

Church Government

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(Elwell Evangelical Dictionary)

Basically there are three types of church government, **the episcopal, the presbyterian, and the congregational**, each of which takes on features from the others. Episcopalianism, for example, finds a large place for presbyters in its synods and elsewhere, and its congregations have many functions of their own. Presbyterian congregations also play a large part, while the appearance of moderators attests a movement toward episcopal supervision. The very existence of such groupings as Congregational and Baptist Unions with their presidents shows that churches with a basically congregational polity are yet alive to the value of other elements in the Christian tradition. Yet the general categories do apply.

Episcopacy

In this system the chief ministers of the church are bishops. Other ministers are presbyters (or priests) and deacons. All these are mentioned in the NT, although there bishops and presbyters seem to be identical. Those who see an episcopal system in the NT point to the function of the apostles, which some think was passed on to bishops whom the apostles ordained. They see as important the position of James of Jerusalem, which is not unlike that of the later bishop. The functions of Timothy and Titus as revealed in the Pastoral Epistles show these men to have been something of a transition between the apostles and the bishops of later times. The apostles are said to have practiced ordination by the laying on of hands (Acts 6:6; 1 Tim. 4:14), and they appointed elders in the churches they founded (Acts 14:23), presumably with the laying on of hands. On this view the apostles were the supreme ministers in the early church, and they took care that suitable men were ordained to the ministry. To some of them they entrusted the power to ordain and so provided for the continuance of the ministry in succeeding generations.

It is further alleged that the organization of the church subsequent to NT days supports this view. In the time of Ignatius the threefold ministry was clearly in existence in Asia Minor. By the end of the second century it is attested for Gaul and Africa by the writings of Irenaeus and Tertullian. Nowhere is there evidence of a violent struggle such as would be natural if a divinely ordained congregationalism or presbyterianism were overthrown. The same threefold ministry is seen as universal throughout the early church as soon as there is sufficient evidence to show us the nature of the ministry. The conclusion is drawn that episcopacy is the primitive and rightful form of church government.

But there are objections. There is no evidence that bishops differed from presbyters in NT days. It is going too far to say that all the ministry of these times was of apostolic origin. There were churches not of apostolic foundation, like that in Colossae, which do not seem to have lacked a ministry. Again, some of the early church orders, including the Didache, are congregational in outlook. The case is far from proven. Nevertheless, episcopacy is undoubtedly early and practically universal. In time divisions appeared, notably the great schism in 1054 when the Orthodox Church in the East and the Roman Catholic Church in the West separated. Both continue to be episcopal and hold to

the doctrine of apostolic succession. But there are differences. The Orthodox Church is a federation of self governing churches, each with its own patriarch. The Roman Catholic church is more centralized, and its bishops are appointed by the pope. There are doctrinal differences, such as different views of the filioque clause in the Nicene Creed.

At the Reformation there were further separations. The Church of England rejected Roman supremacy but retained the historic episcopate. Some of the Lutheran churches opted for an episcopal system but did not remain in the historic succession. In more recent times other churches have decided to have bishops, e., some Methodist churches, and these too have rejected the historic succession. There have been other divisions, such as the separation of the Old Catholics when the dogma of papal infallibility was proclaimed. More Christians accept episcopacy than any other form of church government, but episcopal churches are for the most part not in communion with one another.

Presbyterianism

This system emphasizes the importance of elders, or presbyters. Its adherents do not usually hold that this polity is the only one in the NT. At the Reformation the Presbyterian leaders thought that they were restoring the original form of church government, but this would not be vigorously defended by many Presbyterians today. It is recognized that there has been much development, but it is held that this took place under the guidance of the Holy Spirit and that in any case the essentials of the presbyterian system are scriptural. It is beyond question that in the NT presbyters occupy an important place. They are identical with the bishops and form the principal local ministry. In each place there appears to have been a group of presbyters who formed a kind of college or committee which was in charge of local church affairs. That is the natural conclusion to which exhortations like Heb. 13:17 and 1 Thess. 5:12 - 13 point. From the account of the Council of Jerusalem in Acts 15 we see that the presbyters occupied an important place at the very highest levels of the early church.

In the subapostolic age the bishop developed at the expense of the presbyters. This was due to such circumstances as the need for a strong leader in times of persecution and in the controversies against heretics and perhaps also to the prestige attaching to the minister who regularly conducted the service of Holy Communion.

