

Uncommon things commonly believed among us

On the first Sunday of each month we have been exploring some of the things we commonly believe in the Churches of Christ that many in the religious world around us do not commonly believe. When such differences exist, I believe we have a responsibility to offer a reasoned, biblical explanation for our different belief. This morning we will consider our belief about the nature of the church government.

We believe in a universal pattern for church government (Acts 14:19-23)

Beginning Considerations

- A number of different types of church governments exist within the religious communities of our world.
- Given those differences, we should ask ourselves what type of church government God reveals in the Bible.
- We believe the Bible shows a pattern for government that includes: local congregational autonomy, heavenly rather than earthly headquarters, qualifications and responsibilities for leaders, and a style of leadership different from that of the world.

Examining the Bible's evidences for our claims

- The autonomy of local congregations.
 - The New Testament shows no government beyond that of the local congregation.
 - Each congregation was to develop its own autonomous government overseen by a plurality of elders (*Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17, 28; Hebrews 13:17*).
 - Even the Apostles worked within the context of local congregations (*Acts 13:1-3*).
 - The Apostles gave doctrine to the churches and settled matters of dispute (*I Corinthians 2:10-16; 11:17-34*), but their office existed for a limited time (*I Corinthians 13:8-13; Ephesians 4:11-16*).
 - The apostles established pattern of leadership that would replace them, a pattern for autonomous congregations overseen by elders (*Acts 20:17-32*).
 - The Jerusalem Council of Acts 15:1-29, where the Jerusalem church and various church leaders set a practice for all churches, does not violate this principle of local congregational independence.
 - The Holy Spirit played a principle role in gathering the leaders and in the outcome of the meeting (*Acts 15:28*).
 - We do not have any such revelation today because the New Testament provides all of the guidance we need both as individuals and as churches (*II Timothy 3:16-17; cf. John. 14:26; 16:13*).

- The heavenly headquarters of the church (*Ephesians 1:19-23*).
 - The church Jesus built has its headquarters in heaven (*Acts 2:33; Colossians 3:1-3*).
 - This heavenly centered focus can be seen in the rejection of Jerusalem as a central headquarters.
 - Paul took his orders from Christ, not from Jerusalem (*Galatians 2:7-10*).
 - Those in Jerusalem were not above others in the church (*Galatians 2:6*).
- The qualifications and responsibilities for leaders.
 - God designated leaders for the local church (*Philippians 1:1*) and He also gave qualifications for those offices.
 - Elders (*I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9*).
 - The elders shoulder the primary for shepherding and overseeing the local church in a mature manner—as the biblical designations for the work imply.
 - But rather than being a board of directors, elders should be concerned with the souls of the members of the congregation (*Hebrews 13:17*), a responsibility revealed through the New Testament’s description of elders as shepherds (*Acts 20:28*).
 - Deacons (*I Timothy 3:8-13*).
 - Deacons served under elders in the church of the New Testament (*Philippians 1:1*).
 - The name “deacon” was a common term for a servant or minister (*Acts 6:1-6*).
 - In the special work that also used this name, there were qualifications relating both to character and life situation (*I Timothy 3:8-13*).
 - In the New Testament times, deacons were not congregational decision makers (*Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 23-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Ephesians 4:11-12; I Timothy 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5-9; James 5:14; I Peter 5:1-5; cf. I Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:17*).
- The leadership of the local congregation, though authoritative (*Hebrews 13:17*), does not look like the leadership commonly practiced outside of the church.
 - Serving, not lording it over the congregation, is a distinctive feature of biblical leadership (*Matthew 20:20-28; John 13:3-17*).
 - In fact, no one elder has any more authority than any other member of the church, which is why “elders” were appointed in all the churches.
 - An eldership’s authority resides in its reflection of Jesus’ will (*Ephesians 2:20*).
 - Shepherds are to know the congregation and be willing to serve the best interests of the brethren with their very lives (*Acts 20:28; John. 10:11-15*).

All biblical issues must be considered in light of the Bible’s teachings. Any differences, no matter how practical or effective they might seem to us, must be rejected in favor of our trust in God’s revealed wisdom. God has revealed His plan for the church’s government and we do well to consider what the Bible teaches us in this matter and expect no less from the leaders of our churches.

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