterian system are (1) that those who have wisdom and gifts for eldership should be called on to use their wisdom to govern more than just one local church, and (2) a national (or even worldwide) government of the church shows the unity of the body of Christ. Moreover (3) such a system is able to prevent an

36. In the Christian Reformed Church, the form of government is similar to a presbyterian system, but the names of the governing bodies are different: the elders in a local church are called a *consistory* (instead of a session), the regional

governing body is called a *classis* (instead of a *presbytery*), and the national governing assembly is called a *synod* (instead of a *general assembly*).

individual congregation from falling into doctrinal error much more effectively than any voluntary association of churches.³⁷

The presbyterian system outlined above has many adherents among evangelical Christians today, and it certainly works effectively in many cases. However, some objections can be brought against this system: (1) Nowhere in Scripture do *elders* have regularly established authority over more than their own local church. The pattern is rather that elders are appointed in local churches and have authority over local churches. Against this claim the Jerusalem council in Acts 15 is often mentioned, but we should notice that this council was held in Jerusalem because of the presence of the apostles. Apparently the apostles and the elders in Jerusalem, with the representatives from Antioch (Acts 15:2), together sought God's wisdom on this matter. And there seems to have been some consultation with the whole church as well, for we read, at the conclusion of the discussion, "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, *with the whole church*, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas" (Acts 15:22). (If this narrative gives support to regional government by elders, it therefore also gives support to regional government by whole congregations!) This situation with the elders in Jerusalem is not a good pattern to defend a system whereby elders have authority over more than their local churches: the Jerusalem church did not send for all the elders in Judea, Samaria, and Galilee and call a meeting of "the Judean presbytery" or a "general assembly." Although the apostles in Jerusalem certainly had authority over all the churches, there is no indication that elders by themselves, even in the Jerusalem church, had any such authority. And certainly there is no New Testament pattern for elders exercising authority over any other than their own local churches.

On the other hand, advocates of a presbyterian system could answer that nowhere in the New Testament do we find an example of an independent church, because every church in the New Testament is subject to the worldwide governing authority of the apostles. Of course, a defender of independent churches might answer that we have no apostles today to exercise such authority. However, if we are looking to the New Testament for a pattern, the fact still remains that no independent churches are to be found there, and we would expect that *something* rather than *nothing* would replace a government by the apostles. This seems to me to indicate that some sort of denominational authority over local churches is still appropriate (though that will take different forms in different denominations).

(2) This system, in practice, results in much formal litigation, where doctrinal disputes are pursued year after year all the way to the level of the general assembly. One wonders if this should be characteristic of the church of Christ—perhaps so, but it seems

37. A fuller defense of the presbyterian system of church government is found in Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1941), 581-92.

to the present author to be a system that encourages such litigation far more than is necessary or edifying for the body of Christ.

(3) The effective power in church government seems, in practice, to be too removed from the final control of the laypeople in the church. Although Berkhof, who defends this system of government, affirms quite clearly that "the power of the church resides *primarily* in the governing body of the local church,"³⁸ he also admits that "the more general the assembly, the more remote it is from the people."³⁹ Thus the system is very hard to turn around when it begins to go wrong since the laypersons who are not elders have no vote in the session or the presbytery or the general assembly, and the governing structure of the church is further removed from them than in other church government structures.

(4) Although in some cases it is true that a doctrinally sound denomination with a presbyterian system of government can keep a local church from going astray in its doctrine, in actuality very frequently the opposite has been true: the national leadership of a presbyterian-governed denomination has adopted false doctrine and has put great pressure on local churches to conform to it.

(5) Although the presbyterian system does represent in one form the national or even worldwide unity of Christ's church, such unity can certainly be shown in other ways than through this system of government. The churches with more purely congregational forms of government do have voluntary associations that manifest this unity. In fact, these associations involve *all* the people in the churches, not just the elders or the clergy, as in a presbyterian system. The national meeting of a Baptist denomination, for example, where large numbers of ministers and laypersons (who are delegates from their churches, not necessarily elders or deacons) join in fellowship, might be seen as a better demonstration of the unity of Christ's body than a presbyterian general assembly where only elders are present.

