

CHOOSING OUR LEADERS (1):

New Testament Teaching on Church Government

I. OVERVIEW OF CLASSES

A. Week #1: Overview of NT Teaching on Church Government

B. Week #2: Miscellaneous Topics Related to Elders: Kinds of Elders, Jobs of Elders, Decision-making Process of Elders, Congregational Safeguards Against Abuse by Elders, Dismissal of Elders

C. Week #3: Qualifications and Selection of Elders

II. THE NECESSITY OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

A. In a perfect world, all men would be governed directly by the Spirit of God, with no need of human govt.

B. In a fallen world, God has ordained that men be governed by God, partly through other men/leaders (Gen. 6)

C. The three main spheres of divinely ordained human government:

- The family
- The state
- The church

C. Purpose of such governments: To establish and maintain good (i.e., divine) order with a view to the well-being of those under their charge and care.

But if anyone is hungry, let him eat at home, lest you come together for judgment. And the rest *I will set in order when I come*. – 1 Cor. 11

14 I am hoping to come to you speedily; 15 but in case I am delayed, I am writing these things to you so that you may know *how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God*, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support⁶ of the truth. – 1 Tim. 5:14f

5 I left you in Crete for this reason, that you might *set in order* the matters that were left undone, and appoint elders in every city, as I commanded you. – Titus 1

D. Means of attaining good order

- Oversight
- Instruction
- Government (Policy making, discipline, etc.)
- Praise and Encouragement

III. KINDS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

A. Episcopal: Decision-making authority vested in a hierarchy

- Hierarchical (Pope, cardinal, archbishop, bishop, etc.)
- Monarchical (Single Pastor)

B. Presbyterian: Decision-making authority vested in a hierarchy of elders

- Session (teaching, ruling elders)
- Presbytery (reps of various churches)
- (Synod)
- General Assembly

C. Congregational: Decision-making authority (more or less) vested in the congregation

- Single Elder (Sr. Pastor): Elected by congregation, advised or overseen by a Board of Deacons (unscriptural: false view of pastors, deacons)
- Plurality of Elders: Appointed by other elders, confirmed by the congregation, assisted by a Board of Deacons with unique responsibilities of their own (scriptural)
- Church Board: Various composed of the pastor, deacons, officers (president, treasurer, secretary), and committee heads. Board hires and fires the Senior Pastor, giving him whatever authority he has to govern the church, whether great or small (unscriptural: This is basically a corporate, CEO model)

D. Dean's View, and the Topic of Today's Teaching: The Church is God's family and God's nation. Just as he ordains *fathers* and *civil magistrates* to preserve good order in their spheres, so he ordains *elders*, under Christ, to preserve good order in theirs. But just as God has put in place safeguards against tyrannical fathers and civil magistrates, so too he has put in place safeguards against tyrannical elders. The result is that biblical church government is best defined as *government by God, through Christ, through a team of elders, with proper congregational safeguards against the abuse of the elder's God-given authority.*

IV. BIBLICAL TEACHING ON ELDERS

A. God Has Ordained that Elders Should Lead the Churches

- Christ appointed apostles
- The apostles appointed elders in every city and church

²¹ Now when they had preached the gospel in that city and made many disciples, they returned to Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch; ²² and they strengthened the souls of the disciples, encouraging *them* to continue in the faith, and *telling them*, “We must enter the kingdom of God through many afflictions.” ²³ And when they had appointed elders in every church with prayer and fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. – Acts 14:21f

I left you in Crete for this reason, that you might set in order the matters that were left undone, and appoint elders in every city, as I commanded you. – Titus 1:5

B. Synonyms for Elders: Overseers (bishops), Pastors (shepherds)

Paul to the ELDERS of Ephesus: ¹⁷ From Miletus he sent word to Ephesus, calling for the elders of the church . . . ²⁸ Watch out for yourselves and for the entire flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, with a calling to *shepherd* the church of God that He purchased¹¹ with His own blood. – Acts 20

Peter to the ELDERS here and there: ⁵ Therefore I exhort the *elders* among you, I who am *your* fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory yet to be revealed: ² *Shepherd* the flock of God among you, serving as *overseers*, not under compulsion, but willingly, according to God; not out of greed for material gain, but eagerly; ³ not as lording it over those allotted to your care,¹ but becoming² examples to the flock; ⁴ and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that never fades away. – 1 Peter 5

Note: On the use of titles: Mt. 23:8-10

C. Implications: There are only Two Offices in the Local Church: Elders and Deacons

1 Tim. 2 and Titus 1 teach on two and only two offices: elder and deacon (more next time)

Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons: ² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. – Phil. 1:1

