



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” in 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 were 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.



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Lesson 2 | 6/20/2021

The Word of Truth: The Authority of the New Testament Church.

The Authority is the Word. To understand the church of the New Testament we need to understand where they perceived their authority. In our last lesson we considered that the authority that the evangelist Timothy would have would not exist in his office – but

in his teaching (c.f. 2Timothy 4:1-4). The authority of the New Testament church was never intended to be organizational. Even for the Apostle Paul, it would be authority from the word he would deliver as an inspired man (2Corinthians 13:1-10) that would be the source of authority for Corinth. 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). And it would be that word that is the expression of the authority for (not of) the New Testament churches wherever they would be.

The Authority is the Apostles' Teaching. So when we read that the early church “devoted themselves to the Apostle’s teaching” (Acts 2:42), this is the demonstration of authority. The first congregation of people who followed Jesus did not imagine their way or follow their inner consciences to guide them to what they were to be or to do – instead they devoted themselves to the authority of those whose “ways which are in Christ” that “they taught in every church” (1Corinthians 4:17) so that they would “learn not to exceed what is written, in order that no one of you might become arrogant in behalf on one against the other” (1Corinthians 4:6). These apostles gave the early church “everything pertaining to life and godliness” (2Peter 1:3) because they were given “all truth: (John 16:13) by the Holy Spirit. The early church who wanted to follow Jesus turned to Jesus’ Chosen Ambassadors for their every direction. Churches who want to follow Jesus today should be no different.

The Authority is Truth. It was this “word of truth” that Jesus hoped that his Disciples would follow (John 17:17). Abstractly speaking, truth is what is “a conformity to fact or reality” and its authority is the authority of reality or what is real, not what seems to be real. Therefore, defying truth is defying reality. Even in other relationship like the authority of a parent over his child or government over its citizen, it must ultimately conform to truth or “right,” or each will face the inevitable rebellion. Might does not make right – and neither does majority rule. Further, rebellion, of itself, does not prove a thing right either. What makes something right is that it is true, or truth. Truth does not seek to force itself on us. We must seek after it – for only in it is true freedom (John 6:44-45; 8:31-32).

Only God has such Truth in Him. Such sovereign authority is, in its ultimate sense, suited only to God. He is God of truth, His word is truth (Deuteronomy 32:4). Respect and desire for truth leads man to God, and any other attitude is contrary to God-like-ness. The way to heaven is the Way of truth (John 14:6). And Jesus is Head over all things to the church (Ephesians 1:22-23).

So how did the early church respond to this?

1. **The early church followed Christ as the Head of the church.** Even from Pentecost, Jesus was declared Lord (Acts 2:36) and Lord to every believer (Romans 10:9; Philippians 2:11). As Lord, Jesus must be master or owner of something. Jesus is Lord of all because He is Lord of each. And from the church’s viewpoint of things, His authority and position over them is because He has been raised to be Lord (Acts 2:36) over His Kingdom of which they were citizens (Colossians 1:13).
2. **The early church followed the Apostle’s word as the authoritative, and final word from God.** This word was authoritative *when spoken* by the Apostles and as written, was equally

authoritative. Paul told Corinth they were not to exceed what was written (1Corinthians 4:6). The reason is that when the Spirit guided their spoken words, He also guided the result of their written words. The Scripture is inspired of God (2Timothy 3:16-17) or “God breathed out.” As noted before, this gospel is “one” (Ephesians 4:5); it is the final expression from God (Hebrews 1:1-3), that has been “once and for all delivered to the saints” (Jude 3). There will be no other because there is no other gospel (Galatians 1:6-8). And so, the early church was consistently told that “everyone who goes on ahead and does not abide in the teaching of Christ, does not have God. Whoever abides in the teaching has both the Father and the Son” (2John 9).

3. **They distinguished the authoritative message from the Old Testament of Moses.** Several times these Apostles said the New Testament replaced the Old Testament (2Corinthians 3:1-11; Ephesians 2:14-15; Hebrews 8:6-13, 10:9). Especially when efforts to use the Old Testament rule or practice as a binding aspect on Christians, the Apostles disavowed the practice as wrong (Galatians 5:1-4). All the writers expressed that there was value in the study and understanding of Old Testament Scripture (Romans 15:4). However, Christians considered their normative patterns belonged to the new covenant alone (Colossians 2:13-17).
4. **They were told the message of the Apostles had a uniformed pattern.** Paul spoke of his ways that he taught in “every church” (1Corinthians 4:17; 7:17) – just as he taught evangelists (2Timothy 2:2) and elders (Acts 20:28-32) – that the words delivered were the pattern for their thinking and their actions (2Timothy 1:13). And Paul clearly said to Timothy, “Follow the pattern of the sound words that you have heard from me, in the faith and love that are in Christ Jesus.” Even the practice of the custom, Paul said was to be uniform as he had “directed the churches of God” (1Corinthians 11:16). Further, Paul directed the Corinthian church in regard to the contribution for the saints to follow the same practice as he had taught the “churches of Galatia” (1Corinthians 16:1). If the teaching Paul delivered was uniform, then the practice of churches that Paul instructed should be the same as well. It was, in fact, handed down as authoritative tradition or teaching (cf., 2Thessalonians 3:6; Philippians 4:9).
5. **The early church learned they were to speak the oracles of God** (1Peter 4:11) and if there is no instruction, they should not speak (Acts 15:24) and not exceed what is written (1Corinthians 4:6). The principle that only what God reveals is authoritative is modelled in the Old Testament, is used to teach in the New Testament (Hebrews 7:17) and is implicit to the walk as a Christian (2John 9). If God is silent, there is no authoritative word to empower us with God’s approval to do in the name of Christ. If churches would just listen to this truth, there would be much greater unity among disciples.

The early church received these Apostolic writings to resolve their difficulties (i.e. 1Corinthians, 2Thessalonians, Hebrews, 1John). Notice how Paul addressed the problems that the Corinthian church had. Regarding marriage, Paul cited Jesus’ teaching (1Corinthians 7:10-11 with Mark 10:9). When the Lord’s supper was being misappropriated, Paul appealed to what the Lord had said to him (1Corinthians 11:22-25). Consequently, If we are to solve our problems in churches, then we must turn to Scripture – not tradition – not culture – not conscience – and to Scripture alone – to resolve our differences because the authority for the church is in the word of truth delivered by the Apostles from the Holy Spirit. For us today, the New Testament is the only Divine solution to our problems or grievances.

The only solution to our problems as churches is to return to the New Testament because the only place we should start when we become a Christian, when we start as a church and when we do the works that we do for Jesus Christ’s sake is to finish with the New Testament. It alone is the authority to, for and of the New Testament church.