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Church Government

Radically Biblical, Apostolic, Christianity



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CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Introduction

Without a doubt one of the most controversial and tragically, one of the most divisive areas is the subject of Church Government. We must recognize that there must be some form of government, but what form it should take is a point of much contention and divergence.

Jesus said that every *city, house or kingdom* divided against itself will surely fall (Matt. 12:25-26). The Church is likened to God's House, God's City and God's Kingdom. But it has certainly been divided as to its government. This is one of the reasons why the Church has not been able to stand against the kingdom of Satan. Satan attacks all forms of government as ordained of God, because he is the lawless one, and wants to bring about a lawless society. Rejecting the government and the authority of God, he sets himself up as government and authority. Those who do not submit to authority, sets themselves up as authority. Those who reject God's government, sets themselves up as self-governing.

Satan led an angelic rebellion and revolt against God's government in the eternities past (Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezekiel 28:1-19; John 8:44; II Peter 2:4; Jude 6).

Satan also brought the revolt of man against God's government in the Garden of Eden (Genesis 3:1-6). There are a number of vital things relative to the subject of government which need to be considered before dealing more particularly with Church Government.

A. Definition of Government.

The word "government" has been defined as:

* The exercise of authority over an organization, institution, state, district, etc; direction, control, rule, management.

* A system of ruling, controlling, etc., an established system of political administration by which a state, district, etc., is governed.

* Government involves (a) Territory, (b) People and (c) Leadership.

Thus we recognize that the Church as God's House, City, and Kingdom needs government (Psalms 127:1; Isaiah 2:1-4; Joel 2:25-28; Acts 2:17).

Having defined the word we note that:

1. **Government is God-Ordained.**

The powers that be are ordained of God. God has ordained that law and order be exercised and preserved in human society through appointed authorities (Romans 13:1-8).

I Corinthians 12:28. God has set in the Church governments (plural), i.e. Steering, piloting, directing.

Isaiah 9:6-9. The government shall be upon His shoulder: There is no end to it. Thus government means "rule, leadership, oversight, inspector, to go before, to guide, a governor."

Isaiah 22:22. The government shall be placed in the hand of Eliakim, which means "Resurrection of God."

II Peter 1:10. There are those who are presumptuous, self-willed, and not afraid

to speak evil of dignitaries. They despise government.

Government in the universe is ordained of God. All things exist by His Word and operate by His Word. Law is the Word of God. Nothing in the universe is left to chance.

2. **The Need of Government.**

Without government lawlessness and anarchy will prevail. There would be rebellion and chaos in the universe without Divine authority. Israel's history reveals that "there was no king in Israel and every man did that which was right in his own eyes" (Judges 18:1 17:6; 21:25; 19:1).

Without some form of government, the spirit of lawlessness will reign with its resultant confusion. The spirit of iniquity is at work today around the world to overthrow governments. The world is in collision without law and order in the universe. People are created and born into this world to be governed.

3. **Divinely Appointed Realms of Government.**

There are several major realms of government in the universe, touching both earth and heaven.

- * Government of Heaven, the universe, and the angelic realm (Psalms 145:10-13).
- * Government of the Home, involving husband, wife and children (Genesis 1:26-28).
- * Government of the Nation, involving the State and Human Government as established by God under the Noahic Covenant (Genesis 6-8; Romans 13:1-8).
- * Government of the Church (I Corinthians 12:28; Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24). The

Church is a society within a society, a community within a community, a nation within the nations, and a Divinely governed institution within humanly governed institutions. It is His Kingdom - a Theocracy!

4. **Overthrow the Government.**

II Peter 2:10; Isaiah 14:12-14; Matthew 6:6-9. There is law and order in the government of heaven. This **law - order** is demonstrated in the Godhead under leadership (I Corinthians 11:1-3). However, Lucifer (Satan) rose up in rebellion against this headship and authority and caused the angelic revolt.

* Satan was the leader of rebellion. He sought to overthrow the government of heaven. All freewill creations were tested at this point, as to whether they would serve God with their freewill or serve Satan. Traditional sources indicates that one third of the angels fell. Here the doctrine of existentialism was born. "Do your own thing." They followed Satan's challenge against the government of God and His authority. Satan thus fell from the position he sought to gain as the anointed cherub and guardian of the throne of God. He promised the angels who followed him positions of authority in his rival kingdom.

* The same thing is evident in the fall of Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden. It was treason against God Himself. Eve was deceived. Adam sinned knowingly, but without realizing the full consequences on the unborn human race.

* In Israel under Korah we also see rebellion against Divinely appointed authority of God as given to Moses (Numbers 16).

This has been the history of the human race. The challenge against God's authority and government has been challenged over the centuries. The Satanic power is behind it all. Church history shows the same conflict in the Church of Jesus Christ.

B. Forms of Church Government.

Church history shows the various forms of Church government which have been tried out by the people of God. Much study has gone into this subject by various writers of history. Some of the clues and indications from early Church history have been taken and used to formulate different systems of Church government. The pendulum seems to have been swung back and forth between apparent extremes. Denominational forms of Church government have been made to maintain unity of doctrine, purity of life, this being done by strong government. However, this has never worked. Liberalism, Modernism, Apostasy and Heresy and death have all been manifest in the very Denominations who sought by strong centralized government to keep these things out. Generally speaking, if the denominations goes astray, then all of its churches under its jurisdiction follow suit.

Then the Independent Churches or local congregations have established forms of government. They have a greater measure of safety in the sense that, if Heresy arises, then it is more localized than spread through a whole Denomination. However, the same problems have manifested themselves on this local level as in the Denomination level.

The Church, like Israel of old, has followed world systems of government instead of God's system of government.

A consideration of New Testament revelation shows that there was a "threefold cord" manifested in Church government. Church history, both past and present show that various groups have taken one or the other of these cords and emphasized such, upholding it to be THE form of Church government. As will be seen, it seems that the answer is not one or the other of these cords but "*the threefold cord which cannot be broken*" (Eccl. 4:12) that provides the necessary "checks and balances" needed in the delicate matter of Church government.

Anthropologists tells us that basically there are five possible types of human government:

- * Oligarchy -- the government by an elite few.
- * Monarchy -- government by one man or woman.
- * Gerontocracy -- government by the old men.
- * Democracy -- government by a large portion of the people, usually through some form of representation.
- * Theocracy -- government by God through appointed authorities.

1. **Monarchy.**

Monarchy is government by one person. It is an autocratic system of government. Autos = "self" and Kratos = "power."

a. **Civil Rule.**

This can be seen in a Dictatorship, whether good or evil, benevolent or despotic. It is the rule of the one man, a form of government in which one person has supreme and an absolute power above all others. The Monarch can be independent and individualistic, exercising unlimited authority.

Nebuchadnezzar was a king and illustrates this form of government, for "whom he would he slew, and whom he would he kept alive, and whom he would he set up, and whom he would he put down" (Daniel 5:19).

Kingdoms of the world have illustrated this system of government; the Pharaohs in Egypt; the kings of Babylon; the Emperors of Rome, as well as various nations today under a Dictatorship.

b. Church Rule.

The monarchical rule is seen in the Church under the Papal and Episcopal forms of government. The pope is called “The Bishop of Bishops.” The Greek word for Bishop or Overseer is “episcopos” (“epi” = “over,” and “skopos” = “to see or look”). The Bishop of the church is the one-man rule, the one who looks after and guards the flock of God. Authority is invested in him as the Church head, whether it be Pope, Bishop or Cardinal or another appointed Clergy.

The Churches which are governed by one man, whether he be called Bishop, Pastor, Minister or Presiding Elder, etc., illustrate the rule of the one man. He may be a good or bad ruler. He may be a benevolent or despotic Dictator. He may rule as a king over his kingdom, and have the Nebuchadnezzar spirit (Dan. 15:19), or he may have a humble spirit. He may be a Godly Bishop or a hypocritical Bishop, but he is a Monarchical Bishop.

Many times, “Independent Churches” or “Autonomous Churches” come under this form of government. Diotrefes seemed to exemplify the independent spirit, loving the pre-eminence and rejecting or receiving whom he would as an autocrat (III John 9-10).

The great danger relative to the rule of one man, whether civil or ecclesiastical is that this person generally has no “checks and balances” for his own safety, as well as the safety of the people he rules over. False cults and their leaders have taken numerous people into slavery and death. The Jim Jones cult is a prime example of this.

2. Hierarchy.

The word “hierarchy” means “a group of officials” who together rule the people (Greek “Hieros” = sacred, and “Archos” = ruler). Hierarchy is Church government by a group of Priests or Clergy in graded ranks. Although this word does have religious connotations, the idea of “a group of officials” is seen in both civil and ecclesiastical forms of government.

The following words illustrate such:

A. Oligarchy

“Oligo” means “few” and “Arche” means “rule.” Oligarchy is government by elite few.

Oligarchy is a form of government in which the supreme power is placed in the hands of a small executive class. Any one of these rulers is called an oligarth.

B. Gerontocracy.

Greek “Geron” means “an old man” and “Kratos” means “power.” Gerontocracy is simply the rule by old or aged men. It is a government controlled by old men. Certain nations had governments whose supreme magistrates were all over sixty years of age.

King Solomon took counsel with the old men while his son Rehoboam failed to do so and took counsel with the young men, his peers, who lacked wisdom that generally comes with the experience of years. The result was a divided kingdom that has never ever been united since that time (I Kings 12:1-24).

Churches who are governed by a group of “Elders” or “Bishops” come under this form of government, especially if the word “Elder” is taken in its stricter meaning as an “old man, or aged person.”