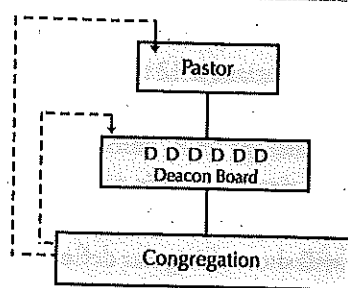
3. Congregational

a. **Single Elder (or Single Pastor).** We can now look at five varieties of congregational government for the church. The first one, which is common among Baptist churches in the United States, is the "single elder" form of government. In this kind of government the pastor is seen as the only elder in the church, and there is an elected board of deacons who serve under his authority and give support to him (D in figure 47.3 stands for deacon).

In this system, the congregation elects the pastor and the deacons. The amount of authority the pastor has varies greatly from church to church and generally will increase the longer a pastor remains in a church. The authority of the deacon board is often thought to be merely an advisory authority. In the way this system ordinarily functions, especially in smaller churches, many decisions must be brought before the congregation as a whole.

38. *Ibid.*, 584.

39. *Ibid.*, 591.



Single-Elder (Single-Pastor) Government

Figure 47.3

The arguments in favor of this system are presented clearly in A. H. Strong's *Systematic Theology*, a text that was previously widely used in Baptist circles.⁴⁰ Strong gives the following arguments.

(1) The New Testament does not require a plurality of elders, but the pattern of plural elders seen in the New Testament was only due to the size of the churches at that time. He says,

In certain of the New Testament churches there appears to have been a plurality of elders. . . . There is, however, no evidence that the number of elders was uniform, or that the plurality which frequently existed was due to any other cause than the size of the churches for which these elders cared. The New Testament example, while it permits the multiplication of assistant pastors according to need, does not require a plural eldership in every case.⁴¹

In this quotation Strong shows that he would regard additional pastors hired by a larger church to be elders as well, so that this system could be expanded beyond a single elder/pastor to include two or more elder/pastors. But the crucial distinction is that *the governing authority of the office of elder is possessed only by the professional pastor(s) of the church* and is not shared by laypersons in the church. And we must realize that in practice, the vast majority of churches that follow this pattern today are relatively small churches with only one pastor; therefore, in actuality, this usually becomes a single elder form of government.⁴²

40. A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Valley Forge, PA: Judson, 1907), 914–17. Strong was President of Rochester Theological Seminary from 1872 to 1912.

41. *Ibid.*, 915–16.

42. Another Baptist theologian, Millard Erickson, supports Strong's claim that the New Testament does not require plural elders in a church. He says that the New Testament examples of elders are "descriptive passages" that tell about a

church order that already existed, but that "churches are not instructed to adopt a particular form of church order" (*Christian Theology*, 1003). Moreover, Erickson sees no one pattern of church government in the New Testament, but says, "There may well have been rather wide varieties of governmental arrangements. Each church adopted a pattern that fit its individual situation" (*ibid.*).

(2) Strong adds that "James was the pastor or president of the church at Jerusalem," and cites Acts 12:17; 21:18; and Galatians 2:12 to show that this leadership by James was a pattern that could then be imitated by other churches.

(3) Strong notes that some passages have "bishop" in the singular but "deacons" in the plural, hinting at something similar to this common Baptist form of government. If we translate the Greek word *episcopos* as "bishop" (instead of "overseer"), then a literal translation of the Greek text will show a singular definite article modifying "bishop" in two verses: "*The bishop* therefore must be without reproach" (1 Tim. 3:2, literal translation), and "*the bishop* must be blameless" (Titus 1:7, literal translation), but by contrast, we read, "*Deacons* likewise must be dignified" (1 Tim. 3:8).

(4) Finally, the "angel of the church" in Revelation 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14, according to Strong, "is best interpreted as meaning the pastor of the church; and, if this be correct, it is clear that each church had, not many pastors, but one."⁴³

(5) Another argument, not made by Strong, is found in literature on church growth. The argument is that churches need a strong single pastor in order to grow rapidly.⁴⁴

Once again it must be said that this single elder form of government has worked successfully in many evangelical churches. However, there can be objections to the case presented by Strong and others.