There is much that is convincing in this case. But we must also bear in mind the considerations urged by upholders of the other ways of viewing church government. What is beyond doubt is that from the Reformation onward the presbyterian form of church government has been of very great importance. John Calvin organized the four churches in Geneva on the basis of his understanding of the NT ministry as four fold: the pastor, the doctor (or teacher), the deacon, and the presbyter (or elder). It was the pastor who had the care of the congregation. This was not the full presbyterian system, but it laid the foundation for it, and presbyterianism developed in Switzerland, Germany, France, the Netherlands, and elsewhere. On the continent the name "Reformed" is used for these churches.

Another important development in Geneva took place in a congregation of exiles from Queen Mary's England. They met under their elected pastors, John Knox and Christopher Goodman, and developed along presbyterian lines. After the accession of Elizabeth, Knox returned to Scotland, and his work led in time to the full emergence of

the Presbyterian Church in that country, from where it spread to northern Ireland. England for a number of reasons did not accept presbyterianism as wholeheartedly as did Scotland, but a presbyterian church emerged there also. From this church Welsh presbyterianism took its origin. From Europe, more particularly from Britain, the church spread to America, where it became one of the most significant groups of Christians. In the great missionary movement of modern times missionaries carried the presbyterian form of the church far and wide, and national presbyterian churches were formed in many parts of the world.

Presbyterian churches are independent of one another, but they have in common that they accept such standards as the Belgic Confession, the Heidelberg Catechism, or the Westminster Confession and that they practice a presbyterial form of church government. The local congregation elects its "session," which governs its affairs. It is led by the minister, the "teaching elder," who is chosen and called by the congregation. He is, however, ordained by the presbytery, which consists of the teaching and ruling elders from a group of congregations over which it exercises jurisdiction. Above it is a General Assembly. In all courts parity between teaching and ruling elders is important. There has been a tendency for smaller bodies of presbyterians to appear among those who are dissatisfied with the laxity (as they see it) in the way some of the larger churches hold to classic presbyterianism.

Congregationalism

As the name implies, this puts the emphasis on the place of the congregation. Perhaps it would not be unfair to say that the chief scriptural buttresses of this position are the facts that **Christ is the head of his church (Col. 1:18, etc.) and that there is a priesthood of all believers (1 Pet. 2:9)**. It is fundamental to NT teaching that Christ has not left his church. He is the living Lord among his people. Where but two or three are gathered in his name, he is in the midst. **Nor is it any less fundamental that the way into the very holiest of all presences is open to the humblest believer (Heb. 10:19 - 20)**. Other religions of the first century required the interposition of a priestly caste if anyone wished to approach God, but the Christians would have none of this. Christ's priestly work has done away with the necessity for any earthly priest as the mediator of access to God.

Added to this is the emphasis on the local congregation in the NT. There, it is maintained, we see autonomous congregations, not subject to episcopal or presbyterial control. The apostles, it is true, exercise a certain authority, but it is the authority of founders of churches and of the Lord's own apostles. After their death there was no divinely instituted apostolate to take their place. Instead the local congregations were still self governing, as we see from local church orders like the Didache. Appeal is also made to the democratic principle. The NT makes it clear that Christians are all one in Christ and there is no room for any absolute human authority.

Congregationalism as a system appeared after the Reformation. Some among the Reformed decisively rejected the idea of a state church and saw believers as forming a "gathered church," those who have heard the call of Christ and have responded. An Englishman, Robert Browne, published in Holland a famous treatise, "Reformation Without Tarrying for Any" (1582), in which he affirmed the principle of the gathered church, its independence of bishops and magistrates, and its right to ordain its ministers.

Denied the freedom to put all this into practice in England, many crossed into Holland. It was from the church at Leiden that the Pilgrims fathers sailed for America in 1620 and established congregationalism in the new world, where it became very important.

Congregationalism is much wider than the church that bears the name. Baptists, for example, usually have congregational polity. They see the local congregation as independent and not subject to any outside authority. So it is with several other denominations. In addition there are Christians who from time to time set up their own congregations with no links with anyone. **Congregationalists generally oppose creedal tests.** This leads to an admirable toleration. But it also opens up the way to a distortion of NT Christianity, and some congregationalists have passed over into unitarianism. Nevertheless, congregationalism remains a widely held form of Christianity, and it undeniably points to important NT values.

Conclusion

A consideration of all the evidence leaves us with the conclusion that it is impossible to read back any of our modern systems into the apostolic age. If we are determined to shut our eyes to all that conflicts with our own system we may find it there, but scarcely otherwise. It is better to recognize that in the NT church there were elements that were capable of being developed into the episcopal, presbyterian, and congregational systems and which in point of fact have so developed. But while there is no reason that any modern Christian should not hold fast to his particular church polity and rejoice in the values it secures to him, that does not give him license to unchurch others whose reading of the evidence is different.