C. Bureaucracy.

Bureaucracy is defined as “government by departmental officials following an inflexible routine.” It is governmental officialism, or their officials collectively. It is the concentration of authority in administrative bureaus. An example of bureaucratic form of government is seen in “The Party” in the countries under Communism or Socialism. It involves also Gerontocracy or the rule of old men (“The Party” in Moscow illustrates this fact). Deacon control also illustrates this.

D. Hierarchy.

The Hierarchical form of government is the rule of the Priests or Bishops over God’s people. These persons are not secular but sacred rulers as the word Hierarchy means (Greek “Hieros” = sacred, and “Archos” = ruler).

Hierarchical rule can include in itself “the rule of the few” (Oligarchy), “the rule of old men” (Gerontocracy), and “the rule of officials” (Bureaucracy), except that, as noted, it is used more to refer to the sacred (Ecclesiastical) rule and not secular rule.

A hierarchy has the flavor of Nicolaitianism, or “suppression of the laity” thus creating “clergy and laity” (Rev. 2:6, 15).

The Roman Church recognizes the Pope as “Bishop of Bishops” and the Catholic Priesthood nullifies the priesthood of all believers. This is hierarchy! The Episcopal Church is the government of the Church by a Bishop whose authority is conferred on him by Bishops above him who comprise an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

The Presbyterian Church is the government of the Church by an Elder whose authority comes from “the presbytery” or “session,” a group of elders of equal rank. These represent the people in District, State and national levels and in sessions on through to the Assembly of Elders of the whole Presbyterian Church. There are widening degrees of authority in this Eldership, or Presbyterial form of government.

Many local Churches have this form of government by the Elders in that locally governed Church. However, the great danger, is that it can become an hierarchical form of government, and rob the congregation of their priestly ministry before the Lord, by the creation of “clergy and laity.”

3. Democracy.

The word “democracy” is made up of two words, “Demos” = “the people,” and “Kratia” = “to rule.” It means “the rule of the people.” Democracy is government by the majority of the people. It is the people’s rights, the people’s voice, the people’s rule. It is government of the people, by the people, for the people by popular vote, directly or through representatives.

This form of government exists generally in the Western world as well as some of the other Democratic countries.

As far as Churches are concerned, the Congregational, Baptist, various Churches of Christ, some Pentecostal and other local Churches have the democratic system of government. It is the choice of the people to have who they rule for them, subject to their authority. Thus we have the “hire and fire” pastoral system in operation so much.

It is worthy to note that Laodicea means “mass rule” or “the rule of the people” (Rev. 3:12-21). Christ, the Head of the Church, was sadly outside His own Church seeking admission.

The congregational form of government is democracy. It places the power and authority, and the government in the hands of the people, whereby they control the leadership of the Church.

Thus, under the Roman Catholic and Episcopal Churches, authority is conferred by superiors in an ecclesiastical hierarchy.

Under the Presbyterian government authority results from the Session of Elders. Under the Democratic Form of government authority is delegated by the people. In each case, authority comes from above or below. However, all forms of government go astray without God, for God can only govern through men when He truly governs *in men!*

Alex Rattay Hay in "*The New Testament Order For Church And Missionary*" confirms the above comments, which we quote and adapt here (pp. 141-145):

(1) Autocracy -- absolute government by one man, and (2) Oligarchy -- government by a privileged group, and (3) Democracy -- government of the people by the people.

Democracy is defined as "A form of government in which the supreme power is vested in the people collectively, and is administered by them or by officers appointed by them."

The whole Church is organized under one of these three forms, rejecting the theocratic form of government.

The autocratic form of government is found in the Roman Catholic Church and in Denominations with a government in which one man is given supreme control and in congregations where one man assumes a place of priestly privilege in the ministry of the Word.

The Oligarchic form of government is seen in congregations where a group of Elders, in the appointment of whom the congregation has no say, undertake to find the will of the Lord for the congregation.

The democratic form of government is found in congregations organized on the congregational system. The responsibility is placed directly on the entire congregation. Decisions are made by vote and the opinion of the majority rules.

Where the responsibility is placed upon ONE MAN it is hoped he will know the will of God and guide the congregation in the right paths.

Where a group of ELDERS have that place it is expected that they will know God's will, the congregation depends on them.

Where the congregation rules it is hoped that the decision of the majority will be the will of Christ.

Thus, human forms of government rob the people of priestly relationship to Christ and to God, as well as their responsibility as a congregation.

C. The Government of God in the Old Testament.

In viewing Divine government in the Old Testament times, we find that it falls into two major areas. There is government which is absolute and sovereign, and there is government that is of God through human instrumentality.

1. Divine or Sovereign Government.

By Divine or Sovereign government, we mean the rule and reign of God absolutely and directly over the affairs of mankind. We may say that this kind of government was manifested during the anti-diluvian era from Adam to Noah (Gen. 1-6). God Himself governed and judged Adam and Eve. It was God Himself who came and judged Cain for his rebellion and murder of Abel. It was God Himself who came to Noah and told him of the judgment by a flood on a godless, violent and sinful world.

Government was operated by God Himself in heaven upon earth's inhabitants. God Himself ruled the affairs of world kingdoms, giving it to whosoever He would (Dan. 1-7). God Himself ruled over Israel (Judges 8:22-23).

2. Human Government.

It was under the Noahic Covenant that God introduced human government, the government of men by men. This was Divinely delegated and limited authority however. God was still sovereign and supreme and His government universal. But here authority is placed by God into the hands of men to deal with men in the realm of murder and the taking of human life (Gen. 7-8-9).

These laws governing human lives were amplified more fully under the Mosaic Covenant as given to the chosen nation Israel. It was seen in measure when God raised up the deliverers in the time that the Judges ruled also (Acts 13:20).

However, God's government is over all human government.

D. Theocracy in Israel.

It is in the nation of Israel that we see more clearly Divine rule through human instrumentality. It is there that we see a true Theocracy -- the rule of God under God, and thus through His chosen, appointed and anointed leaders. "Theos" = God, an "Kratien" = to rule. Thus, Theocracy is "God-rule." But how did God rule in Israel?

He ruled through instruments of His choice, His representatives, through His appointed officials or rulers.

Israel had this form of government under God, and God raised up leaders to perform His will and exercise His rule, acting as His delegated authorities, under Divine unction and wisdom in total dependence upon Him.

These leaders were God-called, chosen and equipped. Sometimes the Divine choice was made sovereignly, by God Himself. Other times it was God's choice revealed through human instrumentality. The issue was that God ruled through human vessels of His choice.

1. Divine Sovereignty.

A. Moses -- sovereignly called and chosen of God to rule His people Israel (Exodus 3, Exodus 1-40).

B. Aaron -- sovereignly called and chosen by God to be the High Priest in Israel (Exodus 28, 29) Read Numbers 17 also.

C. Judges -- The Judge -- Deliverers were chosen of God sovereignly.

D. Elijah -- sovereignly raised up as the prophet of God to Israel (I Kings 17).

E. Jeremiah -- Jeremiah 1.

G. Isaiah -- Isaiah 6.

So, it was generally with the Major and Minor Prophets. God sovereignly came to them and called them to act under His authority, to be His spokesman to the people of God. All knew the sovereign call of God to the ministry. None were self-called, or man-called.

2. Human Responsibility Under God.

On other occasions God chose men by using human vessels to confirm His choice.

These men were not elected or voted in or out of office by people. They

were God's choice.

A. Rulers -- Exodus 18. By a word of wisdom from Jethro, Moses chose able and qualified men to be judges and rulers over God's people and share the load with him.

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B. Joshua -- Numbers 27. Joshua was chosen by God through Moses to be his successor to lead the people into the promised land and complete the ministry of Moses.

C. Saul -- I Samuel 9-10. Even though Israel had rejected God's theocratic kingship and wanted a visible king like other nations, nevertheless, it was God who chose Saul through Samuel to be their king. Whose choice was Saul really? They chose a king. God chose their king for them.

D. David -- I Samuel 16. It should be recognized that it was God's will for Israel to have a king, but not His time when Saul was chosen (Gen. 17). David was God's choice from His tribe, and chosen under Samuel in His time (Gen. 49:10).

E. Elisha -- I Kings 19. Elisha, the prophet, was God's choice, but this was confirmed by the human instrumentality of Elijah and his mantle.

F. Levites -- Numbers 1-4, 18. The tribe of Levi was chosen by God through Moses and then given to Aaron as a gift for the service of the sanctuary. It was confirmed by the laying on of hands, and they were appointed to serve the Tabernacle and the people of Israel (Acts 7:38).

Thus, the choice of men originated with God Himself, and was manifested or by human instrumentality. These men were chosen by God and called to rule over Israel, exercising Divine government in their midst. They acted for God as His delegated authorities. It is this that is meant by the use of the word theocracy here.

Theocracy is the rule of God directly or through His chosen, appointed and anointed authorities.

They were not:

(1) SELF-called or chosen. As was Abimelech (Judges 9); Korah (Numbers 16); or Diotrephes (III John 9, 10).

(2) MAN-called or chosen. As was king Saul, yet God permitted it and chose him for them (I Samuel 18:9-10; Numbers 5:1-5).

(3) But they were GOD-called men and chosen, as was Moses, Aaron, Joshua, David, Samuel, and the Prophets of God (Hebrews 5:1-5).

They were not voted in or out by popular vote of the people. There was no bureaucratic or democratic choice of these people. These leaders were God-called and God-chosen leaders. This is THEOCRACY -- the rule of God

Himself, or His rule through His chosen vessels.

