

2. Church Government

by Chuck Smith

The sermon discusses the different forms of church government, with a focus on the episkopos and presbyteros forms, and emphasizes the importance of being ruled by the Lord and aided by the Elders.

Scripture: Exodus 18:13-27, Matthew 26:33, Luke 22:31-32, Acts 14:23, Romans 7:18, 1 Corinthians 15:10, Ephesians 1:22, Ephesians 3:8, 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Jude 1:24

Topics: "Church Leadership", "Governance in the Church"

Description

Chuck Smith discusses the various forms of church government as presented in the New Testament, emphasizing the roles of bishops (episkopos) and elders (presbyteros) while critiquing congregational rule. He highlights the importance of having godly leaders who are in touch with God, drawing parallels between church leadership and the theocratic model established in Israel under Moses. Smith warns against the dangers of a pastor becoming a hireling under a board or congregational rule, advocating instead for a structure where the pastor is led by Christ and supported by a board of elders. He stresses the need for true repentance and reliance on God for church leaders, as well as the importance of prayerful decision-making within the church. Ultimately, he presents a vision of church governance that aligns with biblical principles and fosters spiritual growth.

Transcript

"And hath put all things under his feet, and gave him to be the head over all things to the church,"

Ephesians 1:22

We recognize that the New Testament doesn't give a clear definitive statement of God's preference for church government. In Scripture, we find three basic forms of church government. Two of them are in the New Testament, and the other one developed through church history. The first form of church government was the rule by bishops, or overseers. The Greek word is 'episkopos'. In I Timothy 3:1, Paul wrote, "This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work."

Timothy gives us the qualifications for an episkopos.' "A bishop must be blameless, the husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behaviour, given to hospitality, apt to teach; Not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre; but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; One that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity; (For if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?). Not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation

of the devil. Moreover he must have a good report of them which are without; lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil." (I Timothy 3:2-7).

There was another form of leadership that utilized a group of gifted men called the 'presbyteros', or elders. Acts 14:23 tells us, "And when they had ordained them elders (presbyteros) in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed."

The New Testament clearly teaches the establishing of bishops, the episkopos, and the appointing of elders, the presbyteros. These two forms of government, by their very nature, seem to clash. Is the church to be led by the bishop, or by the board of elders? Is it the episkopos or the presbyteros? These divisions are so pronounced that today we have two denominations representing both sides of the issue. The Episcopal church follows the episkopos. It's a church ruled by a bishop. You also have the presbyteros, the Presbyterian church, ruled by a board of elders. The fact that they both exist shows that there isn't a clear definitive teaching about the correct form of church government. Both sides can present a valid case for their point of view.

Over time, a third form of church government has arisen, known as congregational rule. I don't believe that congregational rule is an option because we really never see an example in the Bible where the congregation was right. It was the congregation that was always coming and saying, "We want a king to rule over us like the other nations," making demands that were not after the will of God. I can find no Scriptural example of effective congregational rule. We do read of congregations attempting to rule. In Exodus 16:2 we read, "And the whole congregation of the children of Israel murmured against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness:" and in Numbers 14:1-3, "And all the congregation lifted up their voice, and cried; and the people wept that night. And all the children of Israel murmured against Moses and against Aaron: and the whole congregation said unto them, Would God that we had died in the land of Egypt! or would God we had died in this wilderness! And wherefore hath the LORD brought us unto this land, to fall by the sword, that our wives and our children should be a prey? were it not better for us to return into Egypt?" Moses responds to God in Numbers 14:27, "How long shall I bear with this evil congregation, which murmur against me? I have heard the murmurings of the children of Israel, which they murmur against me." So woe to the man who pastors a congregational church. Like Moses, the pastor will only find murmuring and uprisings.

These are the three basic forms of church government that we see today. The Episkopos, the Presbyteros, and the more recent Congregationalists.

Now we do find in Scripture a form of government that God established and modeled in the early history of Israel. It was a theocracy, people who were ruled by God. The nation of Israel, in its inception, was a theocratic form of government. It was God-ruled.

