

QUESTION 1

Why Is It Important to Have a Biblical Form of Church Government?

The organizational structure of a church is an important issue. It is not, however, the most important issue. There are many other issues that have priority over this one. The deity of Christ, justification by faith alone, the inspiration, infallibility, and sufficiency of Scripture, and the substitutionary atonement of Christ are just a few examples of issues that are more crucial to the Christian faith. Moreover, although some aspects of church government are clearly set forth in Scripture (e.g., teaching is the responsibility of the elders and not the deacons), other aspects are less clear (e.g., how church leaders should be selected). As a result, at certain points we must allow for some flexibility, while acknowledging that our personal preferences should not be put on par with Scripture. It is necessary, therefore, that we approach the issue of church government with humility and with a teachable spirit.

But just because a topic may not be the most important does not make it unimportant. As we will see, the form of church government that a local congregation employs is extremely relevant to the life and health of the church. As the body and bride of Christ, the church should seek to be pure and spotless. If certain biblical patterns and principles are ignored or abandoned, then the church will reap negative consequences. It is beneficial for the church, therefore, to follow the wisdom of God as recorded in Scripture.

Church government is important not because outward structures are important, but because outward structures directly affect who can be a leader in the church, what each leader does, and to whom each leader is accountable. Thus, when we speak of church government or church polity, we are really speaking of the roles, duties, and qualifications of those who lead the body

of Christ. The following discussion represents a few reasons why church government is important.

It Affects Who Can Be a Leader

One reason a *biblical* form of church government is so important is that church government directly affects who is qualified to lead or rule the church. Depending on the style of a church's polity, prospective leaders may or may not be held to the biblical requirements listed in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. If a church emphasizes a candidate's professional accomplishments over his personal character and family life, it can result in the church of Jesus Christ being led by someone who is biblically unqualified. In other cases, a particular church may add qualifications to those listed in the New Testament. For example, in some churches a person will not be considered for leadership unless he has a minimum educational level (usually a Master of Divinity). Other relevant questions relate to whether a candidate must be a certain age or gender, or whether a leader can be single, divorced, or remarried. Thus, a church's polity and related doctrine often determines who can be a leader.

The selection process of a leader also will differ depending on the church's organizational structure. In some congregations, leaders are chosen by the majority vote of the congregation. In other churches, the presiding leader or leaders are responsible for making the final decision of adding new staff members. Still, in other models the bishop, who stands above the congregation, appoints a leader for the church. Therefore, a church's governmental structure relates not only to the qualifications needed to be a leader but also to the particular method of selecting a leader.

It Affects What a Leader Does

The organizational structure of a church also will affect the particular role of a church leader. This aspect is important because the duties of a church leader often have eternal consequences. Leaders, especially pastors or elders, are not merely responsible for running an organization but also have the crucial role of shepherding, teaching, and equipping the congregation. In addition, church leaders are examples to the rest of the flock.

Church Leaders Are Shepherds

Having a biblical form of church government is important because church leaders are given the task of shepherding the congregation. The author of

Hebrews exhorts his readers to obey their leaders and submit to them, “for they are keeping watch over your souls” (Heb. 13:17). What could be a more important and, at the same time, more frightening job description? Leaders in the church (elders in particular) are given the task of making sure those in their charge have a healthy relationship with God. Their calling is not to run an organization or to help people maximize their potential in the world. Rather, their calling is to come beside their fellow brothers and sisters and lead them to the Great Shepherd. But shepherds not only lead; they also must protect. In Acts 20, Paul warns the Ephesian elders that after he is gone, savage wolves will come in among them and will not spare the flock (v. 29). Godly church leaders are needed to shepherd the flock and to protect the flock against false teachers who would seek to lead the sheep astray.

Church Leaders Are Teachers

Biblical church government is crucial because church leaders are given the task of teaching the congregation the Word of God. The Bible is our standard for life and godliness (2 Peter 1:3). As such, it is crucial that those who teach the Word are adequately gifted and trained to accurately handle the Word of Truth (2 Tim. 2:15). The truth is always under attack. False teachers and false teachings are rampant outside and inside the church. Paul warned Timothy that certain false teachers have the devastating affect of “upsetting the faith of some” (2 Tim. 2:18), which means that some had actually abandoned the apostolic faith and embraced another gospel. It was for that very reason that Paul sent Timothy to Ephesus. Paul feared that false teachers were in danger of leading the congregation away from the pure gospel. But Paul not only sent Timothy to Ephesus and left Titus behind in Crete; he also sent letters to these associates (and to the churches they served) in order to protect the truth of the gospel. In a similar manner, church leaders are entrusted with the responsibility “to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). It is the elders of the church who are needed not only “to give instruction in sound doctrine” but also “to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9).

Church Leaders Are Equippers

Paul writes that Christ gave gifts to the church, including apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). These leaders are given “to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ”

(Eph. 4:12). Godly leaders are needed to equip the congregation to do the work of the ministry and to help the congregation become mature in its faith. Without such leaders, congregations become like children who are “tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes” (Eph. 4:14). God has designed the body of Christ to be led by those who are gifted to help the congregation become stable and mature. Therefore, the specific roles given to leaders in the church are crucial for the body of Christ to reach maturity.

Church Leaders Are Examples

Because church leaders are examples to the congregation and to those in their community, they have a great responsibility. Their testimony can either help or hurt the cause of Christ and His gospel. Peter exhorts the elders to be “examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:3). The author of Hebrews encourages his readers to imitate the faith of their leaders (Heb. 13:7). The type of church government a local congregation embraces often determines who its leaders are and what its leaders do. Because leaders are called to be examples to the flock and because the flock is encouraged to follow the example of its leaders, employing a biblical model is vital. Paul indicates that elders, or overseers, must not only manage their own household well but also must “be well thought of by outsiders” (1 Tim. 3:7). If a church’s polity allows certain unqualified people to become leaders, their negative example will affect not only those in the church but also those outside the church, possibly causing some to despise the gospel.

It Affects to Whom a Leader Is Accountable

The organizational structure of a church is also important because it determines to whom the church leaders are accountable. In some systems, the senior pastor is given unmatched authority and is accountable to no one in particular. Only a congregational vote is given more authority or power. In other models, the senior pastor is accountable to the deacons, who really are responsible for business of the church. The senior pastor does only what the deacons tell him to do. Other structures do not have one leader but a number of leaders who are given equal authority. In this case, the pastor or minister is not accountable to the congregation but to other selected leaders who are on the church council. Finally, in some structures the church leader does not report to the congregation, the deacons, or fellow council members but to

the one who appointed him to his position. In this model, the church leader is accountable to someone outside the local congregation. Thus, the various forms of church government determine the accountability structure of the leaders.

Summary

The church as the body of Christ is composed of believers who have been redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. It is for this reason that those who are called to lead the church under God's guidance are given such an important task. Because the outward structure of a congregation directly relates to who leads the church, what a leader does, and to whom a leader is accountable, church government becomes an extremely important issue in the life and health of a church.

Reflection Questions

1. Do you agree that it is important to have a biblical form of church government?
2. What do you think is the strongest reason for a biblical form of church government presented in this chapter? Why?
3. What problems might result if a church does not have a biblical form of church government?
4. Do you think your church has a biblical form of church government? Why or why not?
5. What could be done to improve your church's leadership structure?