Israel was not a Democracy, even as the home is not a Democracy. Parents are the authority under God. Contrary of the modern opinions of today, the man is head of the house, and is not voted in or out, nor does he abdicate his throne. Human forms of governments have advantages as well as disadvantages, but the Church is not called to imitate these.

Government in the Church is a **gift** from God (I Corinthians 12:28; I Peter 4:10-11). Government in the Church is not man-made like Israel saying, "Make us a king like other nations" (I Samuel 8:7). God has His form of government for the Church. It is THEOCRATIC and not Democratic or

Bureaucratic or Hierarchical or Monarchial! God's government of the Church must be through Divinely gifted people He has chosen. The development of this is from Christ the Head, then through the Twelve Apostles, and then on through Paul to the Eldership as laid out in the New Testament.

E. The Headship of Christ.

Every Government has a HEAD. Without it, government could not function. This is true whether it speaks of government in the individual, the home, the Church, the nation, or the universe.

There must be HEADSHIP! Headship is government. Headship is authority.

It is headship that co-ordinates all the members of the body, whether naturally or collectively in people.

The Scripture is clear that Christ is the HEAD of the Church, and no other can usurp His Headship.

God has given Christ to be Head over all things to the Church, which is His Body (Ephesians 1:22). When we speak of Christ's Headship we speak of Lordship, Rulership, Authority, Government, Kingship. The government is upon His shoulders (Isaiah 9:6-9). God has committed the key of David and the government of His kingdom into His hand (Isaiah 22:20-24).

Christ is the Headstone of the building (Psalms 118:21; Mark 12:19; Matthew 21:42; Acts 4:11; I Peter 2:4-8).

The Scriptures also show that there is a Divine order of Headship in the universe, in the government of God both in heaven and in earth.

(1) GOD is the Head of Christ (I Cor. 11:3).

(2) CHRIST is the Head of the Church, His Body members, collectively and individually (Ephesians 4:15; Colossians 1:18; Ephesians 5:23-27).

* Christ is the Head of every believer, individually (I Corinthians 11:3).

* Christ is the Head of all principality and power (I Cor. 11:3).

* Christ is the Headstone which the builders, the religious leaders, rejected (Psalms 118:22; Zech. 4:7; Matthew 21:42-44; Mark 12:10; I Peter 2:7; Acts 4:11).

* Christ is the Fulness of the Godhead bodily (Colossians 1:19; 2:9).

(3) The HUSBAND is the Head of his wife, as Christ is the Head of His Church (Ephesians 5:23-32).

(4) Rulers were chosen to be “heads” over the nation of Israel (Exodus 18:13-26).

They were not to usurp the headship of Moses under the leadership of the Lord God, but only act as “heads” under “headship.”

(5) Ministries in the Church are not to act as “lords” over God’s heritage, not to usurp the Headship as a husband or ruler if truly under the Headship of Christ (I Corinthians 11:3).

Many times, human headship and heads of denominations and organizations usurp the Headship of Christ bringing confusion and division into the Body of Christ.

(6) First the Natural, then the Spiritual.

The Scriptures teach the principle that it is “first the natural, afterwards the “spiritual” (I Cor. 15:46-47). Because of this there are some major lessons to be learned from natural headship of the human body.

* The Head in the natural body is the seat of the mind, the seat of control and direction. Wisdom, knowledge and understanding are in the head. Christ is the Head of the spiritual Body, the Church. Therefore, He is the brains, the mind of God in the Church. He gives directions and exercises control.

* The Head governs and directs every member of the natural body. By a thought from the head, every member obeys; every member submits and responds to the direction of the head.

So, every member of the Body of Christ should be submitted to the risen Head and obey His will and thought (Colossians 2:17-19; Ephesians 4:15).

* The Head in the natural body is responsible for all food and nourishment being supplied to every member. Every member must receive from the head. So, Christ the Head nourishes and cares for the Church, His Body; cleansing, Purifying and nourishing the Body (Ephesians 5:27-32).

* The Head holds the center of the nervous system which connects the whole body to it in sensitiveness.

* Christ the Head is vitally connected to every member and the members to Him by the Holy Spirit, who is the Divine “nerve system” in the Church, His Body. There has to be sensitivity to His Spirit.

* The Head is incomplete without the body, and the body is incomplete without the head. Each belong to each other. We cannot conceive of a bodyless head

or a headless body.

* So, Christ is incomplete without the Church, His Body, and the Body is incomplete without Him (Ephesians 1:22-23; 4:11-16; Colossians 2:17-19).

Christ, as THE HEAD of the Church, is perfect and infallible. He is the all-fulness of God (Matthew 18:20; 28:18-20). Because of this He is able to govern the Church both locally and universally. This no man can do. This is why no man can possibly or ever be the universal head of the Church. This is to usurp the Headship and place of Christ.

The Book of Acts reveals Christ the Head in heaven directing, controlling, governing, quickening the members of the Church, His Body, in the earth. By the Spirit He was able to send His thoughts, His will, His mind, His plans and purposes to the members of His Body (Acts 1-2; 8-10; 13:1-4).

The order of Headship is revealed. God is Head over Christ, Christ is Head over the Church by The Holy Spirit. Every member of the Body must know this headship and hold the head, even Christ (Colossians 2:19). He is the Governor, the Director and God's authority is invested in Him. The Church, both universally and locally is under His headship. Rulers in the Church can only exercise headship as they are submitted to and governed by Christ's infallible Headship (Zechariah 9:7; 12:5-6; Genesis 45:26; I Peter 2:14; Matthew 2:6; Psalms 22:28; Genesis 42:6; Matthew 27:2-6; Galatians 4:2; II Peter 2:10).

F. The Government of the Church.

We come now to a consideration of the government of the New Testament Church, both universally and locally.

1. The Government of the Church Universal.

The endeavors of men, of denominations and organizations, to set up a “World Church” with a “Central World Headquarters” is contrary to Scripture. It usurps the Headship of Christ. The Pope cannot be “Universal Head of the Church.” How can any man or group of men effectively know the mind of Christ for the Church around the world? Countries and cultures may vary, needs of Churches in different localities around the world vary. There is great need for the “many-sided wisdom” of God in Christ. Only Christ, the infallible and Divine Head, whom God has given to the Body, can effectively govern and direct the Church universal.

There were no “Central Headquarters” for the Church in the Book of Acts.

Jerusalem as the “Mother Church” did not try to control or govern every local Church established in the cities of the nations. Jerusalem was not “headquarters” or the governing body over Antioch or Corinth, or any other Church in the cities. Neither did Rome control Corinth, nor did Ephesus control the Churches of Asia.

It is human nature that desires to set up some “Jerusalem” to be the governing head of Churches established around the world. This is not to be found in Scripture. The only “Jerusalem” believers look to is “the heavenly Jerusalem” (Hebrews 12:22-24).

The “Universal Headquarters” is also in heaven, which is Jesus Christ, the Head of the Church (Matthew 16:16-19; Ephesians 1:18-22). Christ alone is omnipotent, omnipresent, and omniscient and is thus qualified to be the Head of the Church. He alone is able to meet the needs of His people, everywhere, at all times (Matthew 18:15-20; 28:18-20).

2. Government of the Local Church.

Government of the local Church is also by Jesus Christ. But He Himself

governs the Churches in various localities through local ministries.

One of the clearest revelations of Christ in the midst of His Church is the vision given to John on the isle of Patmos. Christ had already promised that “where two or three are gathered together in My Name, there I AM in the midst of them” (Matthew 18:15-20).

Now in Revelation 1:10-20 John sees the risen Christ “in the midst” of the seven golden lamp stands which represented the seven Churches in Asia. Each of these were local Churches; Churches in cities as His light-bearers.

Christ addressed Himself to each of the “angel-stars,” the messengers of each local Church. Each local Church received a distinct and separate letter. No letter was sent to “headquarters” or “Mother Church” to send out to the other Churches. Christ Himself spoke a word and ministered to each local Church in their respective city. These things were testified in the local Churches (Revelation 22:16).

No one Church had control over another Church. There was fellowship, but no denomination formed out of these Churches. Each was under the sovereignty of Christ’s Headship. Each was accountable to Him (Revelation 1-2-3). The same is true of every local Church in each city in the New Testament.

Each Church was locally governed. There was no central government. There was no central control. There was no earthly headquarters. Christ was THE HEAD of the Church, both universally and locally. Christ alone qualifies as the builder of His own Church. He alone is infallible and knows the need of each local Church, as well as the Church universally. How can any fallible man know such or be “head of the Church?”

The tragedy of the Church History reveals how corruption set in and men as Bishops arose and took the place of Christ, usurping His authority and the

sovereignty under Christ of the local Churches.

It would be profitable at this point to digress briefly into Church History and see

how this corruption developed, both Biblically and Historically.

a. Biblically - The Book of Acts.

(1) *The Church at Jerusalem.*

The original Church at Jerusalem was founded by Christ and the Twelve Apostles of the Lamb. Their names are in the foundation of the Bride City (Revelation 21:14).

There was multiple leadership, or plurality of leadership in the original Pentecostal Church order (Acts 2:14; 6:2). These Apostles were known as “the Twelve,” twelve being the number of Apostolic government.

There were also Prophets at Jerusalem who ministered at Antioch (Acts 11:27-30).

There were also Elders in the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 15:6, 22; 21:17, 18). As the Church developed we see the Gospel spreading to both Jews and Gentiles and we see plurality of ministry at the various Churches.

(2) *The Church at Antioch.*

In due time the Gospel reached Antioch. Here we see a great Church established. Prophets and Teachers were in this Church, or plurality of leadership (Acts 13:103).