(1) It seems inconsistent to argue that the New Testament falls short of giving a clear *command* that all churches should have a plurality of elders when the passages on qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-7 are used as scriptural *requirements* for church officers today. How can churches say that the *qualifications for elders* found in the New Testament Epistles and Acts are commanded for us today but the *system of plural elders* found in these very same New Testament books is not commanded but was required only in that time and in that society? Though it could be objected that these are commands written only to individual situations in Ephesus and Crete, much of the New Testament consists of apostolic commands written to individual churches (in Rome, Corinth, Philippi, Thessalonica, etc.) on how they should conduct themselves. Yet we do not say that, since they were written to local churches, we are free to disobey the instructions in these epistles. In fact, 1 Timothy and Titus give us a great deal of material on the conduct of local churches generally, material that all believing churches seek to follow.⁴⁵

43. Strong, *Systematic Theology*, 916.

44. See, for example, C. Peter Wagner, *Leading Your Church to Growth* (Ventura, CA: Regal, 1984). He says, "The principal argument of this book is that if churches are going to maximize their growth potential they need pastors who are strong leaders. . . . Make no mistake about it: it is a rule" (73). The book is filled with anecdotes and pronouncements from church growth experts telling the reader that leadership by a strong single pastor is essential to significant church growth.

45. There are a very few (three or four) commands regarding physical actions that carry symbolic meaning that varies from culture, such as foot washing, a holy kiss, and head covering for women. We rightly obey these with different physical actions today. See discussion in Wayne Grudem, *Christian Ethics* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018), 1227-32.

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Moreover, it seems to be quite unwise to ignore a clear New Testament pattern that existed throughout all the churches for which we have evidence at the time the New Testament was written. When the New Testament shows us that *no* church was seen to have a single elder ("in every church," Acts 14:23; "in every town," Titus 1:5; "let him call for the elders," James 5:14; "I exhort the elders among you," 1 Peter 5:1), then it seems unpersuasive to say that smaller churches would have only had one elder. Even when Paul had just founded churches on his first missionary journey, there were elders appointed "in every church" (Acts 14:23). And "every town" on the island of Crete was to have elders, no matter how large or small the church was.

In addition, there is an inconsistency in Strong's argument when he says that the large churches were those which had plural elders, for then he claims that "the angel of the church in Ephesus" (Rev. 2:1) was a single pastor, according to this common Baptist pattern. Yet the church at Ephesus at that time was exceptionally large: Paul, in founding that church, had spent three years there (Acts 20:31), during which time "all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks" (Acts 19:10). The population of Ephesus at that time was more than 250,000.⁴⁶

We may ask, why should we follow Strong and adopt as the norm a pattern of church government which is *nowhere* found in the New Testament, and reject a pattern *everywhere* found in the New Testament?

(2) James may well have acted as moderator or presiding officer in the church in Jerusalem, for all churches will have some kind of designated leader like this in order to conduct meetings. But this does not imply that he was the "pastor" of the church in Jerusalem in a "single elder" sense. In fact, Acts 15:2 shows that there were *elders* (plural) in the church in Jerusalem, and James himself was probably numbered among the apostles (see Gal. 1:19) rather than the elders.

(3) In 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7, the Greek definite article modifying "overseer" simply shows that Paul is speaking of general qualifications as they applied to any one example.⁴⁷ In fact, in both cases Strong cites we know there were *elders* (plural) in the churches involved: 1 Timothy 3:2 is written to Timothy at Ephesus, and Acts 20:17 shows us that there were "elders" in the church at Ephesus. And even in 1 Timothy, Paul writes, "Let the *elders* who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (1 Tim. 5:17). With regard to Titus 1:7 we need only look to verse 5, where Paul directs Titus explicitly to "appoint *elders* in every town."

46. Robert H. Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, NIC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 85.

