

Biblical Church Government

The Yigo Baptist Church (YBC) model for governance is very different than what is practiced in most Christian churches today. This paper is intended to help church members as well as some outside the church to understand the basis for the YBC governance model. YBC tries to conform itself to the New Testament church model in every way possible. Thus, the church has attempted to follow the pattern for church government found in the New Testament as closely as possible. The purpose of this paper is to lay out what the New Testament says about church government.

We will go through the New Testament assessing every reference to the governance of a church. The four gospels cover the ministry of Jesus Christ and contain almost no mention of the church. Therefore, we will begin our survey with the book of Acts and proceed through the remainder of the New Testament.

What does the Bible say about church governance?

The book of Acts provides some interesting insight into the development of offices and officers within the church. The book begins with the ascension of Christ and with the apostles in charge of the little church group. Apparently, the apostles were carrying out most of the duties within the church because in Acts 6, after a complaint is made about Greek widows being skipped over in the food distribution, the apostles agree that there needs to be a division of labor incorporated into the structure of the church. The apostles determined that they need to devote their time to teaching the Word of God **and to prayer** and they cannot afford to be involved in squabbles over food distribution. Their solution is to ask the church body to nominate seven people to be responsible for ministering to the physical needs of the body, while the apostles focus on the spiritual needs of the body. Thus, we see a prototype of the organizational structure of the church: one group of men giving themselves to instruction and teaching of the Word of God, and one group ministering to the physical needs of the body. It is apparent this division of labor goes through a maturation process as the New Testament unfolds and the early church is established.

By the time we get to Acts 11, there appears to be a set structure in place. The church in Antioch has decided to send some offerings to help with a famine coming to the church in Judea. They decide to send the offering to the elders of the church in Judea to be delivered to them by Paul and Barnabas. It is clear that by this time that the group given the role of governance of the church is coming to be known as elders. Paul and Barnabas are obviously being asked to take the offerings collected and turn them over to those entrusted with the governance of the church. This passage contains the first use of the term “elder” to describe an office in the church. The word elder is translated from the Greek word “presbuteros,” from which the word “Presbyterian” is derived. The word literally means an older person, but it is used here and elsewhere in the New Testament to describe an office of leaders in the early church.

In Acts 14, we see Paul and Barnabas preaching the gospel in Lystra, Iconium, Derbe, and Antioch. We are told that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every city. After a number of people have responded to the gospel in every city and Paul and Barnabas have spent time covering the fundamentals of the Christian faith, the first order of business is to appoint a group of men to take over the responsibility of building up the body of Christ. This passage does not specify men, but that is an issue we will revisit later.

There is a pattern developing here that is important to point out at this point. We see apostles preaching the gospel and gaining converts. Then, when the apostles determine it is time to move their preaching ministry to a different town, they appoint a group of men to oversee the operation of the church. This pattern continues throughout Scripture. We never see a single man being placed in charge of a church. It is always a group of elders. Some refer to this as plural elder leadership. The notion of only one man in charge of a church was an invention of man which first appeared well after the New Testament canon was written.

In Acts 15 and 16, we see elders referred to six times in conjunction with deciding an important matter of church doctrine. Acts 15 contains a passage of Scripture referred to as the Council at Jerusalem. This passage is important on a number of levels for the key insights it provides into how decisions were made in the early church. We will revisit that passage later.

In Acts 20:11, Paul wants to meet with church leaders in Ephesus, so he calls for the elders in the churches at Ephesus to join him. It is important to note that Paul does not call for a senior pastor from each church in Ephesus to come meet with him, but rather he calls elders (in the plural) from the churches (in the plural) to come to a meeting. This is consistent throughout Scripture. Every church is governed by a group of people who are most often called elders. This passage is interesting for a number of reasons.

Paul has this rare opportunity to meet with the leaders of the church, which is really the first pastors' conference. It is notable to see what he wants to communicate to the leaders. He stresses that he has served with humility through a variety of trials. He says that his trials did not prevent him from a public ministry preaching "repentance toward God and faith toward our Lord Jesus Christ." Further, he says he is committing to finishing the race he was called by God to run. He says he was given the ministry by the Lord Jesus Christ, and he clarifies that the message he was called to spread is the gospel of the grace of God. He takes the opportunity to warn them that savage wolves will be coming to the church and people will rise up from within the church to teach perverse things. It will be up to this group of people to guard the body against attacks to the faith of church members.

In addition to revealing what should be most important to elders in a church, Paul gives two key insights into the church. In verse 28, Paul says, "Therefore take heed

to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.” The first thing to note is that Paul says the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. There are some passages where it is unclear how elders are to be chosen; however, this passage is perfectly clear: it is the Holy Spirit who makes a person an elder. It doesn’t say a person with the best business skills should be an elder. It doesn’t say the person who gets the most votes should be an elder. It says the Holy Spirit makes a person an elder. Elders need to be selected based on who the Holy Spirit has set apart for the work.