From Antioch, Paul and Barnabas were sent forth and

established Churches in the cities of the Gentiles. On their return visit, these Apostles ordained Elders in every Church, by prayer, fasting and the laying on of hands (Acts 14:14, 21-23). The Pentecostal believers were first called “Christians” in this city. Before this, they were called followers of “The Way.” We note again the plurality of the eldership -- not just one elder, but elders.

(3) *The Church of Ephesus.*

In the establishment of the Church at Ephesus, again we see multiple rule in the group of Elders. Paul, in Apostolic office, called for the Elders of the Church of Ephesus. He did not call for the “pastor,” or “the bishop,” or one ruling elder, but he called for the Elders.

Thus, Biblical history shows that the Churches were under the rule and direction of multiple leadership, never just one person, never just one elder, whether he be called “Pastor,” or “Bishop,” or “Elder.” It always involved plurality, or, a Presbytery, which is a group of Elders.

b. Historically - Church Decline.

The seeds of decline are seen in New Testament times and secular history gives evidence of the fruit in those seeds.

While the Twelve Apostles were alive, the Church maintained that plurality of Eldership, together ruling and caring for the flock of God.

It is the Apostle Paul who, in Acts 20, clearly saw the potential seeds of corruption and warned the Elders of Ephesus of the same. He also warned Timothy of the departure from the faith in the latter times (I Timothy 4:1).

In Acts 20: 28-31, the Apostle Paul forewarned the Elders of Ephesus

of the twofold danger to the Church, the flock of God. He spoke of the wolves in sheep's clothing from *without*, and then the dangers of Elders from *within*, who would seek to draw disciples after themselves, dividing the flock of God, and separating from the one fold.

Paul even warned Timothy and exhorted him, who he had left at Ephesus, to warn certain Elders not to teach contrary doctrines (I Timothy 1:3,4). He also told Timothy not to be in a hurry to ordain an Elder, to honor Elders, but to rebuke those Elders before others if accusations of sin against them is justified (I Timothy 5:17-22).

It should be noted that Timothy is not a novice, but about 37-40 years of age at this time, as a study of his life will confirm. He is an Elder amongst Elders.

It is the Apostle John who gives to us an indication of what was beginning to manifest itself in the Eldership at that period of Apostolic history, 90 A.D. History strongly suggests that John the beloved Apostle was at Ephesus in the last years of his life, after being released from banishment on the isle of Patmos. If this is so, then the significance of his third Epistle becomes weightier in the matter dealt with. This involved the commendation of two brethren, and the condemnation of one brother, named Diotrephes (III John 1-14).

It is evident that these brethren together had some position in the Church. The language is strong in denunciation of Diotrephes. He is characterized by the following:

- * He loved to have the pre-eminence amongst the brethren and in the Church.
- * He would not receive the apostles, or other traveling ministries.

- * He spoke against them with malicious words.
- * He forbade all others in the Church to receive any of these brethren.
- * He excommunicated from the Church any who did receive apostolic or other of the traveling ministries.

We might say what happened here at “the Church” (III John 6, 9, 10) in Diotrephes shadowed forth that which happened in the history and decline of the Church after apostolic times.

Whereas Apostolic Churches had multiple rule, or plurality of Eldership, gradually ONE ELDER rose up, and, Diotrephes-like, assumed the pre-eminence in the Church over and above the Elders, and over that Church or over Churches. The Churches became ruled over by one Elder instead of a group of Elders.

Gradually there came a wrong decision between the words “Bishop,” “Elder” or “Presbyter.” Two distinct orders came into being during the second century.

Alex. Patray Hay, in *“The New Testament Order for Church & Missionary”* (p249), says: “During the second century it seems to have become common for the Elders in a congregation to choose one of their number to preside over them, and to apply to him the designation of Bishop. Even then he was not considered as of higher rank, but simply “first among equals.”

Eusebius (300 A.D.), writing of the time of the Apostles, used the term Bishop and Presbyter interchangeably. This is the common writings of the early Fathers. However, with the subtle change of order and the change of meaning in similar words, we see the rise of the monarchical Bishop (spoken of a “monepiscopacy”), *above* and Distinct from the Eldership. There came the rule of one Bishop in each of the congregations. He became the

president over the other Elders. In due time, the ordinances of water baptism and the communion became invalid if such were not conducted by the Bishop.

The power of the Bishops over the Elders and congregation continued to expand in the third and fourth centuries. We see there not only the Bishop over a local congregation and over a city, but then the rise of metropolitan Bishops. These became Arch-Bishops, wielding great power over all and sundry.

As the Bishops took more power to themselves and became “Priests” of and for the people, believers lost their “priesthood ministry” and thus we have the creation of “clergy and laity,” or a “priest-craft and people.”

The Dark Ages, or, as Martin Luther called it, “The Church’s Babylonian Captivity,” came into full focus for hundreds of years. Bishops were Priests, Elders were of lesser order or discounted and the congregations were robbed of priestly service to the Lord which was then done for them by a priest-caste. In principle, it was a horrible lapse back into the priesthood of the Old Covenant and Aaronic and Levitical order where only one tribe was allowed into priestly services and they did that on behalf of the other 12 tribes of Israel.

The New Covenant order is the priesthood of ALL believers, a royal priesthood after the Order of Melchisedek and not after the Order of Aaron (Hebrews 7; Revelation 1:5-6; 5:9; I Peter 2:5-9).

So, the rise of the monarchical Bishop helped forward the subjugation of the priesthood of all believers, as well as the suppression of the ascension-gift ministries of Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors, and Teachers and New Testament Eldership.

Thus we see the failure in Church history in the fact that the Ecclesiastics made a distinction between “Bishops” and “Elders.” The Bishops made themselves superior to the Elders and took the power over them and the local Churches were welded together under the One Holy Catholic Church, the Universal Church, under one Head, the Bishop of Rome. This is how the hierarchy came into existence.

As will be seen “Bishop” and “Elder” are one and the same (Philippians 1:1; I Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:5-7). There is no Scriptural distinction between the “episcopos” and the “presbuteros.” This pyramidal rise of power was contrary to Scripture. The word “Bishop” was of Greek City State origin. The word “Presbuteros” was of Jewish Synagogical origin (Luke 7:3). But both are one and the same person.

Each local Church was to be a completely autonomous unit, not subject to supervision of human agency be it Episcopal or Presbyterian. It is first of all subject to Christ THE HEAD and then His delegated and appointed governmental gifts which He sets in the Church (I Corinthians 12:28).

Local Churches were welded into a Universal Church under the power of the city of Rome, and all Bishop/Elders were brought under the government of the Bishop and Church of Rome.

All of this was indeed contrary to Scripture and the revelation of the New Testament Church order.

How then were the local Churches governed by Christ? Our considerations bring us to the answer of this question.

G. Government of the New Testament Church by Eldership.

As has already been seen under Section B, concerning the Forms of Church Government, it seems that the Divine intention is to have the “three-fold cord” of Church

government (Ecclesiastes 4:12). It is this which combines three Biblical points and provides for checks and balances in the government of any local Church. For the sake of orderly thought, we will consider (1) The Chief Elder, (2) The Multiple Eldership, and (3) Congregational relationships with the Eldership.

1. The Chief Elder - First Among Equals.

We submit this proposition for consideration.

“God’s form of government is *theocratic in character*. That is to say, God *chooses, calls* and *equips* certain persons to be leaders and rulers over His people, investing and delegating them with *degrees of authority* according to His will. These persons are most commonly called “*Elders*,” and in any given group of Elders, God generally places *the mantle of leadership upon some one Elder*. This does not exalt this Elder above the other Elders, but sets him in *responsibility* as “*First among equals*.”

a. First the natural.

Nature itself, as also mankind, teaches the principle that someone must take the leadership. James Lee Beall in “*Your Pastor, Your Shepherd*” (pp109-118) says that setting up of government is even seen in the animal kingdom.

* In the chicken yard, roosters establish leadership by subduing their opponents. It is called “the pecking order.” The rooster that can out peck all others is the undisputed head of the coop - that is until another arises who can out peck him.

* Animals with antlers, such as deer and moose, establish a horning order.

* Sheep and goats have a “butting order” until leadership is established.

* A flock of geese in-flight always have a lead bird, the others following in formation accordingly. The lead bird takes the direction for the flock.

* Sports and games which mankind plays always needs leadership. Basketball, Football, etc. have to have organization, rules to govern, and leadership. Otherwise there is chaos and confusion, and no sportsmanship.

Leadership is established in the animal kingdom in a beastly manner.

Leadership is established among men in sports according to their ability to lead. People seek leadership. People select their own leaders. It is instinct to follow a leader. It reveals the need to be governed. If this need is not met, then there is confusion and frustration. If men do not have leadership they will create it.

Someone has to lead. Isaiah's times revealed this. When the mighty men have failed, they wanted to take someone to lead and be their ruler. The end result, was that "children and women ruled over them." That is, immature and weak leadership took the lead (Isaiah 3).

People fear being left without direction (Ezekiel 13:7). Bad government is sometimes preferable to no government. Poor leadership is better than anarchy.

People will make their own leadership in order to be led. It is human nature to want government so bad they will create their own. Human nature demands leadership of some sort.

Plato in "*The Republic*," his great discourse on human government, describes the process of human government:

(1) If there is no leadership, people select someone and nurse him to

greatness.

(2) In this time, they call him their benefactor.

(3) In time he changes from such to be a tyrant - self-serving now because of the deification by the people.

(4) Tyranny now produces revolution.