Their demise came when they tired of God's rule and demanded instead to have a monarchy. They said, "We want a king to rule over us. We want to be like the other nations." Samuel was greatly disappointed when they came to him requesting this monarchy.

Let's look at an example of theocracy in which God was ruling. Under God there was a man called Moses. Moses went to God for guidance and direction. Moses was the earthly leader who was recognized as receiving from God the guidance, direction, laws, and rules for the nation. It was recognized by the people that he was their link to God. They said, "Look we're afraid to approach Him. He's awesome. We've seen the fire and thunder. You go up and you talk to Him, and then you come down and tell us what He says,

and we'll obey it. But we don't want to go. You just go." So they recognized that Moses was being directed by God. He would go up and he would receive from God and he would, in turn, come down and share it with the people.

Under Moses, the personal demands were staggering. The line of people with needs would stretch to the horizon every day. They would come to Moses for every little thing so he could judge between them and their neighbors on the issues that had arisen. "They borrowed my hoe, and they never returned it." Now this went on all day long, every day. Jethro, his father-in-law, said, "Hey, son, this is going to kill you. You can't handle this. You can't take care of the things that need to be done because of this long line of people waiting for you to give them judgment." So the Lord told Moses to take seventy of the elders of Israel and gather them into the tent of congregation. He took the Spirit that He had put upon Moses and put it upon them so that the people could come to them and they could give the rulings and judgments. If issues arose that were too difficult for them, they were then to go to Moses. Moses would then go to God to get clarification on the issue. (Exodus 18:13-27).

For additional support, Aaron and the priesthood, under Moses, oversaw the spiritual needs of the nation, like the preparation and offering of sacrifices. Under the elders and Aaron was the congregation of Israel. This is the form of government that God established for the nation of Israel.

In the church today we see this structure in a modified form. We see that Jesus Christ is the Head over the body of the church. It's His church. He's the One in charge. As pastors, we need to be like Moses, in touch with Jesus and receiving His direction and guidance. As pastors we need to be leading the church in such a way that the people know that the Lord is in control. Then, when issues come up, we can say, "Well, let me pray about that." "Let me seek the wisdom of the Lord on this." "Let's look for the Lord's guidance." Also, like Moses, within the church we have a Board of Elders who are there to pray with us and support us in seeking the Lord's leading for the church.

Let me warn you. First of all, you want to get elders who are men of prayer, and who recognize that God has anointed you and ordained you as the pastor of the church. Paul warned Timothy not to lay hands on any man suddenly. (I Timothy 5:22). Really get to know the men as well as possible before giving them positions of authority. It's sort of like marriage, you really don't know your wife until you have been married to her for awhile. Many times there are a lot of surprises. It's also important to remember that problems usually arise when you start to have some success and the church begins to grow and become powerful. There are many people who have a desire for power. When they see there's money in the bank, that's when they make their move for position and control.

It's necessary to have godly men who recognize that God has called and ordained you as the pastor of the church. Men who will work with you and support those things that God is directing you, as the pastor, to implement within the church. A good Board is one of the greatest assets that you can have in your ministry. I thank God that here at Calvary Chapel Costa Mesa we have been blessed with great men of God serving on the Board. We usually look at the Saturday night prayer meetings or at the all night prayer watch for men to serve on the Board. We want men of prayer. We want men who are seeking God and the will of God. We are blessed with such men on our Board, and I thank God for them.

Now, real elders aren't a bunch of "yes" men, but they are men yielded to the Holy Spirit. They're a real buffer and protection for me. Their job is to interface with the congregation. The congregation brings any problems that they see to them. Many times they will simply reply, "Well, this is the church policy, and this

is why we do things in this way." And it doesn't go any further. Sometimes at the Board Meeting they will bring a list of questions such as, "Well this has been brought before me. How do you feel about this?" On occasion I'll answer, "Well, I don't have any real feelings. Let's seek the Lord." But in many instances I will just let them work out the issues.