The other key point in this is what Paul says the Holy Spirit has made them. The Greek word for overseer is episkopos. The English word episcopal is derived from this word. This word is sometimes translated as “overseer.” As he continues, he tells them their purpose is to shepherd the church of God. The Greek word for shepherd is poimaino. The word is closely related to the Greek word poimen which is translated “pastor” in Ephesians 4:11 - the only use of the word in Scripture. Although many churches use the terms to refer to different offices, as is made clear in the passage, the Scriptures use these terms synonymously.

In Philippians 1:1, Paul tells us he is addressing his letter to the saints in Philippi along with the bishops and deacons. Thus, we now see two distinct offices taking shape in the church: bishops, or overseers or pastors or elders, and deacons. The word deacon comes from the Greek word diakonos which means “one who carries out the commands of another.” The word (and other words with the same root) are frequently translated in other passages as serving or to serve.

The next passage we come to is in 1 Timothy chapter 3. This is the reference where the roles of the offices are most clearly set forth. The words used to describe the offices are episkopos, or bishop, and diakonos, or deacon. We have previously shown that episkopos (bishop), presbuteros (elder) and poimen (pastor or shepherd) are used synonymously. The passage contains lists of qualities that persons holding the offices of bishops and deacons must possess. There are two aspects of this passage I’d like to highlight. The first is the phrase “able to teach.” If a person is being considered for the office of an elder, he has to have the capacity to teach the Word of God. He not only must have significant knowledge and skill in working with the Scriptures, but he also must have the temperament of a teacher. Thus, it is not important for a person to possess business skills, but he must possess the ability to provide spiritual leadership.

The other portion of the passage I’d like to highlight is as follows: “one who rules his own house well, having *his* children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?);” (1 Tim 3:4-5). Paul says that a parent ruling his own house well is an indicator of his ability to oversee the church. This provides an insight into the nature of authority that bishops or elders possess in the church.

Paul adds one other little nugget when he says that an elder should not be a novice (1 Tim 3:6). This supports the idea that an elder has to be someone who has been a Christian for a while and has had time to develop and exhibit skill using the Word of God.

The issue of final authority is a topic of significant disagreement within the church. We will be revisiting this in a few moments.

The next passage using the term of an office is 1 Timothy 4:14. The passage mentions that Timothy received a gift of prophecy through the laying on of hands of the eldership. As we saw in chapter 3, the Greek word to describe the office is episkopos, which is translated bishop. Here in the next chapter, Paul reverts back to the word eldership, whose Greek root comes from presbuteros. This is a further indication that bishop and elder are used synonymously.

The passage makes reference to the laying on of hands. The laying on of hands in Scripture is a mechanism used for conferring something from God to another person. In some instances, it is a blessing. In other instances, it is the gift of the Holy Spirit. In this passage, it is the gift of prophecy. The fact that Timothy's gift of prophecy is given by the laying on of hands of the eldership is an indication that God has chosen elders to convey His authority to the body of Christ.

The next reference to elders is in 1 Timothy 5:17-22. Paul says the elders who rule well are worthy of a double honor. The Bible teaches that all people are worthy of honor or respect just because they are made in the image of God. Paul here indicates that an elder who rules well is worthy of twice the honor he had in the first place. As Paul continues the thought, he says that because of the respect due to an elder, an accusation should not be received unless by two or three witnesses. It would not be proper to allow an elder who has served with distinction to have his credibility undermined by an accusation from a single person. Paul then brings up the issue of laying on of hands and says that Timothy should not lay hands on anyone too hastily. This is an indication that part of the selection process of an elder includes the laying on of hands on the prospective elder. Again, the indication is that the eldership is the body that is responsible for laying on hands or for transmitting the calling to the office by the Holy Spirit. This is an important concept in the calling of an elder. When eldership lays hands on an elder candidate, it is not because that person was selected by men. Rather, the elders are simply recognizing the calling that has been placed on the elder candidate by God through the Holy Spirit. Because this process is the work of the Holy Spirit, it must be bathed in prayer and must not be done in haste. Elders are under-shepherds of Christ and have significant roles and responsibilities and it is crucial the process is performed properly.

After Paul completes his list of qualifications for the office of an elder, he begins to list qualifications for a deacon. The list is very similar to the list of elder qualifications, except that there is no reference to managing the church, and there is no requirement of an ability to teach. The passage seems to confirm the distinctions

that were begun in Acts 6 where there was one group of leaders dedicated to meeting the spiritual needs of the body and one group that was dedicated to meeting the physical needs of the body.