(5) People then pull him down from the pinnacle of power. The same society who nursed this leader to greatness will also pull him down.

This is what Jesus spoke about when He said the Gentiles have their “benefactors” who exercise authority upon them and lordship over them.

But He said this was not the way it would be in the kingdom of God, among His leadership (Luke 22:24-27).

b. Then The Spiritual.

Leadership in the Church is not arrived at by “the law of the jungle,” i.e. “the survival of the fittest.” This is not the way it is in the kingdom of God. Jesus reproved the disciples for the wrong motive and desire to exercise lordship and authority over the people as did the Gentiles (Luke 22:24-27; I Peter 5:3). It is because Christ Himself, as the risen Head of the Church, calls, equips and places His mantle of leadership on that person to lead the flock of God.

This person may be referred to as “bishop,” or “chief elder” or “senior pastor,” or “senior minister,” or “presiding elder,” “apostle,” etc. But there must be leadership. We may say that “not everyone can drive the bus, or the train.”

Final decisions for direction must be upon someone, otherwise there is

confusion, frustration and lack of direction for the people of God.

We note this in the following:

(1) *Christ The Chief Elder.*

It is recognized that the Lord Jesus Christ is THE CHIEF ELDER above and among all other Elders (I Peter 2:25; 5:4). He is THE Chief Shepherd, and THE Bishop of our souls. He is THE sacrificial Lamb in the midst of the 24 Elders (Revelation 4-5). He is THE Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor and Teacher. He is the fulness of the Godhead bodily. All the Divine nature, character, glory, attributes, grace and gifts are in Him in perfection (Colossians 1:19; 2:9; John 3:33-34). He is the Head of the Church, which is His Body.

(2) *The Chief Elder in the Local Church.*

Whilest recognizing that Christ is THE Chief Shepherd and Bishop, it is also evident from Scripture that, within a local Church, having plurality of Eldership, Christ will place a mantle of leadership upon some one Elder to direct the people of God. This is done in conjunction with the multiple eldership, as the proposition presented at the beginning of this lesson shows.

* Paul and Barnabas were spoken of as “*chief men among the brethren*” (Acts 15:22; 14:12). That is, they were both *leading* men, men of *command* with *official authority*.

* There were “*chief* priests among the priesthood” (Luke 9:22; 20:1).

* There were “*chief* Pharisees” also (Luke 14:1).

* There were “*chief* rulers of the Synagogue” (Acts 18:8, 17).

* There were “*chief* apostles” also (II Corinthians 11:5; 12:11).

* There were “*chief* musicians” in the Tabernacle of David who were also chief of the Levites (I Corinthians 15:22).

* Michael is called “*chief* archangel” amongst the angelic orders (Daniel 10:13).

So, there should not be any problem in speaking of some one elder, upon whom God has placed the mantle of leadership, as “the chief elder,” or “senior elder,” etc. As long as this is not a “pride trip” in the person, there should not be any problem, and as long as it is not a matter of giving a person “flattering titles” (Matthew 23:1-12; Job 32:21-22).

The thing that “the chief elder” has to be aware of is that Diotrephes spirit and attitude, the desire to have pre-eminence. He has to truly recognize that he himself is an Elder AMONG other Elders, and NOT an Elder ABOVE other Elders!

Christ has demonstrated His own being the truth for man to follow. So it is with Christ. Christ is “the firstborn,” “the first begotten,” and in relation to His brethren in the Church, He is indeed “first among equals.” This is as to His humanity -- not his Divinity. But He is the “firstborn among many brethren” (Romans 8:25-28).

a. Old Testament Examples.

We note some examples from Old and New Testament as to “the chief elder,” or the “first among equals,” raised up and anointed by God to

lead the people of God. These men may be used as types of Christ but even then, we have THE LORD God, then “the set man” under Him, and the same continues in the New Testament, where we have THE LORD JESUS and “the set man” under Him.

* Numbers 27:15-23. Moses, the leader of Israel, asks that God would “set a man” over the congregation of Israel so that they benot as sheep without shepherd. There must be that “*set man*” appointed by God. That man with the mantle of leadership and direction upon Him.

* **Moses** and the Elders with him (Exodus 3:16-18; 4:29; 18:12-26; Deuteronomy 1:9-18).

* **Moses** and Judges share burden (Exodus 18:17-26; Deuteronomy 1:14-17).

* **Joshua** and the Elders with him (Joshua 7:6; 8:10; 20:4, 24:1, 31; Judges 2:7-13). Joshua was the “set man” as Captain over the hosts of Israel. He was to bring them out and bring them in.

* **Samuel** and the Elders (I Samuel 15:30).

* **Saul** and the Elders (What a failure of leadership!) (I Samuel 15:30).

* **David** and the Elders (II Samuel 5:3; I Chronicles 11:3; 15:25; 21:16). David was a king, Prophet-Priest, yet worked with the Elders as the Lord’s anointed (Isaiah 55:1-3).

* **Solomon** and the Elders (I Kings 8:1-3; II Chronicles 5:2-4).

* **Josiah** and the Elders (II Chronicles 34:29).

* **Ezra** and the Elders (Ezra 10:1,8,14). Ezra, the Scribe and Teacher Ministry.

* **Ezekiel** the Prophet and the Elder of Judah (Ezekiel 8:1; 14:1; 20:1-3).

* **The chief or High Priest** and the Elders (Acts 24:1). The Jewish Sanhedrin consisted of 24 Priests, 24 Scribes then 22 Elders, and then the one High Priest, making the Council of the Eldership. Thus Aaron, the High Priest, then the house of Aaron, and then the Levitical priestly tribe.

Thus, in each case, we have various ministries of Prophet, Priest or King or Judge, and these men were “set men,” raised up, and anointed of God. Others recognized this mantle of leadership upon them. The safeguard was that the set men always worked in conjunction with other Elders, but each illustrate the principle of “*first among equals*.”

The Elders recognized this. The congregation recognized this also, but it was GOD who raised this “set man” up to leadership position.

b. New Testament Examples.

The New Testament follows the same principal as set forth in the Old Testament relative to the “set man” and the plurality of the Eldership in the local Churches, even as exemplified in the local city Synagogues.

These men were “chief men,” and recognized as leaders that had been “set in the body” as senior ministers.

* **Peter** and the elders (Acts 1:15; 2:14; 3:4-25; 4:8-12; 5:1-11). Peter was an apostle, but accepted as, “first among equals.” The keys of the kingdom were specifically given to him (Matthew 16:18-19). In the Acts he is the one the Lord *first* used under the outpourings of the Spirit relative to both Jew and Gentile. Others apostles accepted it. There was no strife or lordship position or religious politics. Peter, as an Elder exhorts the other elders in his Epistle also (I Peter 5:1-4).

* **James** and the Elders (Acts 12:17; 15:1; 21:18 especially with Galatians 2:20). After Peter leaves, James becomes the senior shepherd at Jerusalem. James closes the council at Jerusalem over the Gentile problem.

* **Paul** and the Elders of Ephesus (Acts 19:10-11; 18:11; 20:17-35).

After being in Corinth for 18 months and Ephesus for 2 years, Paul calls for the Elders of the Church. They recognized the mantle of Paul’s apostleship as a leader.

* **Timothy** and the Elders (I Timothy 3; Pastoral Epistles -- Postscript). Timothy is spoken of as the first Bishop of the Church of Ephesus. There were Elders already at Ephesus. Timothy is left by Paul as “first among equals.” He is not a novice, but a young man of about 40 years of age in this work.

* **Titus** and the Elders (Titus 1:5; Postscript of Epistle). Titus, ordained the first Bishop of Crete, yet Paul told him to ordain Elders in every city and do the things he had left undone. The same is true for Titus as for Timothy.

* **Epaphroditus** with the Bishops and Deacons (Philippians 1:1; 2:25; 4:18). Epaphroditus was their “messenger” (apostle) and yet the Bishops and the Deacons were with him and addressed along with the saints at Philippi.

* **Nymphas** and the Church in his house (Colossians 4:15).

He was recognized as the leader and host with the House-Church.

* **Aquila and Priscilla** also had a House-Church (Romans 16:3-4). These were recognized as teachers in the Body also.

* **The Angel-Stars** of the 7 Churches in Asia (Revelation 1:11-20; with Acts 20:17). Revelation does not contradict Acts. There were Elders in the Church at Ephesus, yet the letter of St. John was addressed to “the angel-star” of the local Church.

* **Christ**, the Chief Elder/Lamb in the midst of the 24 Elders around the throne, as “first among equals,” ONLY as to the OFFICE of Eldership (Revelation 4-5).

(Note -- Christ in His Sonship and Deity is above all and is the pre-eminent One, so we only speak of Him as “FIRST among equals” as to the office of a Bishop in His humanity).

Though no one man is especially designated “pastor” in Acts or the Epistles, yet some one person had the mantle of leadership and direction on them and worked closely with other Elders who provided checks and balances for him.

These were “chief men” (Acts 15:22). They were those who lead, who commanded, with official authority. They were chief men among the brethren. They were set men among the eldership and recognized as such.

(3) Plurality and Co-equality of Eldership.

Having seen that God does raise up leaders of His people in “the set man,” what then is the safeguard against this man becoming a dictator or autocrat? What “checks and balances” does the Lord provide to prevent a monarchical Bishop from taking the pre-eminence as did Diotrephes? (III John 9, 10).

The answer is seen in the **plurality** or multiple eldership and the co- equality of such persons. These provide checks and balances for the “chief elder” who is “first among equals.” He is first in leadership but certainly not exalted above the other elders.