When I was a very young pastor in Tucson, Arizona (the second church that I pastored), we had an annual Fourth of July picnic at Mt. Lemon. Now Tucson on the Fourth of July, is 110 degrees in the valley, so we would go up to Mt. Lemon where the temperatures are cooler. The state park on Mt. Lemon had a great area for picnics. They had restrooms, running water, tables and playgrounds. It was a wonderful place for the church to go and have our Fourth of July picnic. And it was a good time for fellowship. Before one Fourth of July one of our members said, "I have an acre of ground up on Mt. Lemon. And rather than mixing with the worldly crowd in the state park, I think that it would be great if the church would come up and have the picnic on my acre of ground." We said, "Do you have any water?" And he said "No." "Do you have any restrooms?" "No, just an acre of ground." It was also another five miles up the road from the state park to his acre. He countered with, "But it would be great to have a day of fasting and prayer." Now how can anyone, as a pastor, speak against fasting and prayer without appearing really unspiritual before the people?

So a group of people in the church discussed it, and they agreed it would be wonderful to have a day of fasting and prayer up there on the acre of ground. It would be just us, and we'd have a glorious time.

There was another group of people in the church who said, "We're not going to take our kids up to a place where we don't have water. And who is going to watch the kids, and what are they going to do while we're fasting and praying? There are no restrooms. If you go up there we aren't going." Now the spiritual group said, "Well, if you go to the state park, we're not going." They were manifesting real spirituality. There was a very sharp division in the congregation.

Here our whole Fourth of July picnic, that had been such a glorious delight year after year, was going to be scuttled because of this division. Both sides came to me and said, "Chuck, where are we going to have the fourth of July picnic?" So with wisdom from the Lord beyond my years, I said, "We will let the Board decide that." We had a Board Meeting and it was unanimously decided to go to the state park. I went back to the people and said, "The Board has decided that we should have the picnic at the state park." I was then able to go to the spiritual ones who wanted to fast and pray and say, "That's a great idea. It would be wonderful to spend a day fasting and praying. Maybe we can go some other time, just us, and fast and pray. But as far as the picnic goes they felt it best to go to the state park."

Because the Board made the decision, I was free to minister to both sides. The Board became the buffer. And it's great to have a buffer like that because then people don't polarize against you saying, "It was the pastor who decided, and I don't agree with his decision." The Board decided, and they became a buffer for me.

I believe that God's model is that the pastor is ruled over by the Lord and recognized by the congregation as God's anointed instrument to lead the church, with the Board guiding and directing. Complementing this is the role of the assisting pastors. They are there to minister to the spiritual needs of the people on a daily basis. With these components in place, there is a great form of church government where you, as the pastor, are not in the position of a hireling. Becoming a hireling is a real danger when the church is run by a Presbyterian kind of a government, and the Board is ruling over the church. The pastor is hired by the

Board and can be fired by the Board in the same fashion. With that kind of rule the pastor becomes a hireling.

The same is true with congregational rule. A pastor is hired by the congregation, rather than ordained by the Lord who is the Head of the body. He's not appointed by Jesus Christ, the Head of the body, but instead he's elected or selected by the Board or by the congregation. Here again, the pastor becomes a hireling. I don't believe that anyone can do his best work as a hireling.

It is my belief that everyone should be a deacon. The ministry of helps was the essence of the deacon's function. They were to look after the facilities. They were to look after the needs of the congregation and help the sick. One of the worst things to do is to start giving titles to people in the church, especially a title that distinguishes one above another. That's a dangerous thing.

A word concerning the spiritual qualifications for church leadership: Jude said in his benediction, "Now unto him that is able to keep you from falling, and to present you faultless before the presence of his glory with exceeding joy," (Jude 1:24). I am only blameless as I am in Christ Jesus. Still, it's true that we've all sinned and fall short of the glory of God. If anybody realized his disqualification for the ministry, it was Paul, the apostle, who said, "Unto me, who am less than the least of all saints, is this grace given, that I should preach among the Gentiles the unsearchable riches of Christ;" (Ephesians 3:8). He was saying, "I'm less than the least of all of the saints. I'm not really worthy to be called an apostle because I persecuted the church of God." He refers to himself elsewhere saying, "This grace is given to the chiefest of sinners." Paul realized that his position was given only by the grace of God. As he said in I Corinthians 15:10, "By the grace of God I am what I am." He truly recognized that in Christ he was blameless. So the key qualification for a pastor or leader in the church is to be "in Christ Jesus" and, in this state, blameless.