Paul also makes some significant comments on the office of elder in a passage in Titus 1. Paul directs Titus to appoint elders in every city. The use of the term elder is, again, in its plural form, indicating there would be multiple elders in each church. Paul begins a listing of characteristics an elder should possess. The Greek word used in verse 5 is *presbuteros*. In verse 7, as Paul is continuing the list, he inserts the word *episkopos* (bishop). This is yet further proof that elder and bishop are used to describe the same office.

One key characteristic is that an elder must “be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.” (Tit 1:9 NKJ) Similar to 1 Timothy 3, where Paul says a bishop must be able to teach, this list indicates an elder must have a solid grasp and skill in using the Word of God.

The next reference to the office of elder is in James 5:14, where the brother of Christ urges believers to come to the elders for anointing with oil when they are sick. This passage is another clear indication of elders being the conduit through which blessings are transmitted to believers.

Peter discusses the role of Elders in 1 Peter 5:1-5 which reads as follows: “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: ² Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; ³ nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; ⁴ and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. ⁵ Likewise you younger people, submit yourselves to *your* elders. Yes, all of *you* be submissive to one another, and be clothed with humility, for ‘God resists the proud, But [sic] gives grace to the humble.’”

Again, in this passage, the word elders is in the plural form, indicating there would be many elders in proximity. Peter refers to himself as a fellow elder, indicating the role and authority of an elder in the church is the same role and authority that he carries. Peter exhorts the readers to “shepherd the flock of God.” The Greek word for shepherd is *poimaino* which comes from the same root word as *poimen*, which we have seen has previously been translated as pastor or shepherd. Peter continues his exhortation, saying they are to serve as overseers. The Greek word for overseer here is *episkopeo*. Thus, here is one final passage where the words elder, pastor or shepherd, and bishop are all used to describe the same person or office.

Peter gives many useful instructions to those serving in the office of an elder. He says they should not serve by compulsion, but willingly. The service of an elder should be offered freely, not under any kind of compulsion. In the same way that being called into the kingdom of God is an amazing act of grace, the calling to serve an office in

the church is an incredibly high calling for which the only response can be humbly accepting and offering oneself as a living sacrifice. Further, the service should not be motivated by dishonest gain, but eagerly. The word for dishonest gain is *aischrokerdos*, which indicates a motivation for base gain. This word indicates that motivation for service as an elder should not be for selfish gain or selfish motivations, but with a sincere desire to serve others at personal expense.

As Peter continues to discuss the motivations for service as an elder, he says that elders should not be as lords over those entrusted to them. The Greek word to lord over is *katakuriuo*, which means to bring under subjection. This indicates that like Jesus Christ who said he did not come to be served but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45), elders are to come to the office, not with the goal of bringing the body into subjection to them, but with a willingness to serve the body and give themselves for the body. The word for entrust is the Greek word *kleros*, which is an object used to cast lots. The clear connotation is that church members are allotted or assigned to each group of elders. This is consistent with the language used by Paul in Ephesians 4:16, where the body of Christ is being built into a church person by person as each person is placed into a particular place in the church. Christ is building His church and elders or pastors or bishops are entrusted with serving those who are being built as the church.

The final phrase to focus on completes the thought of not serving as lords, but as being examples to the flock of God. The flock belongs to God, not an elder or leader, and the desired leadership style is not authoritarian in nature, but as one who lives as an example of a person walking with God. The emphasis is again nurturing and enabling the relationship of an individual church member with God, not the relationship between the body of Christ and a leader.

The final references to the office of elder in Scripture come from the letters of I John and II John, where John refers to himself as “the elder.” Out of all the ways John could have referred to himself in these letters, he chose to refer to himself in his role of elder. He is not relying on the fact that he was with Jesus, or that he was loved by Jesus, or that he was a part of Jesus inner circle in order to establish his authority to be heard. It is noteworthy that he identified himself by his role as a church elder at this time when churches were organized and governance structures were in place.

At this point, we have reviewed all the references in the New Testament to the offices of the church. We have shown that churches were governed by a group of elders. We have reviewed qualifications for the position of elder and have highlighted the authority of the position and the requirement that elders be able to skillfully handle the Word of God. We have seen that elders are set apart by the Holy Spirit and recognized as being called to the office by the laying on of hands of other elders. We have also seen the type of leadership that an elder is to apply in leading the church. The role of the elder is to facilitate the relationship between God and the individual member of the body.

Which Model of Church Government?