47. In terms of Greek grammar, the use of the definite article here is best understood as a "generic" use, which is a use of the definite article that "distinguishes one class from another. . . . It categorizes rather than particularizes" (Daniel Wallace, *Greek Grammar beyond the Basics* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996], 227, and see 229 for the generic use of the

definite article in 1 Tim. 3:2). Paul's use of the singular was natural after he said, "If *anyone* aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task" (1 Tim. 3:1), or "If *anyone* is above reproach" (Titus 1:6).

The ESV gives a more appropriate translation for English readers, reflecting this generic use, at these two verses: "an overseer."

(4) The angels of the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 are unusual and rather weak evidence for single elders. “The angel of the church in Ephesus” (Rev. 2:1) can hardly mean that there was only one elder in that church, since we know there were “elders” there in this very large church (Acts 20:17). The word *angel* used in the address to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3 may simply designate a special messenger to each church, perhaps even the human messenger who would take what John wrote to each church,⁴⁸ or it may represent “the prevailing spirit of the church” rather than the ruling official of the congregation,⁴⁹ or it may even refer to an angel who was given special care over each congregation. Even if it did represent a presiding officer of some sort in each congregation, this “angel” is not shown to have any ruling authority or any functions equivalent to today’s single pastor or to an elder in the New Testament churches. This passage does not furnish strong enough evidence to dislodge the clear data throughout the New Testament showing plural elders in every church, even in the church in Ephesus.

It is interesting that all of the New Testament passages cited by Strong (Acts 15, Jerusalem; 1 Tim. 3:2, Ephesus; Titus 1:7, Crete; Rev. 2–3, the seven churches, including Ephesus) speak of situations in which the New Testament points quite clearly to a plurality of elders in authority in the churches mentioned.

(5) The argument from church growth studies does not really prove that government led by a single pastor is necessary, for at least three reasons: (a) We should not reject a pattern supported in Scripture and adopt a different one just because people tell us that the different pattern seems to work well in producing large churches—our role here, as in all of life, should rather be to obey Scripture as closely as we can and expect God to bring appropriate blessing as he wills. (b) There are many large churches with government by plural elders (both Presbyterian churches and independent churches), so the argument from pragmatic considerations is not conclusive. (c) C. Peter Wagner admits that strong leaders can be found in various forms of church government,⁵⁰ and we must agree that a system of plural elders in which all have equal authority does not prevent one elder (such as the pastor) from functioning as a sort of “first among equals” and having a significant leadership role among those elders.

(6) A common practical problem with a “single elder” system is either an excessive concentration of power in one person or excessive demands laid upon him. In either case, the temptations to sin are very great, and a lessened degree of accountability makes yielding to temptation more likely. As was mentioned above, it was never the pattern in the New Testament, even with the apostles, to concentrate ruling power in the hands of any one person.

48. The word *angelos* [“angel”] in Rev. 2:1 et al. can mean not only “angel” but also just “messenger.”

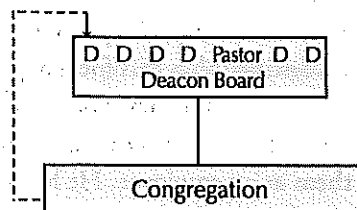
49. See Mounce, *The Book of Revelation*, 85.

50. Wagner says at one point that a pastor can be a strong

leader within a variety of kinds of church government (*Leading Your Church to Growth*, 94–95). Therefore, it is not appropriate to take his study as an argument that solely supports a single elder form of government.

Here it should be noted that the "single elder" view of church government really has no more New Testament support than the "single bishop" (episcopalian) view. Both seem to be attempts to justify what has already happened in the history of the church, not conclusions that have grown out of an inductive examination of the New Testament.

(7) Finally, it should be noted that in actual practice the "single elder" system can change and *function* more like a "plural elders" government, only those who function as elders are instead called "deacons." This would happen if the deacons share the actual governing authority with the pastor, and the pastor and individual deacons all see themselves as accountable to the deacon board as a whole. The system then begins to look like figure 47.4.



