

## #186 “God’s Will for Church Government”

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Church government, sometimes called church polity, can degrade into the worldly, combative, “us versus them” mentality that politics in general often involves. In the world, people take sides with the group that most aligns with their personal viewpoint. They hope that a person will adequately stand for what they believe, and if they are in a democracy, they will try to vote that person into office. If they are in another form of government, where free speech is limited or banned, they will have almost no say in the direction of their country. Sadly, churches too often imitate the world in developing rule by majority or submitting to a single person from whom they take all of their cues. Both extremes are unbiblical. We don’t need people campaigning for church leadership roles or a pastor modifying a human document called a church constitution in order to get a majority of support. The only way for true harmony and unity in the church is to get back to the basics of what God ordained for church government, not what man has decided to borrow from worldly, faulty systems.

First of all, in the true church of Jesus Christ, there is one Head, Jesus Himself (Ephesians 1:22, 4:15, Colossians 1:18). Sovereignty is with God and His Word, not with a church constitution or a human being. God’s church does not have a CEO or a board of directors akin to the business world. It is ultimately led by Jesus Himself as He leads the church. It is essential to understand that in the church all believers are of a royal priesthood in that they can be led by the Spirit and know God’s leading (1 Peter 2:9). It is not just the “clergy” that can access God, but each and every person can know God personally and can understand His Word. Thus, they are all individually accountable to God and His Word for what they say, what they believe, and what they do. Only as each person individually submits to the will and leading of God can the church attain true unity and maturity.

With that understanding of Who ultimately leads God’s church and His people, God then gets down to practicalities by calling for the church to appoint elders. The characteristics for these men are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, and the list is extensive and specific. An elder must, for example, be the husband of one wife, not prone to lying or deceit, and not addicted to wine. He must be, in every way, from family to work to play, above reproach. In other words, there is nothing that somebody from inside or outside the church could accuse this man of that would bring shame to the name of Christ. He is not a hypocrite but a model of how a person should live. He is able to shepherd his own home in such a way that it is clear that he could also shepherd others in the church. The heart of a shepherd is central to being an elder. Also, an elder must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2). Not every elder will likely have the gift and ability to be able to preach every Sunday morning, but they should be able to teach in some way. Perhaps they counsel, teach Sunday School, teach new believers the basics of the faith, or some other form of teaching, but the bottom line is that they must be able to open up God’s Word with others and explain it because they themselves know it and have a solid grasp of it. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double

honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” In other words, not all elders will be particularly given to preaching, but they all must be able to expound God’s Word as God calls them, even being able to refute those who contradict (Titus 1:9). Elders who are just elders because they have deep pockets or because they are successful managers in the corporate world does not square with the Bible’s criteria for selecting elders. Rather, God’s criteria is a test of moral character, a test of shepherding based upon how he leads his own family, and a test of an ability to know and teach God’s Word.

Elders might be older or younger, and age is not to be a sole criterion for leadership. Timothy was mocked and disrespected because of his youth (1 Timothy 4:12), yet Paul trusted him to lead the church at Ephesus. Yet Timothy was not the only elder, for Acts 20:17 says that there were a plurality of elders at Ephesus. In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appointed a plurality of elders for the local churches at Iconium, Lystra, and Antioch. In Titus 1:5, Paul commanded Titus, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you.” He doesn’t say to appoint a single elder in every city but to appoint elders in every city. The church at Jerusalem had multiple elders (Acts 15:2). 1 Peter 5:1-4, Acts 11:30, Philippians 1:1, and James 5:14 also point to churches having a plurality of elders or overseers, also translated bishops. Thus, the picture of church leadership given in God’s Word is that the local church is to be led by a group of several elders who will shepherd and teach God’s people. All will pastor, meaning that they will shepherd the flock, but only some will have the specific role of pastor-teacher, or the teaching and preaching pastor. Perhaps only one will have this gift, but each church needs somebody who can pastor and preach in order for the church to grow as it ought to grow (Ephesians 4:11-13).

The church also has deacons, who are servants of the church or the helpers of the elders (1 Timothy 3:8-13, Acts 6). They have all of the same moral qualifications, but they do not necessarily have the ability to teach. Deacons should find great satisfaction knowing that God will honor them highly for their faithful service (1 Timothy 3:13).

The apostles laid the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20), and they appointed elders in the churches (Acts 14:23). For example, Titus was commissioned by Paul to visit the churches and appoint elders (Titus 1:5). But there is also evidence that the church was allowed to choose from themselves men full of the Spirit and of wisdom (Acts 6:3). After all, it only makes sense that, since the criteria for being an elder or deacon is based not upon a title or a heritage but upon a person’s character, ability to lead his family, and ability to teach God’s Word that those around him are the best evaluators of his qualifications. The church family ought to be allowed input and the right to raise a complaint when choosing elders and deacons. This goes back to the church being a royal priesthood rather than a social body led by elected or non-elected officials. The Holy Spirit leads all of Christ’s followers, and they all have a right to be involved in the direction of the church. “Elder-rule” is not an oligarchy where a few rule with no accountability. Elders do go off course, and the people have a right to bring an accusation against an elder, but it must be supported by two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19).

The point of having more than one shepherd or elder is that it is nearly impossible for one man to look after all the needs of the church, especially as God adds to the numbers in the church. Having a plurality of elders enables trusted men of God to help more people grow to maturity in Christ and to look after their needs. The pastor who is focused upon the preaching of the Word is not going to have an abundance of time to feed the poor or bus tables, as the apostles expressed in Acts 6. The problem too often in today's church is that there are not enough godly men who meet the criteria to lead. Furthermore, too often God's people blindly follow an authoritarian leader or, at the opposite extreme, they want full control. This jostling for power is not right because ultimately Jesus is the authority. When the church is led by godly men who truly care for the people and listen to their needs and input, the church can feel that it is doing God's work together. This is how it is supposed to work.

God's Word is ultimately the authority in the church, and Jesus is the Head. The world scoffs when the church makes decisions with a two-thirds majority or modifies their constitutions in order to get a measure passed. This is ridiculous, and it is nowhere in the Bible. We need to listen to God, not a manmade document.

There will be times when there is disagreement in the church. But if we truly seek God's will according to the Bible, we will find the truth which unifies and edifies. As individuals, we can't control everything that goes on in the church, and we shouldn't hope to. However, we should recognize that we are responsible for the role that we play and for what we say. It is our responsibility to know God's Word and to know when our fellowship is off course. As God leads, we must be willing to stand for truth, even if it means that we will be given the cold shoulder. The church is only as strong as the people in it, for from the people come the elders. If we want church to be Biblical, we must be Biblical. May God enable us to walk rightly before the authority of Jesus Christ, the only ultimate authority in the church.