The number of Elders in any local Church will depend on the enlargement of the flock of God. Smaller Churches may be governed by one Elder until the flock comes to increase. The number of Elders is basically, determined by the need and by those who are qualified Scripturally to fulfill that office.

We consider both Old and New Testaments as to the plurality and co-equality of men called to be Elders. It should be noted that in relation to the New Testament local Churches, the word “Elder” is always used in the plural form, even though no set number of Elders is mentioned. It is “Church” in the singular, not Churches. It is “Elders” in the plural, not Elder! The Old Testament shows this predominant plurality of Eldership in relations to the affairs of nations or the people of God whether Gentile or Israelite.

The word “elder” in the Old Testament is used in plurality about 119 times and is used of “age” in *official* sense. Then the word “elder” used in singular about 24 times (elder, eldest) is used in *relational* sense.

The word “elder” is actually as old as the human race and the Bible itself and it is the most common and earliest known ministry of all.

a. Old Testament Eldership -- Plurality.

* The Elders of Egypt (Genesis 50:7).

* The Elders of Israel (Exodus 3:16, 18; 18:4-29; 12:21).

* The 70 Elders of Israel (Exodus 24:1, 9, 14; Numbers 11:16-25).

* The Elders of the Congregation (Leviticus 4:15).

* The Elders of Moab (Numbers 22:4,7).

* The Elders of Midian (Numbers 22:7).

* The Elders of the city (Deuteronomy 19:12; 21:2-6).

* The Elders of the town (I Samuel 16:4).

* The Assembly of the Elders (Psalms 107:32).

* The Elders of Judah (Ezekiel 8:1).

* The Elders, Scribes and High Priests (Matthew 15:2; 16:21; 26:3; Mark 14:43).

* The Estate (Council) of the Elders (Acts 22:5).

* The Elders who were patriarchs of the faith (Hebrews 11:2).

* The Elders (Moral Law, Deuteronomy 4-5), the Judges (Civil Law; Exodus 18:13-26; Deuteronomy 12-16; 21:1-21), and the Priests of Israel (the Ceremonial Law, Deuteronomy 17-26).

Thus, we have:

(1) Elders of a House/Family (Genesis 50:7; Hebrews 11:2; II Samuel 12:17).

(2) Elders of a Nation (Exodus 3:16-18; 4:29; 12:21; 17:5; 18:12; 19:7; I Samuel 4:3).

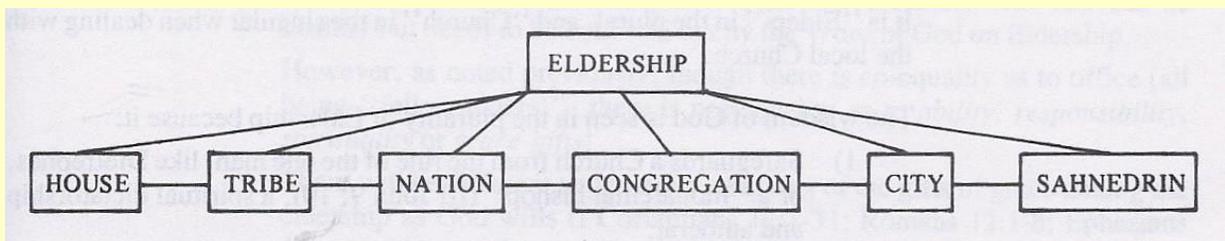
(3) Elders of the Sanhedrin (Exodus 24:1, 9, 14; Numbers 11:16-20).

(4) Elders of the Congregation (Leviticus 4:15; Judges 21:16).

(5) Elders of the Tribes (Deuteronomy 5:23; 31:28-29).

(6) Elders of the City (Deuteronomy 19:12; 16:18; 21:3-6; Judges 8:16; Ruth 4:2, 9-11; Ezra 10:14; I Samuel 16:4).

(7) The Assembly of the Elders (Lit. "The Session, or Sitting"), Psalms 107:32. General use in New Testament speaks of the Sanhedrin (Matthew 27:3; Mark 14:43; Acts 4:5; 24:1; 23:14; 25:15). See also Joel 1:14; 2:16.



Thus, all Elders had their areas of responsibility. The circle diagram may also be used to illustrate the Eldership responsibility according to enablement's. The "Jethro Principle" certainly illustrate the need for and function of

plurality of rulership in behalf of God's people (Exodus 18:13-27).

b. New Testament Eldership -- Plurality.

Of the approximately 69 uses of the word "Elder" in the New Testament, *twice* it is used in a *relational* sense (Luke 15:25; Romans 9:12), *seven* times it is used of an older person and/or elder in *official* sense (I Timothy 5:1-2, 19: 1 Peter 5:1, 5; II John 1; III John 1), and about *sixty* times it is used in an *official* sense in its plural form.

* The relief money was sent to the *Elders* (Acts 11:30) in time of famine.

* They ordained *Elders* in every Church (Acts 14:23).

* The *Elders* in Jerusalem (Acts 16:4).

* The *Elders* of Ephesus (Acts 20:17, 18).

* The *Elders* of Jerusalem (Acts 21:17, 18).

* The *Elders* are to rule (I Timothy 5:1, 17-21).

* The *Elders* of the Church to anoint with oil and pray for the sick (James 5:14).

* The *Elders* exhorted by Peter an Elder to oversee the flock of God (I Peter 5:1-5).

* The *Elders* to be ordained by Titus in every Church and

city (Titus 1:5).

* St. Paul wrote to the *Bishops* and Deacons at Philippi (Philippians 1:1).

* Believers are to obey *them* that have the rule over them (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24).

* Timothy was to make sure that *Elders* qualify for office (I Timothy 3).

* The Lamb was in the midst of the *24 Elders* (Revelation 4-5).

This Priestly court was founded in the Tabernacle of David worship, was an order of Melchisedekian King-Priests unto God.

* There were “prophets and teachers” at Antioch (Acts 13:1).

* There were “prophets” at Corinth also (II Corinthians 14:29).

* There were “prophets” at Jerusalem (Acts 11:27; 15:4, 6, 22).

* There were “apostles and elders” at the Council concerning the Gentiles (Acts 15:1-5; 16:4).

* A *presbytery* is a group of *Elders* in any given gathering (I Timothy 4:14). It is the order of Eldership.

Thus the New Testament Churches at Jerusalem, Antioch, Philippi, Thessalonica, and Ephesus all show plurality of Eldership ministry and rule. Any given group of Elders in a local Church at any given gathering of Elders constitutes “the presbytery” at that place and time (I Timothy 4:14). The Greek word “*presbuterion*” used here means “Assembly of aged men, or Order of Elders.”

It is “Elders” in the plural, and “Church” in the singular when dealing with the local Church.

The wisdom of God is seen in the plurality of Eldership because it:

(1) Safeguards a Church from the rule of one man, like Diotrephes, or a “monarchial bishop” (III John 9, 10), a spiritual dictatorship and autocrat;

(2) Provides checks and balances in rulership, and

(3) Makes a channel for the manifold wisdom of God to be released to the Body of Christ, the Church, and finally,

(4) Provides multiple rule and feeding ministry in the local

Church, as well as

(5) Provides a covering and protection for all Elders.

c. Co-Equality of Eldership

Not only does the Old and New Testament show the *plurality* of Eldership, it also teaches the *co-equality* within that plurality of eldership. That is, no elder is to be exalted as a person above another elder. To do so is to violate

God's own law and attitude to His people, for God is no respecter of persons (Romans 2:11; Acts 10:34; Deuteronomy 10:17; James 2:1-9). He does not show partiality or favoritism.

The New Testament writers recognized and accepted both *plurality* and *co-equality* amongst the Eldership. However, it is a co-equality of office and of elders as persons, but it is NOT a co-equality of Divine ability!

There is a variety of personality, degrees of spirituality and measures of God-given grace and ability within the Eldership. They are equal as persons, and equal as far as office. They are all Elders as persons! But there is difference of grace-gifts to them by the risen Head, Christ.

We note this in the following:

- * Peter stood with the eleven as a co-equal apostle, at Pentecost (Acts 2:14).

- * Paul accepted Peter, James and John as three "pillars" in the Church at Jerusalem (Galatians 2:9) but did not exalt one above the other. They were fellow-apostles, fellow-elders.

- * Peter said he was an "elder" exhorting other "elders" (I Peter 5:1). He was a fellow-elder.

- * The 24 Elders in Revelation 4:4; 5:8-10 are all co-equal as fellow-elders and kings and priests unto God, and all gathered around the Lamb around the throne of God.

- * Paul reproved the Corinthians for their carnality in exalting one ministry above another and glorying in men (I Corinthians 1:10-16; 3:21-

23).

Thus, all Elders are equal as persons and office. But there are differences of grace-gifts given to them which also have to be recognized.

Believers who see the *plurality* and *co-equality* of Eldership in the Church often let the pendulum swing to extremes on this matter and fail to recognize that amongst this kind of eldership God does not set some elder as “first among equals.”

They reject the concept of “chief elder” or “presiding elder” or “elder of elders” or “chief shepherd” through fear of depriving Christ of His place as THE Chief Elder and exalting some man above others. This fear can be healthy but needs to be balanced out by the Word of God on Eldership.

However, as noted previously, though there is co-equality as office (all being “fellow-elders”), there is not equality as to *ability, responsibility, spirituality or grace-gifts!*

There will be different and various measures of the gifts of grace among the eldership as God wills (I Corinthians 12:11-31; Romans 12:1-8; Ephesians 4:9-16). The very fact that God has given a variety of ministry gifts, spiritual gifts and talents to the member of the Body of Christ confirms the truth of the same amongst the eldership. It is this fact that should be seen in the examples here of *plurality, co-equality* of eldership, yet an elder being “first among equals” by reason of Divinely given abilities and grace.