**The Pastor and Deacons May Govern Together
and Thus Function like a Government of Plural Elders**

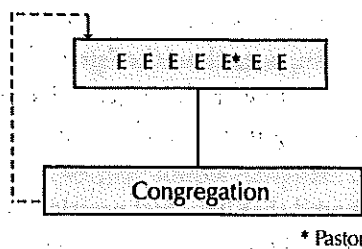
Figure 47.4

The problem with this arrangement is that it does not use biblical terminology to apply to the functions that people are carrying out, for deacons in the New Testament never had governing or teaching authority in the church. The result in such a situation is that people in the church (both the deacons and the other church members) will fail to read and apply scriptural passages on elders to those who are *in fact functioning as elders* in their church. Therefore, these passages lose the direct relevance that they should have in the church. In this case, however, the problem could be solved by changing the name "deacon" to "elder" and considering the pastor an elder along with the others.

b. Plural Local Elders. Is there any kind of church government that preserves the pattern of plural elders found in the New Testament and that avoids the expansion of elders' authority beyond the local congregation? Although such a system is not distinctive of any denomination today,⁵¹ it is found in many individual congregations. Using the conclusions reached to this point on the New Testament data, I would suggest figure 47.5 as a possible pattern.

51. However, Pastor Ralph Perry pointed out to me that the Churches of Christ (noninstrumental) have practiced this pattern of church government for many years, as have many

congregations of the Christian Church/Church of Christ (instrumental).



* Pastor

Plural Local Elder Government**Figure 47.5**

Within such a system the elders govern the church and have authority to rule over it, authority that has been conferred by Christ himself, the head of the church, and by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17). In this system of government, there is always more than one elder, a fact that distinguishes this form of government from the “single elder system” discussed above. In a contemporary congregation, the “pastor” (or “senior pastor”) would be one among the elders in this system. He does not have authority over them, nor does he work for them as an employee. He has a somewhat distinct role in that he is engaged in the full-time work of “preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17) and derives part or all of his income from that work (1 Tim. 5:18). He also may frequently assume a leadership role (such as chairman) among the elders, which would fit with his leadership role among the congregation, but such a leadership role *among the elders* would not be necessary to the system. In addition, the pastor will ordinarily have considerable authority to make decisions and provide leadership in many areas of responsibility that have been delegated to him by the elder board as a whole. Such a system would allow a pastor to exercise strong leadership in the church while still having equal governing authority with the other elders.

The strength of this system of government is seen in the fact that the pastor does not have authority on his own over the congregation, but that authority belongs collectively to the entire group of elders (what may be called the elder board). Moreover, the pastor himself, like every other elder, is subject to the authority of the elder board as a whole. This can be a great benefit in keeping a pastor from making mistakes, supporting him in adversity, and protecting him from attacks and opposition.⁵²

In such a system, are there limitations that should be placed on the authority of the elders? In the section above on the manner of choosing church officers, several reasons were given to have some limitations that would provide regular accountability

52. If the church has more than one pastor who is paid for his work, these other associate or assistant pastors may or may not be viewed as elders (depending on the qualifications of each staff member and the policies of the church), but in either case,

it would be entirely consistent with this form of government to have those associate pastors accountable to the senior pastor alone in their day-to-day work, and he accountable to the elder board with respect to his supervision of their activity.

and put restrictions on the authority of the officers of a church.⁵³ Those arguments are also helpful here in indicating that, though elders have substantial governing authority over the church, *it should not be unlimited authority*. Examples of such limitations are (1) they may be elected rather than self-perpetuating, (2) they may have specific terms with a mandatory year off the board (except for the pastor, whose continuing leadership responsibilities require continuous participation as an elder), and (3) some large decisions may be required to be brought to the whole church for approval. Regarding this third point, congregational approval is already a biblical requirement for church discipline in Matthew 18:17 and for excommunication in 1 Corinthians 5:4. The principle of congregational election of elders would imply that the decision to call any pastor would also have to be approved by the congregation as a whole. Major new directions in the ministry of the church, which will require large-scale congregational support, may be brought to the church as a whole for approval. Finally, it would seem wise to require congregational approval on such large financial decisions as an annual budget, the decision to purchase property, or the decision to borrow money for the church (if that is ever done), simply because the church as a whole will be asked to give generously to pay for these commitments.⁵⁴

