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A lesson from history on...

Church Governance

by James McBride

The Christian centuries have spawned a multitude of forms of "governance". Generally, described as congregational, presbyterian and hierarchical forms - divided by degrees of independence and centralization. And we see all in action today, even within the Churches of God of our own tradition. They all are in some degree effective.

However, it's pertinent to ask, Is there a format handed on by the primitive church? It is sometimes claimed that the answer is *No*, that we are free to devise our own form. Clearly there have to be differences between the first century and any time subsequent to the apostles. For example, there is simply no-one today with inspired apostolic authority who can give a "thus says the Lord". I suggest that the authority in the Church of God today lies in the Scriptures. The challenge - and the danger - comes in the matter of interpretation.

It is from the Scriptures that we derive true doctrine, and it is surely sensible to assume that the form of governance left by the apostles is for our leaning. Deviate from the apostolic form (in the fundamentals) and we become less effective. Indeed if we ignore the apostolic pattern we are guaranteed that glitches will develop along the way. Like most Biblical doctrines, of course, the complete picture is not spelled out for us in any one text.

Our Tradition

The sixty-year history of our tradition witnessed the development of the concept of church government. Our early approach changed from a somewhat democratic form to a hierarchical. It is not

unreasonable to ask if all the changes were positive. Indeed they were based on faulty assumptions relating the practice of the Old Testament to that of the Church. An example is equating the church leadership with OT Aaronic priesthood. Another is falsely assuming a "pyramid" style of governance under Moses. Note that the essence of Moses' form was that all *judgments were made at the lowest level* - a practice Jesus promoted (Matthew 18:15ff)!

We need to learn from our experiences, but also to constantly measure our "experiments" against the rule of the Scriptures. This test was abandoned along the way.

Certainly the fruits were both good and destructively bad. A great work was done. But the seeds of division were sown in fertile soil. This is not to ignore the fact that heresy and division will occur anyway, even were we to implement the "perfect" form of governance. Recall the New Testament divisions and heresies! The descent into heresy was in part an effect of the form of governance we imposed. Indeed it mirrors the progress of the church in the first century.

Pattern of Growth

Examine the development of the primitive church. And apostle or evangelist would go to an area, preach the Gospel, form an assembly - and go away, perhaps never to return. The same process was repeated - twenty miles away, a hundred, perhaps five hundred. The apostle might return - as at Lystra, Iconium and Antioch - to appoint a foundation leadership. Or he would send an "apostolic delegate" for that purpose, as Titus in Crete.

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This held true during the era of inspired apostles. But they gave guidance for future generations by outlining leadership qualification (I Tim 3, Titus 1) and procedures (II Tim 2:2, I Tim 5:22).

Also, an individual Christian would through testimony gather around himself or herself a growing band of new Christians.

Time passes. The local assembly puts out “runners”, forming new local assemblies and each of these appointing elders. The new “church plants” would have emotional and perhaps leadership ties to the “mother” church. Those nearby will naturally cooperate in joint worship and other activities. Distant church plants (as a result of evangelism) will develop in a similar manner. Each assembly included members of the one Body of Christ, but it was not externally governed - from Jerusalem or elsewhere. Not theory, this for it is exactly how the primitive church developed.

As might be expected, however, carnal human nature entered the scene.

Growth of Centralization

Naturally the empire’s first city would have the prestige and the wealth to dominate - not only its own church plants but also the world. Thus was born the Church of Rome, over four centuries becoming the Roman Catholic (Universal) Church. So, too, the Eastern Orthodox Church (Constantinople), the Ethiopian Coptic Church (probably from one humanly unsupervised man - Acts 8:26 - 40!) etc. All grew out of a single self-governing assemblies. Each of these centralized bodies developed separately and, on their borders, in competition. Each developed its own theology, its own traditions, its own government - and its own heresies.

As the “empire” of each expanded and the true Biblical faith became diluted ambitious men developed a hierarchy of power and wealth. Students of church history are aware of the insidious development, during the first century, of the episcopacy from the original two offices, designated by the apostles, of *overseers* and *deacons* (Phil 1:1). The consequences mirror human nature in the raw, whether in secular government or ecclesiastical!

