

Hunter Whiddon

TBC – Arlington, Texas

August 9, 2020 – Sunday Evening

# The Government of A New Testament Church

The doctrine of the Church is the area where Bible-believing Baptists differ so markedly from all other religious organizations, denominations, etc. In particular, they part company over: (**Amos 3:3** “Can two walk together, except they be agreed?”)

- The concept of a church.
- The government of a church.
- The ordinances of a church.
- The mission of a church.

The reason for these differences is often a matter of history. Protestant denominations can be traced back to their mother (Revelation 17:5) — the apostate system which, over the course of many years departed from the Word of God. While the Reformation returned men and their “churches” in some measure back to the Bible, it was incomplete — especially so in the area of church doctrine. Hence we find many “Catholic hangovers” within the Protestant movement, such as State-Church alliances,

sacramentalism, infant sprinkling, amillennialism, hierarchical forms of government, ritualism and formalism, and the universal church theory.

In this study we are concerned with the New Testament plan for the government of a church. Since a New Testament Church is an organized assembly of baptized believers, the right kind of organization is essential. By way of contrast, we shall also consider some of the man-made systems that are imposed upon people today.

## **UNSCRIPTURAL FORMS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

There are three basic kinds of ecclesiastical government in Christendom:

- **Autocratic** — the rule of one.
- **Oligarchic** — the rule of few.
- **Democratic** — the rule of many.

There are also many eclectic styles found across the religious spectrum.

### **A. AUTOCRACY — The Rule of One.**

The Roman Catholic is best described by this classification. In this case the Pope (calling himself the “Vicar (deputy) of Christ” and the “visible head of the Church”) is the all-powerful ruler of the world’s 1.2 billion-plus Catholics.

Implementing his rule on provincial, diocesan, and parish levels is a hierarchy of officials:

Pope – Cardinals – Archbishops – Bishops – Priests – Archdeacons – Deacons – Subdeacons

At the bottom of this cumbersome system is the “man in the pew, with nothing to do; but pray and pay, and ‘do as we say!’”

### **B. ARISTOCRATIC OLIGARCHY — The Rule of a Class.**

This system best describes the Eastern Orthodox style of ecclesiastical government. In many ways, this system is like that of Roman Catholicism (minus the Pope, since 869 A.D.). A class of bishops called “Metropolitans” rules the ‘Church.’

### **C. EPISCOPALIAN OLIGARCHY — The Rule of a Synod (assembly of the clergy).**

The word “episcopacy” comes from the Greek word — “episcopos,” meaning “overseer,” and translated as “bishop.”

Denominations such as the Anglican (Episcopalian) ‘Church’ are governed by a system similar to that of Rome, with a Synod of archbishops ruling in place of a pope.

The Archbishop of Canterbury is the spiritual head of the Anglican communion (‘Church’) and, within the British Commonwealth, the English monarch is the titular head. Local

synods control dioceses, while the local clergy runs parishes within a diocese in a similar manner.

#### **D. CONSISTORIAL OLIGARCHY:**

The various Lutheran denominations have adopted an episcopacy modified by the inclusion of church members into its synods and councils.

#### **E. PRESBYTERIAN OLIGARCHY — The Rule of a Session.**

The word “Presbyterian” comes from the Greek word — “presbuteros” which means “elder.”

This is the system of ecclesiastical government common to most Reformed and Presbyterian denominations.

##### **1. Each Local Congregation Is Ruled By A SESSION.**

The Session is made up of so-called Ruling Elders and Teaching Elders. This body runs a particular congregation in accordance with the directives of the Presbytery.

**2. The PRESBYTERY Runs The Congregations In A Region Or District.** Its members are elected from the sessions.

##### **3. The SYNOD Rules Over Larger Areas.**

These may be statewide or regional synods. Delegates come from the various Presbyteries.

**4. The ASSEMBLY Is The Denominational Level Of The “Church.”** It ultimately controls every congregation in a particular country.

#### **F. ECLECTIC OLIGARCHY:**

The word “eclectic” means “taken in part from all kinds,” and is the type of government adopted by several denominations.

Although primarily an episcopacy, many Methodist denominations incorporate some congregational input along with the rule of Superintendents through various Conferences.

## **II. THE CONGREGATIONAL SYSTEM OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT**

Congregational church government is directly opposed to the forms of rule mentioned above. This is because it affirms:

- **Democracy over Totalitarianism**
- **Church authority over the Councils of men**

It is this style of government that is taught by the New Testament. Consider the following:

#### **A. EXAMPLES OF CONGREGATIONALISM:**

##### **1. The Church Decides All Issues.**

“And if he shall neglect to hear them, tell it unto the church: but if he neglect to hear the church, let him be unto thee as an heathen man and a publican” — Matthew 18:17.

This scripture does not say, “tell it to the synod” — but to the church. It also declares each New Testament church to be the highest and ultimate [human] authority in all church matters. If someone will not “hear the church,” there is no other court of appeal! That God has given to each church this power is so stated in Matthew 18:18.

**2. The Church At Jerusalem Chose Its Bishops — Acts 1:15-26.**

**3. The Church At Jerusalem Chose Its Deacons — Acts 6:1-5.**

**4. The Church At Antioch Sent Its Missionaries — Acts 13:1-3.**

No Mission Board or outside agency was involved in this process. Note also: Acts 11:22; 14:26,27; 15:22.

**5. The Church At Corinth Disciplined Its Members.**

See: I Corinthians 5:1-13.

In this case, Paul (an outsider) could “judge” (verse 3), but was restricted to giving his advice in the matter of church

discipline. The “power” (verse 4b) to discipline resided with the church — “when YE are gathered together” — verse 4a.

## **6. Churches Have Been Given A Mechanism For Judging.**

See: I Corinthians 6:1-8.

The New Testament makes no provision for any outside body (religious or secular) to rule, override, or otherwise interfere with the decision-making process of a church.

## **THE IMPLICATIONS OF CONGREGATIONALISM:**

### **1. The Governmental Power Resides Within The Membership.**

Executive power is in the hands of the “men and brethren.”

### **2. The Majority Of Members Have The Right Of Rule.**

The will of the majority having been expressed, it becomes the minority to submit to the decision as unto the will of God.

### **3. The Decision Of A Church Is Final.**

There is no higher authority, no court of appeal, no other council.

### **4. The Power Of A Church Cannot Be Delegated.**

No church can properly empower a man or body of men to do anything which would impair its autonomy.