They were not set there as leaders of the rest because they were better than the others, but because GOD SET them there, equipping, anointing and enabling them to be “first among equals.”

To whom much is given, more responsibility is upon them. To whom is given, of him will men require the more. He will be a responsible elder among elders (Luke 12:41-48).

The measure of *ability* is the measure of *responsibility*, which becomes the measure of one's *authority*, all of which is the measure of one's *accountability* (Ephesians 4:6). One does not have authority or responsibility if there is no ability. One is only accountable for what one has.

The authority of an Elder is connected with his ability to feed the flock of God. The father in the home has authority as he is able to feed his family!

(4). The Relationship of Elders to Eldership

Some thoughts need to be expressed as to the relationship of the chief elder and the other elders to each other.

For a plurality and co-equality of eldership to work and function as God intended, and also the chief elder among them, there must be principles in operation. Otherwise it will never work. These principles manifested in the Godhead. Eldership must set the example before the Church of unity, teamwork, submission recognition.

* Elders must have a personal relationship with Jesus Christ, as the Elders around the throne of the Lamb (Revelation 4-5).

* Elders must have a personal relationship with each other as elders.

* Elders must submit one to another (I Peter 5:1-3).

* Elders must maintain unity with others (Psalms 133). They must be joined together in the same mind, the same mouth, the same judgment (I Corinthians 1:10).

* Elders must have the same spirit upon them as the chief elder (Numbers 11).

* Elders must be examples to each other and to the flock of God (Acts 20:17; I Peter 5:1-5). Paul was an example to the Elders of Ephesus.

* Elders must take heed to themselves first (Acts 20:28-32).

* Elders must watch that they do not draw disciples after themselves (Acts 20:28-36).

* Elders must watch the spirit of lordship and abuse of authority among themselves (I Peter 5:1-3).

* Elders must realize their safety is “in the cluster” (Isaiah 65:8).

* Elders must be “joined in the spirit” (Numbers 18).

* Elders must accept each other as to different personalities, etc.

* Elders must be committed to each other.

* Elders must maintain transparency, honesty and open communication.

- * Elders must maintain a servant spirit (Mark 10:45).
- * Elders maintain recognition, not competition among one another.
- * Elders must be loyal to each other.
- * Elders must maintain a spirit of humility at all times (Philippians 2:1-11).

(5). The Relationship of Congregation and Eldership

What then is the relationship of the congregation and the eldership?

When St. Paul writes to the Philippian Church, he addresses “the bishops and deacon WITH the saints” (Philippians 1:1). This constitutes New Testament Church order. Do the people have anything to say in Church matters? Is all left to a “monarchial bishop” (“rule of one man”) or a hierarchy (“rule of the elders”)? Or is there some part the congregation have as members of the priestly Body of Christ? The answer is in the affirmative. However, it needs to be clearly defined as to the part and areas that the congregation plays in the order of the local Church, otherwise all becomes a Democracy! The Church is not a Democrat institution. It is not “the rule of the people.” The Church is a Theocracy -- “the rule of God through His appointed authorities.”

It is because there has been the lack of checks and balances on Leadership over the years that the democratic system of Church government arose.

Hence, instead of government coming down from God through His leadership to the people, the people took the government into their own hands and appointed and thus controlled their own leadership.

a. What the Congregation may not do

According to the Scripture, the congregation may not do the following:

- * Appoint its own leadership by the democratic method, or “hire-fire” system.
- * Control the leadership as to the direction of the Church.
- * Control the finances of the Church as to its tithes and offerings.

One could not see the Church in the Wilderness doing these things (Acts 7:38).

- * Take it into their hands to discipline leadership.

b. What the Congregation may do

According to the Scripture the congregation may do the following:

- * Pray for those who rule over them.
- * Submit themselves to their leadership and obey them as the leadership obey the Word of the Lord (Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24).
- * Consent and confirm matters of buildings/lands/extensions in the development of the Church property, especially as necessary for legal purposes.
- * Confirm the matters of Church discipline and

excommunication on unrepentant members (Matthew 18:15-20; I Corinthians 5 are examples of such).

SUMMARY:

The “*threefold cord*” of (1) Chief Elder (or Bishop), and (2) Multiple Eldership (Presbytery), and (3) The Saints (or congregation) all working together in the Spirit of Christ, is God’s way of checks and balances in the government of the local Church.

It is recognized that the *Episcopal* (Monarchial Bishop), and *Presbyterial* (Council of Elders) and *Congregational* (Democratic) forms of government have worked in some measure or degree where the Spirit of Christ has been manifested. Government can never work with carnal people, only with spiritual people.

However, it is the Lord’s desire that we aim towards the Divine ideal. But, even then, it is possible to have all the right form of government, as to the mechanics of it, and lack the life of the Spirit! It is possible to have organization and structure without organism, without life. Organization without organism makes all decent and in order -- and dead!

With all our striving after the ideal, it is imperative that the Spirit of Christ, the spirit of grace, love and humility be manifested in every believer’s attitude. It is tragically possible to build “according to the pattern” and God never to put “the glory” there to seal it!

The government, after all, must be upon HIS shoulder (Isaiah 9:6-9).

In Conclusion:

1. The Presiding Elder or Bishop presents final decisions for the congregation and speaks as the voice of authority for the eldership as the “set man.”
2. The group of elders confer and agree on the direction for the Church as the Church Council the presbytery, acting as checks and balances.
3. The congregation consent, respond and confirm the major decisions of the eldership according to their area of responsibility.

This is how Church Government finds expression in the Local Church! The three valid streams or cords are brought together and “a three-fold cord is not quickly broken” (Ecclesiastes 4:12).

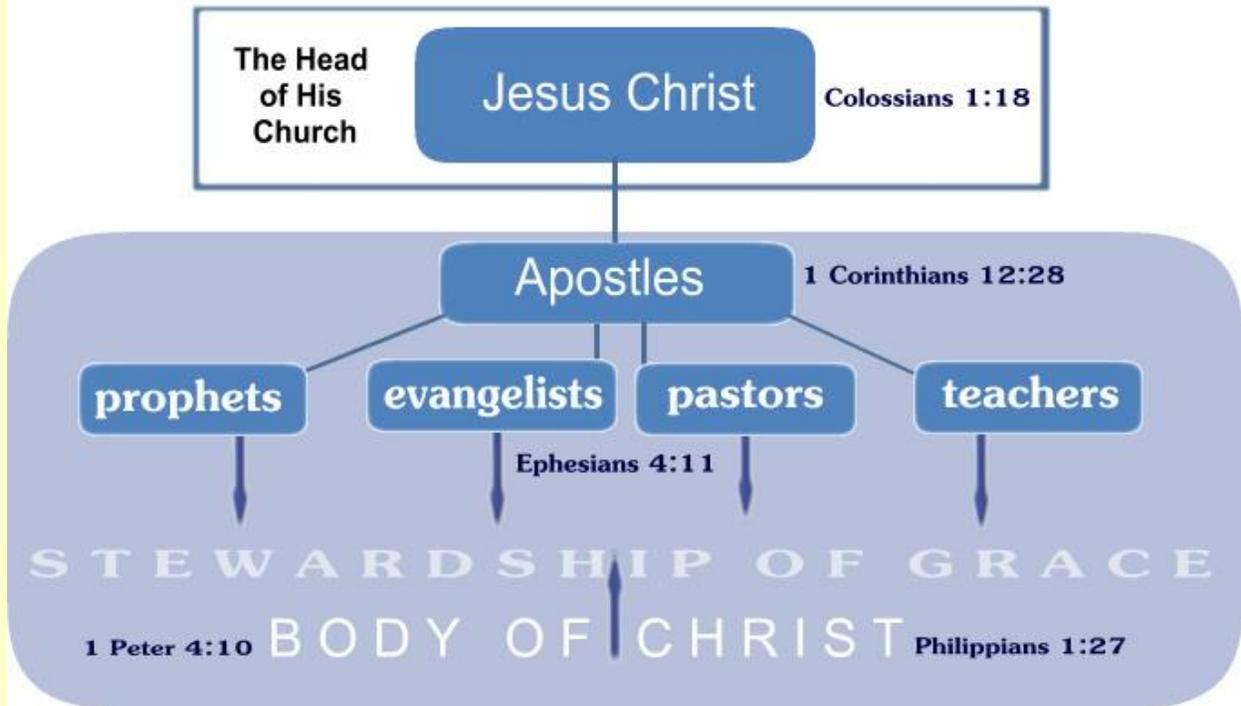
Church Government		
Denominational	Or	Biblical
<p style="text-align: center;">Episcopal</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Elder becomes a priest or a clergyman. The Bishop becomes the ruler of the Elder. 2. One Church with one Elder. 3. Pope, Cardinals, Archbishops etc. lead the Church. 4. The Pope or Monarch, becomes the Head of The Church. 	<p style="text-align: center;">Biblical</p>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. The Elder and the Bishop are identical. 2. One Church with several Elders. 3. The Five Ministries oversee the whole Church. 4. The Lord Jesus Christ is Head of the Church. 5. The Elders are ordained by the Presbytery. 6. Divine order.

