



HOW CHURCHES GREW IN ACTS

Governance for Growth and Stability

Lesson 1 | 6/13/2021

Overview and Introduction

“Who’s in charge of the church?” Most American Christians would answer, “The pastor is.” Further, most American churches are run like American government where it is assumed that democracy is the form of government that God approved. Members have a “vote” and they use that vote to exercise control. If they don’t like the way things are done, they organize a movement to vote them out of office. *That’s the American way!* But it’s not the biblical way. We need to answer clearly from the Bible, “How did God intend disciples to view their governance?” so that we don’t just do things the American way – but the way God intended for growth and stability.

First, I want to show where things stand in the religious world with governance structures before we begin with the Biblical model.

As currently organized in the modern world, the major forms of church government are called:

1. **Episcopal** - strong hierarchy of ordained clergy, namely the Bishop, above the local congregation. It is closely tied to the idea of apostolic succession, the belief that bishops can trace their office in a direct, uninterrupted line back to the Apostles of Jesus. The bishop supervises the clergy within a local jurisdiction. Some examples of this structure are found in churches who are Orthodox, Methodist, Anglican, along with some Lutherans, and the Roman Catholic Church. The authority is placed in the bishop *where the authority is shared downward* in the structure. Some find their proof for this in Acts 6:3, 6; as well as 14:23; Matthew 16:18; and most pointedly in the role of James or Peter in the early church.
 - a. Though the rest of the government of the Roman Catholic Church resembles, to a great degree, the Episcopal form, some distinguish the form of government as its own structure as Papalism or Romanism. One source says, “Romanism holds to a transmitted infallibility. The pope is infallible: 1. when he speaks as pope. 2. When he speaks for the whole church. 3. When he defines doctrine or passes a final judgment. 4. When the doctrine thus defined is within the sphere of faith or morality.” [Augustus H. Strong. Systematic Theology, 914-917].
2. **Presbyterian** - a series of church courts with emphasis upon the local presbytery. Presbyterian governance by the rule of assemblies of elected presbyters, or elders, or church board. Groups of local churches are also governed by a higher assembly of elders known as the presbytery (or classis). These presbyteries can be grouped into a synod. Presbyteries and synods nationwide often join together in a *general assembly*. Presbyterian polity was developed as a rejection of governance by hierarchies of single bishops (episcopal polity). Presbyterianism is also distinct from congregationalism, in that individual congregations are not independent, but are answerable to the wider church, through its governing bodies (presbyteries, synods and assemblies). Some examples are churches that are Presbyterian, Reformed and some Bible churches.
3. **Congregational** - emphasis upon the local congregation and democracy. Congregationalist polity, often known as congregationalism, is a system of church governance in which every local church or congregation is independent, ecclesiastically sovereign as some churches would describe or as brethren would say, “autonomous”. Among *contemporary* churches, perhaps the most popular form of government is the congregational church government where the final governing authority resides within the congregation itself. While many churches of today are

defined as “congregational” is this way, there is a variety of ways this governance is managed within those congregations: a member “vote,” the pastor, etc. In addition to churches of Christ, churches that are often described as congregational in their polity are churches that are Baptist, Congregational and Independent churches, and Quakers, just to name a few.

As we explore the book of Acts to see how governance was executed among churches in the New Testament, we will realize that, in language, “congregational” will be the Biblical way even though most of the present practices within that structure called “congregational” are not Biblical. And since our aim is to be Biblical in everything, we will defend only what the New Testament teaches.

Just as Ephesians 4:1-6 teaches, there is clarity from Paul that churches were to be united in their view of the oneness of what they were to believe. To the Corinthians, Paul said that “you all agree and [that] there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment” (1Corinthians 1:10). And he further says that Timothy would “remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church” (1Corinthians 4:17).

The authority Timothy would have in teaching (c.f. 2Timothy 4:1-4) would not be organizational. It would be authority from the word he would deliver from inspired men (2Corinthians 13:1-10). Those men would be moved to write what we could understand (Ephesians 3:4) by the Holy Spirit (John 14:26; 15:13; 16:13; 2Peter 1:3-4).

What we will discover is that churches in the New Testament are seen to be – or where instructed to be – independent, local and self-governing bodies. While one could say there were acting as democracies complete in themselves, they were following the executive orders from the Apostles’ teaching and none of whom had legislative power.

The English word democracy comes from two Greek words that together mean “the rule of the people.” A democratic government is one in which the people rule. Although there have been very few civil governments that have operated by pure democracy, the democratic principle, at least in theory, has been incorporated into the way the United States is governed. However, in his famous address to the elders of the Ephesian church (Acts 20:16–38), Paul gave important insights into how the church of Jesus Christ was to be governed:

Keep watch over yourselves and over the whole flock of which the holy Spirit has appointed you overseers, in which you tend the church of God that he acquired with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come among you, and they will not spare the flock. And from your own group, men will come forward perverting the truth to draw the disciples away after them.

While some may see in Paul’s word an evolving, governance format, it is clear from Peter’s words that he viewed his work among the 12 apostles as truly pastoral (or like an elder or pastor) in 1Peter 5:1-3. And even for Peter and the other 12, the authority that they had was in the message that they shared (c.f. Acts 15).

We will progress to the next lesson as the Apostles as the Source of that authority. And as we progress, we will see the Biblical model found in their teaching in Scripture that was established as precedent in contrast to the governing practices among churches that have led people away.