I believe that if a man is not abiding in Christ, but walking in the flesh, he is disqualified from the position of an 'episkopos.' Walking in the flesh describes a practiced lifestyle. Satan is out to destroy anyone with an effective ministry and I believe that all of us are capable of stumbling. As Jesus said to Peter, "And the Lord said, Simon, Simon, behold, Satan hath desired to have you, that he may sift you as wheat: But I have prayed for thee, that thy faith fail not: and when thou art converted, strengthen thy brethren." (Luke 22:31-32).

Peter responded, "Though all men shall be offended because of thee, yet will I never be offended." (Matthew 26:33). He was saying, "Lord, though they all may forsake you, I would never forsake! Lord, I would die for you!" That self-confidence had to be dealt with before he could realize his total dependency upon the Holy Spirit. It was something that had to be dealt with in his life. And I think it's something that has to be dealt with in all our lives. When we have areas of self-confidence, the Lord gradually shows us that, in and of ourselves, we can do nothing. As Paul said, "For I know that in me (that is, in my flesh) dwelleth no good thing;" (Romans 7:18). So whenever we think that we are the exceptions to the rule, the Lord allows us to stumble, to teach us our total reliance upon Him.

When we step into the flesh and decide that we're going to live after the flesh, we disqualify ourselves from our positions of service. But if we take the word 'blameless' in a very literal sense, then all of us might as well pack up and go get a job selling cars. I believe that repentance is the key, true repentance, and once there's true repentance, then there is forgiveness, and restoration can begin. But there has to be true repentance, a real turning away from sin.

I've observed that those churches that follow the rule of the Eldership so often are not really looking for a pastor as much as they're looking for a hireling. Their idea of a pastor is, "Someone who is going to come in and dance to our beat. We'll pull the strings and as long as you respond and react, you're a fair-haired employee. But if you dare to want to step out on your own, then it's a different story."

Before we came to Calvary Chapel, I had started an independent church in Corona that was an outgrowth of a home Bible study. Some of the men involved in the home Bible study decided to form a corporation which they called "Corona Christian Association". They set up the corporation so that people could tithe into it and start building up funds, primarily to put me on the radio in Corona. These men who set up the corporation were the corporate officers. So we started a radio broadcast that immediately brought in a multitude of people.

I had been wanting to leave the denomination I was involved in and become independent. These men invited me to start a church in Corona, which I did. We began the Corona Christian Center. It was blessed of God. I was still living in Newport Beach and driving there on Sunday. We'd spend the day there and then we'd come home Sunday night. One Sunday afternoon when my family was there with me at the American Legion hall that we rented, I decided to put the chairs in a circle, rather than in rows. I removed the pulpit and just set up a big circle of chairs. As the people came in that night we all sat in a circle, like in the home Bible studies. Rather than singing three hymns out of the hymnal, accompanied by the organ and the piano, we just sang. I led them a cappella in worship choruses. After that we had prayer time, what we called 'directed prayer'. where we would bring up an issue and people in the circle would pray. Then I taught, just sitting there in the chair, in an informal way.

I felt that it was led by the Spirit and was very dynamic. I mean it was exciting! There were fellows that night who led out in prayer who had never prayed publicly in their lives. So many of them were really touched and moved. However, the Board Members got together afterward for a special Board Meeting. They called me the next morning and wanted to know just what I thought I was doing, and they let me know that they didn't want me to do that again. At the time I thought, "Well, I thought this might be my life's ministry. But it won't be. I'm not going to be under these kinds of restrictions. I must be open to be led by the Spirit."

So when we came to Calvary Chapel and established the bylaws, we didn't create a Presbyterian form of government. It was more of an Episkopos form of government for Calvary Chapel. We believe that God's model is that the pastor is ruled by the Lord and aided by the Elders to discover the mind and will of Jesus Christ for His church. This in turn is implemented by the Assistant Pastors.

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