

Biblical Theology

Unit 7: Doctrine of the Church – Lesson 5: Church Government

Forms of Church Government

- The various methods and philosophies of church government can be categorized into three forms.
 1. **Episcopal Form:**
 - In the Episcopal system, an archbishop has authority over many bishops. They in turn have authority over a “diocese,” which simply means the churches under the jurisdiction of a bishop. The officer in charge of a local parish is a rector (or sometimes a vicar, who is an “assistant” or one who substitutes for the rector). Archbishops, bishops, and rectors are all priests, since they have all at one time been ordained to the episcopal priesthood (but in practice the rector is most often called the priest).
 - Almost all of the decisions and leadership appointments for the local church are made from the top down.
 - Bishops possess apostolic role and, at times, authority within the Episcopal system.
 2. **Presbyterian Form:**
 - In the Presbyterian system, each local church elects elders to a session. The pastor of the church will be one of the elders in the session, equal in authority to the other elders. This session has governing authority over the local church. However, the members of the session (the elders) are also members of a presbytery, which has authority over several churches in a region. This presbytery consists of some or all of the elders in the local churches over which it has authority. Moreover, some of the members of the presbytery are members of the “general assembly” which usually will have authority over all the presbyterian churches in a nation or region.
 3. **Congregational Form:**
 - The Congregational system varies from church to church but essentially functions in a self-contained, fully autonomous fashion where each local body establishes its own leadership group and is not subject to outside involvement.

Offices within the Church

- There are two primary offices within a biblical church government, though the scope of these offices vary based on the form of church government in operation.
 1. **Elders** *act as spiritual leaders and oversees of a body of believers or group of churches.*
 - New Testament pattern suggests plurality.
 - **Acts 20:17** - *Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders*
 - **Titus 1:5** - *appoint elders in every town as I directed you.*
 - **James 5:14** - *Let him call for the elders of the church*
 - Also referred to as pastors. (*Gk. Poimen*)
 - **Ephesians 4:11** - *the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,*
 - **Act 20:28** - *has made you overseers, to care for the church of God,*
 - **1 Peter 5:1-2** - *shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;*
 - Also referred to as bishop or overseer.
 - **Philippians 1:1** - *with the overseers and deacons:*
 - **1 Timothy 3:1** - *If anyone aspires to the office of overseer...*
 - Must be qualified.
 - **1 Timothy 3:2-7 & Titus 1:6-9**

2. **Deacons** act those who serve to facilitate ministry within a body of believers. (Gk. *Diakonos*)
 - New Testament pattern suggests wide-range of functions deacons, though less about leading and more about facilitation.
 - **Acts 6:1-3** - *And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.*
 - **1 Timothy 3:8** - *Deacons likewise must be dignified...*
- Elders are responsible for the spiritual well-being of a church, whereas deacons are responsible for the physical wellbeing of the church.

Church Discipline

- Sometimes it is necessary for the governing body of a church to get involved in the personal matters of its members in order to maintain the health and wellbeing of the collective body as well its individual parts. The following biblical principles should guide this disciplinary process:
- Purpose and Parameters of Church Discipline
 1. **Biblical discipline is about love, not control.**
 - **Proverbs 13:24** - *he who loves him is diligent to discipline him.*
 - **Hebrews 12:6** - *For the Lord disciplines the one he loves*
 - **Revelation 3:19** - *Those whom I love, I reprove and discipline...*
 2. **The purpose of church discipline is restoration and reconciliation.**
 - **Galatians 6:1** - *you who are spiritual should restore him in a spirit of gentleness.*
 - **1 Timothy 1:20** - *handed over to Satan that they may learn not to blaspheme.*
 - **1 Corinthians 5:5** - *so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*
 3. **Church discipline aims to keep the sin from spreading to others within the body.**
 - **Hebrews 12:15** - *that no "root of bitterness" springs up and causes trouble*
 - **1 Corinthians 5:2, 6-7** - *a little leaven leavens the whole lump...*
 - **1 Timothy 5:20** - *in the presence of all, so that the rest may stand in fear.*
 4. **Disciplinary measures should increase in involvement and strength until there is a solution.**
 - **Matthew 5:24** - *First be reconciled to your brother, then come and offer your gift.*
 - **2 Thessalonians 3:14-15** - *that he may be ashamed.*
 - **Matthew 18:15-17** - *"If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.*

Discussion Questions

1. What kinds of governing systems have you witnessed throughout your involvement in church? Which one(s) seemed to function best? Explain.
2. What is the danger of a church leadership structure that is not pluralistic?
3. Have you ever witnessed church discipline? How do you feel this church carries out church discipline?

Reading Assignment

Systematic Theology by Wayne Grudem – Chapter 49: Baptism and Chapter 50: The Lord's Supper.