

Models of Church Government

Study Questions

The assigned reading for this lesson is Edmund Clowney's *The Church*, pp. 199–214. Here are some questions to provoke your thinking as you read through that material. (We may or may not address these issues in class.)

1. Clowney speaks of “church authority” beginning on page 202. What are some of the circumstances in which the church needs to exercise authority? What are some of the limitations on church authority?
2. On page 206 Clowney traces the Presbyterian model to the Old Testament. Is that appropriate?
3. Clowney argues that “church government is organized for service, not dominion” (p. 206). Has this principle been followed in your own church?
4. Consider Clowney's comments about church offices (especially elders and deacons) and examine the relevant biblical passages (1 Tim. 3:1–13; 5:17–22; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Pet. 5:1–5).

Comment: An Overview of Three Major Models

At different times and in different regions of the world, the Christian church has utilized three major models of church government. In the *episcopal*, or *hierarchical*, model, local congregations and their pastors are subject to the authority of a regional bishop (Greek: *episkopos* = “overseer”). The Roman Catholic Church, the Orthodox churches, the Episcopalians (and their English counterparts, the Anglicans), and the Methodists all employ this model. The bishops are typically elevated from priestly or pastoral offices, and they are themselves accountable to archbishops and councils. In the Methodist church, no authority is higher than the Council of Bishops. Episcopalians and Anglicans, however, have presiding bishops; the Roman Catholic Church has the pope; and the Orthodox churches come under the authority of the ecumenical patriarch. Here are some arguments commonly employed in support of the episcopal model:

1. The apostles had authority over all of the local churches, and they appointed leaders

(elders) in those churches (Acts 14:23; 1 Cor. 14:37-38; 2 Cor. 2:9; Tit. 1:5).



2. Even among the apostles particular individuals were elevated to primacy, such as James in Jerusalem (Acts 15:13–21; Gal. 2:12). Roman Catholics believe Peter was appointed by Christ to the highest pastoral office (Matt. 16:18–19; John 21:15–17) and that that office has been passed to each pope in apostolic succession. (Note: Methodists do not affirm apostolic succession, and that explains why they have no individual in a monarchical position over the bishops.)
3. The early church seems to have universally employed an episcopal model. Presbyterian and Congregational models were not developed until after the Reformation.
4. A centralized church government better preserves and exemplifies the unity of the church.

The *presbyterian* model of church government favors a plurality of leaders (Greek: “*presbyteros* = “elder”) in every local congregation. Groups of local churches associate at regional, national, and international levels in presbyteries, assemblies, or synods, which provide general oversight and review while facilitating cooperation between local congregations. At the same time, these higher bodies may be called upon to provide authoritative decisions, as at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6–29). Still, local congregations appoint their own elders and ministers under presbytery advice and consent. Arguments in favor of a presbyterian model include:

1. There is no New Testament basis for distinguishing between elders and bishops. The Greek words *presbyteros* and *episkopos* are used interchangeably (Acts 20:17 with 20:28; Titus 1:5 with 1:7).
2. The apostles had a unique role that was not transferred to others (though some would suggest that contemporary church planters may work in a similar capacity). No apostle had primacy over the others (Gal. 2:9–11). Peter described himself not in exalted terms but as a “fellow elder” (1 Pet. 5:1).
3. The earliest Christian communities would probably have maintained a pattern of elder rule as inherited from Judaism. (Recall Clowney’s argument here, and perhaps run a concordance search of the term “elders” in the Old Testament). The episcopal pattern which developed in the next few centuries rose out of concern for communication and efficiency in a time of persecution, and it was prolonged by its parallel to national monarchies.
4. The local congregations in the New Testament were always led by a plurality of elders, not single individuals with inordinate power (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; 1 Tim. 4:14; Heb. 13:17; James 5:14).

Decades ago most of the students at Dallas Seminary were Presbyterians. However, after Lewis Chafer had a falling out with the Southern Presbyterian Church in the 1940’s (primarily over the place of the covenant of grace in his dispensational theology), our student body came to consist primarily of Baptists and independents, most of whom favor a *congregational* approach to church government. This is not unlike the rise of congregationalism in post-Reformation England as believers expressed their disagreements with the Church of England through the development of independent congregations. In the congregational system, the priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9) provides a foundation for rule by the congregation. No individual is given primacy over the others, though the church may choose to appoint ministers, elders, and/or deacons for the congregation. Arguments for the congregational model include:

1. All believers are “priests” (1 Pet. 2:9) with access to the Father through the cross and resurrection of Jesus Christ. There is no need for additional mediators between us and God.

2. Local congregations were served by elders, but greater gatherings like the Jerusalem Council were ecumenical councils, not intended to establish a pattern for ongoing presbyteries or general assemblies.

3. Congregationalism began with the Puritans who sought freedom from hierarchical powers. Modern advocates recognize that it was not a common model throughout church history, but they believe they have learned the lessons of history and are preserving the church from the outside control that once threatened its existence.

Conclusions and Questions

- The New Testament does not provide us with a formal model of church government, but we can glean many positive features from the three models considered above. With the episcopalians, I would affirm that the apostles had genuine authority over the local congregations. However, along with the congregationalists and presbyterians, I would argue that apostleship was a unique office, one that was not passed on to the next generation. It makes much more sense for episcopalians to argue that the responsibilities of the apostolic office were delegated to appointed bishops, who continued that tradition, so that any "succession" became a succession of the episcopate. Still, this argument runs up against the observation that elders and bishops were apparently indistinguishable in the New Testament. A question to ponder: Since the New Testament churches were evidently founded by the apostles or their companions, what is the role of a church planter today? Is such an individual a modern-day apostle? If someone appoints elders in several different churches, what is their ongoing accountability to that person?

- We should observe that New Testament elders were not representatives, but leaders (Heb. 13:17; 1 Cor 12:28; 1 Th. 5:12; 1 Pet. 5:1-5). If elders are not appointed, but elected, does that election render them inappropriately accountable to the congregation (when the congregation should instead be accountable to the elders)?

- Is there any biblical justification for formal and regular meetings of a presbytery consisting of elders from various local congregations? Acts 15 might certainly be enlisted here, but others regard that as a pattern for an ecumenical council, not repeated regional presbyteries. Does it matter? Given the impossibility of identifying the invisible church with the visible church, especially when we have thousands of independent churches and just about as many denominations, have we come to a place in which we can no longer effectively conduct either ecumenical councils or inter-church assemblies? On the other hand, might such assemblies still be valuable even if they are not genuine gatherings of the whole church?

- In the next lesson we will consider the relationship between gifts and offices in the local church, but some aspects of that discussion overlap with this one. Who is to do the teaching in a local congregation? Is it not the responsibility of the elders? Is there any biblical precedent for professional clergy who serve the local church but are essentially non-members of the congregation? On what basis should teachers be appointed? By whom should they be appointed?

- Congregationalism seems most appropriate to those who have been raised in democratic nations like the United States. Does the election of elders inherently compromise their ruling authority? Can it be done in such a way that the congregational authority remains secondary (e.g., elders suggest the next slate of elder candidates)? Is that a compromise of congregational authority?

- Does 1 Tim. 4:14 refer to a gathered presbytery or is this simply the corporate action of local church elders? (That question may help one decide between presbyterian and congregational approaches.)