5. The Elder is ordained by the Bishop.

Presbyterial	Biblical
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bishop and Elder are identical. 2. Ordination by Presbytery. 3. Plurality of Elders. 4. Appointment from below. 5. Popular elections. 6. Democratic. 7. Distinction between ruling and teaching Elders. 8. Highest Court: appeal to man -- General Assembly. 9. General Assembly oversees the whole Church, .i.e. that denomination. No Denomination. 10. Aaronic - style Priesthood. 11. Human system of government. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Same 2. Same 3. Same 4. Appointment from above. 5. No popular elections. 6. Theocratic. 7. No distinction: all Elders rule and teach. 8. Highest Court: appeal to God. 9. The Five Ministries oversee the whole Church. 10. Melchisedec Priesthood. 11. Divine order.

Congregational	Biblical
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Bishop and Elder the same. 2. One man leadership. 3. Popular elections. 4. Democratic. 5. Ordination not required. 6. No outside interference permitted, as the Board has the final decisions. 7. Each congregation sets its own doctrine, practices and standards. 8. Human Institution. 	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1. Same. 2. Multiple leadership. 3. Eldership appoints. 4. Theocratic. 5. Presbytery ordains. 6. Open to Five Ministries for correction when necessary. 7. Each congregation aligns itself to the Heavenly pattern. 8. Divine order.

New Testament
CHURCH GOVERNMENT



Supplement

Should Every Local Church Have a Senior Pastor?

David K. Bernard

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This article appeared in *Forward* magazine published by the United Pentecostal Church International, Hazelwood, MO.

The standard form of local church government in the United Pentecostal Church International calls for one person to serve as pastor (spiritual leader and overseer), or in a few cases two persons may serve as co-pastors. Since the New Testament speaks of elders in the plural, some have concluded that the leadership of a local congregation should be collective and that no one person should be the senior leader. Which approach is more biblical?

In the Old Testament, we find many examples of teamwork (e.g., Moses and Aaron, Deborah and Barak), delegated authority (e.g., the seventy elders), and mentoring (e.g., Elijah and Elisha). At the same time, God typically anointed senior leaders in charge of significant groups, institutions, and endeavors. Examples are Moses, Joshua, the high priests, the judges, Samuel, the kings, and the prophets.

The New Testament does not provide detailed instructions about church government. Undoubtedly this lack of specificity is intentional, because in God's plan the precise form of church government can vary depending on culture, circumstances, times, and preferences. An organizational form that works in twenty-first century North America might not work as well in the first-century Middle East or even the twenty-first century Middle East.

The New Testament does teach us important principles for church government. For instance, we find that the local church is primarily responsible to handle its own affairs under spiritual leadership. At the same time, there is strong emphasis on unity, interdependence, fellowship, ministerial accountability, organization, and structure.

Local churches were led by elders, people whom God calls to the ministry of preaching, teaching, leading, and overseeing the church. In the New Testament, the titles of elder (*presbuteros*, "elder, presbyter"), bishop (*episkopos*, "overseer"), and pastor (*poimen*, "shepherd") are used interchangeably for the spiritual leader of a local congregation. Acts 20:17, 28 says elders (*presbuteros*) are overseers (*episkopos*) and are to feed the church, literally, "to tend as a shepherd" (*poimaino*). Titus 1:5-7 equates elder with bishop. I Peter 5:1-4 describes the work of elders as shepherding the flock (*poimaino*) and taking oversight (*episkopeo*). I Timothy 5:17 similarly describes elders as ruling.

Why does the New Testament speak of “elders” in the plural when describing local churches? We must remember that there were no church buildings in the first century. All believers in a city were considered members of one church, but there was no one building in which all could meet together. Instead, they met in various house churches. In this context, it appears that the elders of the city were the council of leaders of house churches—what we would consider to be pastors of various churches within a city. Another way to view them would be as a ministerial staff or team of a large church.

This explanation reveals how closely the ministers in a city worked together, considering themselves as ministers of one church. From it we can learn some important lessons about unity, mutual accountability, and team leadership. However, nothing in this concept would contradict the idea of a senior pastor or head of the team, which is God’s typical plan throughout the Bible. And nothing in this concept would preclude an individual elder from being responsible for a local house meeting. To examine this idea further, let us look at every biblical book that describes the New Testament church in existence (Acts through Revelation).

Acts: While the twelve apostles were the supreme leaders of the church, James the brother of the Lord, who was not one of the Twelve, became the chief elder or senior pastor in Jerusalem. (See Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18.)

Romans: Paul mentioned at least three and probably five house churches in Rome with their leaders. (See Romans 16:3-5, 10, 11, 14, 15.) Priscilla and Aquila apparently served as the pastors of the church in their house.

1 and 11 Corinthians: Corinth may fit the model of a council of elders with no strong central leader. However, it was a new church, and it appears that, as the founder, Paul was still functioning as their senior pastor in a transitional phase.

Galatians: This letter was written to a group of churches in a region, so there is no identification of a senior pastor.

Ephesians: It was probably a circular letter written first to Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, but also meant for the other churches in Asia. (See Acts 19:10, 26.) This could explain why Paul elsewhere referred to a letter to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16), why Ephesians contains no references to individual saints in Ephesus, and why many manuscripts omit the recipients in Ephesians 1:1. If this letter was written to a group of churches, then again, we would not expect mention of an individual pastor.

Philippians: Paul apparently addressed the senior pastor in Philippians 4:3, asking him to mediate a dispute between two female ministers in the church.

Colossians: It seems that Ephaphras was the senior pastor (Colossians 1:7), and he was on a trip to visit Paul at the time, perhaps to discuss the heresy in Colosse against which the letter was written. He also had responsibilities for other churches in the area (Colossians 4:12), so he may have been a regional leader. Nymphas was apparently

the pastor of a house church in neighboring Laodicea (Colossians 4:15).

1 and 11 Thessalonians: Paul wrote to the church not long after he founded it, and they still looked to him as their senior pastor (1 Thessalonians 2:11, 17).

1 and 11 Timothy: Timothy was the designated leader in Ephesus to help establish the church doctrinally and organizationally (1 Timothy 1:3). He was under the authority of the apostle Paul.

Titus: Titus was the designated leader in the island of Crete, charged with organizing churches and ordaining elders in the various communities under his care (Titus 1:5). He was under the authority of the apostle Paul.

Philemon: Philemon had a church in his house in Colosse, and it is likely that Apphia was his wife and Archippus was his son (Philemon 1-2). If so, Archippus may have been the ministerial leader of this house church (Colossians 4:17).

Hebrews, James, 1 and 11 Peter, 1 John, Jude: These are general letters to the church as a whole or to a region or group, so it is not surprising that they would not mention any local pastor.

11 and 111 John: They were written to local churches. It may be that II John 1 addresses a lady pastor, or perhaps John just addressed the church generally. In III John, Gaius and Diotrephes may have been neighboring pastors of house churches, with Diotrephes wrongly trying to assert authority over the whole region or city (Ephesus). In the biblical sense they were members of the same church of the city. Or they could have been leaders who attended the same house church, in which case we see a team leadership under the direction of John, the apostle who had charge of that area as the senior leader.

Revelation: In Revelation 2-3 we find seven letters to the “angels” of seven churches. The Greek word *angelos* literally means “messenger”; this is the alternate translation provided by the NIV. In this context it does not seem possible that they would be spirit beings, because Jesus gave a message to John to transmit to the seven messengers. Would Jesus tell John to write letters to angels rather than Jesus communicating with them directly? If so, why would John need to write in Greek to angelic beings? How would he deliver letters to these angels? What were the angels supposed to do in response to the messages? The messages counsel believers to repent, be faithful, and walk in holiness. How could angels cause human churches to fulfill these admonitions? It seems clear that these seven letters were written to seven individual human messengers whom God held responsible to communicate His Word to their respective churches. In other words, they were the seven senior pastors of seven churches in Asia Minor.

Recently, Peter Lampe, professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, has conducted an unprecedented scholarly study of local church organization

and government in the first two centuries in Rome, the city for which we can glean the most information. Here is a summary of his findings as excerpted from his book, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

“In the pre-Constantine period, the Christians of the city of Rome assembled in premises that were provided by private persons and that were scattered across the city (fractionalization)” (364). Nevertheless, “people writing from outside of Rome could address the Roman Christians as a unity.” At the same time, “a plurality of presbyters leads Roman Christianity” (398).

“All presbyters are at the same time ‘bishops,’ and the latter designation specifies one of their special duties....The worship leader always is at the same time also in charge of taking care of the poorer members in his liturgical assembly. *Each* presbyter in Rome apparently leads a worship assembly in a house community and therefore also takes care of needy fellow Christians there....Each individual group was presided over by its own presbyter-bishop” (400).

“For a house community in the second century one has to reckon most probably with only one presbyter. Two or three presbyters for a single house-church community can only be established at the earliest for the third century” (400, n. 8).

“On a level *above* the individual house communities occasional conventions of presbyters took place....All this points to conventions at which the presbyters of the city’s individual communities, which acknowledged spiritual fellowship with each other, gathered together” (401).

In summary, we cannot make every detail of twenty-first century UPCI structure conform to first-century church structure, because we do not have enough detail in Scripture to construct a supposed standard model. We have various forms of church government today, within North America as well as overseas, and it seems that there were also various forms in New Testament times. However, we can find evidence in the New Testament for ministerial credentials, recommendations, ministerial discipline, general conferences, home missions programs, foreign missions programs, regional organization, church business meetings and elections, local church discipline, and so on.

We should follow New Testament principles in structuring local, regional, national, and international organization. We need to pay more attention to principles of team leadership and mutual accountability that are often neglected to our hurt. Nevertheless, to implement these principles we should not try to abolish the office of senior pastor of a local church.