A local church, gathered and fully organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members. The officers appointed by Christ are overseers or elders, and deacons. They are to be chosen and set apart by the church called and gathered in this way, for the distinctive purpose of administering ordinances and for carrying out any other power or duty Christ entrusts them with or calls them to. This pattern is to be continued to the end of the age. –LBC 1689

A note on deacons: a) appointed by apostles after consultation with the people; b) job is to handle church benevolence, esp. to widows and their children; c) not a governing body

D. Plurality of (each church is to have a *team* of elders)

²³ And when they had appointed *elders* in every church with prayer and fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. – Acts 14:23

¹⁴ Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the *elders* of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. – James 5:14

¹⁷ Obey *those* who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. – Heb. 13:17

“Two significant conclusions can be drawn from a survey of the NT evidence. First, no passage suggests that any church, no matter how small, had only one elder. The consistent NT pattern is a plurality of elders “in every church” (Acts 14:23) and “in every town” (Titus 1:5). And secondly, we do not see a diversity of forms of government in the NT church, but a unified and consistent pattern in which every church had elders governing it and watching over it.” –Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, p. 913

C. Duties of:

1. To Minister the Word of God / Equip the Saints for the Work of Service

“It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. ³ Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word. – Acts 6

And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers, ¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ. – Eph. 4:11-12

I solemnly charge *you* in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: ² preach the word; be ready in season *and* out of season; reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction. ³ For the time will come when they will not endure sound teaching, but *wanting* to have their ears tickled, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in accordance to their own desires, ⁴ and will turn away their ears from the truth and will turn aside to myths. ⁵ But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry. – 2 Tim. 4:1-5

2. To Oversee the Flock of God

So when they had eaten breakfast, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me more than these?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Feed My lambs.” He said to him again a second time, “Simon, *son* of John, do you love Me?” He said to Him, “Yes, Lord; You know that I love You.” He said to him, “Tend My sheep.” He said to him the third time, “Simon, *son* of John do you love Me?” Peter was grieved because He said to him the third time, “Do you love Me?” And he said to Him, “Lord, You know all things; You know that I love You.” Jesus said to him, “Feed My sheep. – John 21:15-17

²⁵ “And now, take note: I know that none of you among whom I have gone about proclaiming the kingdom will see my face again. ²⁶ Therefore I testify to you this day that I *am* innocent of the blood of all. ¹⁰ ²⁷ For I did not hesitate to declare to you the whole purpose and plan of God. ²⁸ Watch out for yourselves and for the entire flock, among whom the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, *with a calling* to shepherd the church of God that He purchased ¹¹ with His own blood. ²⁹ For I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; ³⁰ indeed, from among your own number ¹² men will rise up, speaking perverse things, *trying* to draw the disciples away after them. ³¹ Therefore keep constant watch, remembering that night and day for three years I did not cease to warn and admonish each one *of you* with tears. – Eph. 20:25

3. To Govern the Affairs of the Church (i.e., set policy, oversee ministries, mediate, arbitrate, administer discipline, etc.)

¹⁷ Let the elders who *rule* (Gk: *proistemi*, stand before, be set over, care and provide for) well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and teaching. – 1 Tim. 5:1

- Elders have God-given authority to rule/govern/make authoritative decisions
- Headship and sphere sovereignty

(An elder must be) one who *rules* his own house well, having *his* children in submission with all dignity (i.e., *gravitas*) (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?). – 1 Tim. 3

- This verse again shows that elders have authority from Christ to govern the affairs of the church, just as a father has authority from Christ govern his family . . . all the while being attentive to their views, wishes, and needs, so as best to care for them!

¹⁷ Obey your leaders and submit *to them*, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you. – Heb. 13:17

- Again we see that elders have God-given authority to make decisions with regard to the life of the church (but not other spheres: individual, family, state, etc.)
- It is because they have authority that they are responsible and accountable
- The people are not to submit uncritically: They need not obey lawless elders who give unscriptural commands
- Submission is important: It preserves the peace, and the spiritual health and joy of the elders!

Summary:

- Q: What does it mean for an elder to govern (rule over) the affairs of the church?
- A: *It means that he is to use his God-given authority to set church policy, mediate, arbitrate, and administer discipline in such a way that it promotes the eternal well-being of those under his charge and care.*

4. Preside over the administration of the sacraments

V. SUMMARY AND PREVIEW

A. Summary: God and Christ ordain that the local church is to be governed by a qualified Team or Board of Elders whose main duties are to minister the Word of God, oversee the flock, govern the affairs of the church, and administer the sacraments, lovingly serving the congregation as fathers who are sensitive to the views, wishes, and concerns of the church family, but who carry authority, for which they are finally accountable to the Lord.

B. Topics for Next Time: Kinds of Elders, Specific Jobs of Elders, Decision-making Process of Elders, Congregational Safeguards Against Abuse by Elders, Dismissal of Elders