In fact, the reasons for placing some limitations on the authority of church officers may appear so strong that they would lead us to think that all decisions and all governing authority should rest with the congregation as a whole. (Some churches have adopted a system of almost pure democracy in governing the church, whereby everything must come to the congregation as a whole for approval.) However, this conclusion ignores the abundant New Testament evidence about the clear ruling and governing authority given to elders in New Testament churches. Therefore, while it is important to have *some recognized limitations* on the authority of elders and to rest ultimate governing authority with the congregation as a whole, it still is necessary—if we are to remain faithful to the New Testament pattern—to have a strong level of authority vested in the elders themselves.

53. The arguments given above (pp. 921–22) for restrictions on the authority of church officers may be summarized as follows: (1) Church officers in the New Testament were apparently chosen by the whole congregation. (2) The final governing authority in New Testament churches seemed to rest with the whole church. (3) Accountability to the congregation provides a safeguard against temptations to sin. (4) Some degree of control by the entire congregation provides a safeguard against the leadership falling into doctrinal error. (5) Government works best with the consent of those governed. In addition to those, there is another reason for restricting the authority of church officers: (6) The doctrine of the clarity of Scripture (see chapter 6), and the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers (see the New Testament affirms that all Christians have access to God's throne in prayer and all share as members in a "priesthood" [1 Peter 2:9; cf. Heb. 10:19–25; 12:22–24])

combine to indicate that all Christians have some ability to interpret Scripture and some responsibility to seek God's wisdom in applying it to situations. All have access directly to God in order to seek to know his will. The New Testament allows for no special class of Christians who have greater access to God than others. Therefore, it is right to include all believers in some of the crucial decision-making processes of the church. "In an abundance of counselors there is safety" (Prov. 11:14).

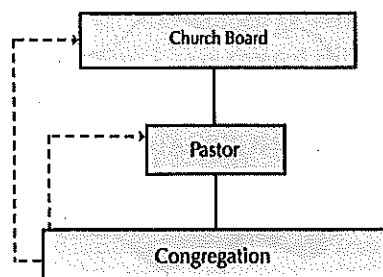
54. It should be noted that a church government system with a self-perpetuating group of elders, rather than one elected by the congregation, would be very similar in function to this system, but would not be as extensive in the limitations put on the authority of the elders. Such a church may still think it wise to have some mechanism whereby the congregation could remove elders who strayed from faithfulness to Scripture in serious ways.

Should an associate pastor also be an elder? When this kind of "plural local elders" system functions in a large church, the elder board may decide that one of the associate pastors has the character traits and maturity that would qualify him to be an elder. I do not think, in principle, that there should be any objection to having a mature and wise associate pastor join the elder board. However, it does not seem wise for this to be a common practice because a large majority of the elder board should be persons *who are not associate pastors in the church*. This is because the associate pastors are subject to the senior pastor in all of their church work (he usually hires and fires them and sets their pay, and they report to him). Therefore, if several of the elders are associate pastors, the interpersonal dynamics involved will make it awkward for them to disagree with the senior pastor during the elder meetings, and the system will increasingly tend to function as a (somewhat disguised) form of "single pastor" government, not as a plural elder government.

Someone may object that in a large church only full-time staff members know enough about the life of the church to be effective elders, but this is not a persuasive objection. Government by boards who are not closely involved in the everyday activities of those whom they govern works well in many realms of human activity, such as college and seminary boards, local school boards, boards of directors of corporations, and even state and national governments. All of these governing bodies direct policies and give guidance to full-time administrators, and they are able to obtain detailed information about specific situations when the need arises. (I realize that all these systems *can* work poorly, but my point is simply that they can work very well when the right people are put in leadership positions.)