All this was a far cry from the purity of the apostolic foundations. As Joseph Priestley notes: “There did not remain, at the conclusion of the fourth century, so much as a shadow of the ancient constitution of the Christian Church” (*The Corruptions of Christianity*, p.229). That constitution is summed up by Edward Gibbon in his *Decline and Fall...*: “The societies [local assemblies] which were instituted in the cities of the Roman empire were united only by the ties of faith and charity. Independence and equality formed the basis of their internal constitution” (*abr ed* p.170). And again (p.172): “Every society formed within itself a separate and independent republic, and although the most distant of these little states maintained a mutual as well as friendly intercourse of letters and deputations, the Christian world was not yet connected by supreme authority of legislative assembly”. *That came later!*

Writes W D Davies: “The birth of what seems...an almost “military” hierarchical organization... is connected with the Church’s failure to understand itself as the “People of God”, as had the old Israel. By relinquishing the humble Synagogue, the Church organism more easily developed into an organization, a community stratified like the surrounding society and organized in terms of a ministry separated from, though maintained by, a subservient laity” (*The Gospel and the Land*, p.387).

The accounts of these men match history on the ground.

All this radical change was motivated simply by the tendency of human nature, condemned so roundly by Jesus (Luke 22:25-27), to institute structures which make it easier to lord it over folk! The spirit of pride and ambition supplanted the servant mentality exemplified by Jesus and the apostles.

The concept of the church as the People of God, God’s heritage (I Peter 5:3) is enhanced, and the desire to dominate is limited, when the Church is viewed as an association of independent but co-operating assemblies. Before long, however, the heritage (*Gk kleros*), the brethren, were sidelined and the term *clergy* applied solely to the leadership. Others became “mere laity”.

It is of note that the “principles of governance” in the New Testament are all *directed to local assemblies*

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with no implication that they refer to a universal “one and only true church organization”.

Into All The World

Note that the initial half-century of the church of God was the most productive in history! Local assemblies were diligent to carry out “the great commission”. They went into all the world (Colossians 1:6) compelled by a love for mankind and a burning desire to do a work for God. All this despite huge obstacles imposed by geography and communications and transport. And with no centralized organization. In each assembly men and women equipped by God with necessary gifts and carried by a faith that God would provide went out from their local assemblies with the precious good news. No-one forbade them!

I’m not here advocating we all buy a donkey each! The apostolic principles include local autonomy, diligent application of spiritual gifts by *all* the brethren, fiery zeal, faith, vision, exploitation of available tools and voluntary inter-assembly co-operation. Examples of the latter are in Philippians 4:16 (evangelism), Romans 15:26 (alms). It is folly to replace these principles by centralized organization. This leads only, in time, to gross abuse - as we have seen anciently and in this century. *And are sure to see again*, given enough time, and given there will always be those who secretly desire a following - and power.

In a world of burgeoning populations God has provided the tools, and the talented and gifted brethren able to skillfully use those tools. All the brethren in each local assembly must appropriately use to the full there diversity of gifts Jesus Christ has placed within their assembly. That will include evangelism. It will include the encouragement and financial support of

those gifted for evangelism. It will include co-operation with other independent local assemblies to achieve this and other activities.

We should not, of course, assume the world will be at our feet even if we had perfect government! We sow where we can, but it is God who calls. *When His harvest will be complete is known to Him.* In the meantime we are - all of us - to labor zealously till the end, even if there are but “gleanings” that remain to be reaped.

Local Government

It is a fallacy, however, to assume that local assembly autonomy means God does not require a form of government in His church gathered in local independent assemblies. The Scriptures on this are writ large. For a local independent assembly to be effective it is vital that each be Scripturally ordered. Within each assembly there is a God-given pattern which includes all the brethren. But this does not mean “the congregation rules”! The inspired writings tell us God’s way to handle disputes among brethren, to maintain order, to determine doctrine, to appoint the leadership. This is a topic for future discussion! [*see Governance in The Churches of God UK*]

The history of the first half century of the Christian Church depicts many independent but co-operating local assemblies. It is flawed reasoning to assume a pattern of church government foreign to that promoted by the apostles will be a more effective way. Probably any form of church polity will work - for a while. But anything other than the apostolic is like a bicycle with a buckled wheel. It will give us a rough ride, and eventually it will shake our bicycle to pieces. We have all experienced it.

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