I have labeled this system one of "plural *local* elders" in order to distinguish it from a presbyterian system where elders, when gathered on the level of the presbytery or general assembly, have authority over more than their own local congregations. But in such a system of elected local elders, can there be any wider associations with churches beyond the local congregation? Yes, certainly. While churches with this system may choose to remain entirely independent, most will enter into voluntary associations with other churches of similar convictions in order to facilitate fellowship and the pooling of resources for mission activity (and perhaps for other things such as Christian camps, publications, theological education, etc.). However, the only authority these larger associations would have over the local congregation would be the authority to exclude an individual church from the association, not the authority to govern its individual affairs.

c. Corporate Board. The remaining three forms of congregational church government are not commonly used, but they are sometimes found in evangelical churches. The first one is patterned after the example of a modern corporation, where the board of directors hires an executive officer who then has authority to run the business as he sees fit. This form of government could also be called the "you-work-for-us" structure. It is depicted in figure 47.6.



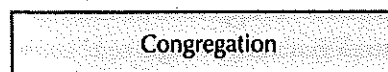
Corporate Board Model of Church Government

Figure 47.6

In favor of this structure it might be argued that this system in fact works well in contemporary businesses. However, there is no New Testament precedent or support for such a form of church government. It is simply the result of trying to run the church like a modern business, and it sees the pastor not as a spiritual leader but merely as a paid employee.

Further objections to this structure are the fact that it deprives the pastor of sharing in the ruling authority that must be his if he is to carry out his eldership responsibilities effectively. Moreover, the members of the board are also members of the congregation over whom the pastor is supposed to have some authority, but that authority is seriously compromised if the leaders of the congregation are in fact his bosses.

d. **Pure Democracy.** This view, which takes congregational church government to its logical extreme, can be represented as in figure 47.7.

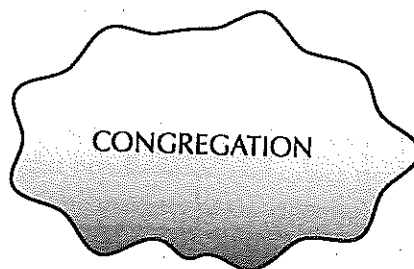


Government by Pure Democracy

Figure 47.7

In this system *everything* must come to the congregational meeting. The result is that decisions are often argued endlessly, and as the church grows, decision making reaches a point of near paralysis. While this structure does attempt to do justice to some of the passages cited above regarding the need for final governing authority to rest with the congregation as a whole, it is unfaithful to the New Testament pattern of recognized and designated elders who have actual authority to rule the church in most situations.

e. **"No Government but the Holy Spirit."** Some churches, particularly very new churches with more mystical or extremely pietistic tendencies, function with a church government that looks something like figure 47.8.



No Government but the Holy Spirit

Figure 47.8

In this case, the church would deny that any form of government is needed, it would depend on all the members of the congregation being sensitive to the leading of the Holy Spirit in their lives, and decisions would generally be made by consensus. This form of government never lasts very long. Not only is it unfaithful to the New Testament pattern of designated elders with governing authority in the church, but it is also subject to much abuse because subjective feelings rather than wisdom and reason prevail in the decision-making process.

4. Conclusions

It must be made clear, in concluding this discussion of church government, that the form of government adopted by a church is not a major point of doctrine. Christians have lived comfortably and ministered very effectively within several different kinds of systems, and there are many evangelicals within each of the systems mentioned. Moreover, a number of different types of church government systems seem to work *fairly well*. Where there are weaknesses that appear to be inherent in the governing structure, individuals within the system generally recognize those weaknesses and attempt to compensate for them in whatever ways the system will allow.

Nevertheless, a church can be *more pure* or *less pure* on this point, as in other areas. As we are persuaded by Scripture concerning various aspects of church government, then we should continue to pray and work for the greater purity of the visible church in this area as well.

D. SHOULD WOMEN BE CHURCH OFFICERS?

Most systematic theologies have not included a section on the question of whether women can be church officers because it has been assumed through the history of the church, with very few exceptions, that only men could be pastors or function as elders within a church.⁵⁵ But in recent years a major controversy has

55. See William Weinrich, "Women in the History of the Church: Learned and Holy, But Not Pastors," in Piper and Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*,

263-79. See also Ruth A. Tucker and Walter L. Liefeld, *Daughters of the Church: Women and Ministry from New Testament Times to the Present* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987).

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