Now, let us review these passages in light of some modern church government practices. The first thing I'd like to address is overall church government. There are three main forms of church government in use today:

- 1) The Episcopal Model
- 2) The Presbyterian Model
- 3) The Congregational Model

The Episcopal Model is a holdover from the pre-reformation church, where a priest was recognized as having spiritual authority over the congregation. Additionally, there would be a person who had spiritual authority over a number of priests. The characteristic of this model is for total or near total authority to be invested in a single person. Another way to look at this is that in this model, God speaks to a man, often through a system, and then a man speaks on behalf of God to a congregation. This can play out today in congregations where one person, often called the senior pastor, is so popular or so powerful that he can lead a church in the direction he desires to go with very little resistance on the part of any other leaders or church members. Rather than having a group of men praying to discern the leading of the Holy Spirit on a matter, in the Episcopal system, a single person can exert his will over a board and a body who accept his leadership as the main person who is skillful enough in the Word of God to provide spiritual leadership over the body. In order for this system to work, you must have a structure in which there is imbalance between the Word skill levels of leaders and in which elders are not sufficiently challenged to grow in their abilities to skillfully handle the Word of God. In the Bible, church leaders are recognized as a part of the body. In the Episcopal model, there is a tendency to view leaders as being in a separate class which operates above the body.

The second model is the Presbyterian Model. In the Presbyterian system, governance is placed in the hands of a board of elders or a session with little to no input from the congregation for most governance decisions.

Under the third model, the congregational model, the final authority of the church is placed in the hands of the congregation. This method has grown in popularity in places where democratic government has taken root. Proponents of this model point to Matthew 18:17, where a person who is confronting someone in sin is directed to "tell it to the church" after he has made two attempts at correction. Another passage that is pointed to is 2 Corinthians 2:6, where Paul says punishment had been inflicted by the majority. One other passage often cited is Acts 6, where the apostles ask the church to choose men to meet the physical needs of the body.

There is some basis for some elements of these arguments; however, there are also some problems. First, in Matthew 18, the passage says to "tell it to the church." It does not say tell it to the church for a final outcome. The idea of communicating the matter to the church could also be in view in this passage.

The passage in 2 Corinthians uses the word pleion which is translated majority. Out of the 55 times this word is used in the New Testament, there are only a handful where the word is translated as majority. Thus, the use of the word has some measure of obscurity. Due care should be exercised when developing doctrine from isolated passages where there is some question over the meaning of words or phrases.

With respect to the passage in Acts 6, it should be noted this is the only time a church is given authority to make this type of decision in Scripture, and it should also be noted that the decision involved the persons meeting the physical needs of the church, not the group of men exercising spiritual authority over the church.

In evaluating the merits of the arguments for the congregational model, there are some undeniable facts. There is no instance in Scripture where elders are selected by a vote of the congregation, and there is no instance in Scripture where a decision by the elders is over ruled by a vote of the congregation. Quite to the contrary, the task of appointing elders is given to Titus in Titus 1:5. In Acts 20, we are told the Holy Spirit made the men elders. 1 Timothy 4:14 shows elders laying hands on elders, indicating the involvement of the elders in the selection process. 1 Peter 5 makes it clear that elders are given a stewardship role in the church - they are shepherds responsible to the Chief Shepherd entrusted with oversight over a body of believers. If elders are given a stewardship role over the church, why would we think that would not be extended to the selection of elders? These passages can all work together when we understand that elders should be very practiced at seeking the will of God through prayer as revealed by the Holy Spirit. It is a logical deduction that elders, who are the most practiced at seeking and discerning the leading of the Holy Spirit, would be given authority for the selection of elders and all matters of authority within the church.

We have discussed 1 Timothy 3, where we are asked the question of how a person can manage the affairs of the church if he can't manage his own household. In most families, decisions are not generally put up to a vote where children can overthrow the decision of a parent. Thus, this passage tends to enforce the idea that decisions are not made on the basis of a popular vote.

Although the office of elder is not mentioned specifically in Hebrews 13, there are three references to those who rule over you. One of the references exhorts the readers to obey their leaders. Additionally, there is a passage in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 that makes a similar reference to those who are over you. While the office of elder is not referenced specifically in these passages, there is only one office in Scripture linked to the word rule - elders. 1 Timothy 5:17 says that elders who rule well are worthy of a double honor. Additionally, the word rule is used in translating 1 Timothy 3:5 into English. Thus, the only conclusion we can draw from these passages is that there were leaders in the church given the responsibility to rule and were to be obeyed and we can come to no other conclusion than that these passages refer to the office of elder.

For these reasons, I believe there is sufficient evidence that final authority of the early church was not placed in the hands of the church membership at large.

The Biblical Model

In order to describe the model of church government revealed in Scripture, I'd like to discuss a passage known as the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15.

Acts 15:1-31 is a passage that is very instructive with regard to matters of church government, as it is the most detailed example of a decision being made in the early church. Acts 14 ends with Paul and Barnabas going to Antioch. Acts 15 begins with men coming down from Judea to Antioch and teaching that Gentiles must be circumcised in order to become fully Christian. In other words, even though the Gentiles had received Christ as their Lord and Savior, the men from Judea were teaching that they were still required to be circumcised and follow the law. The passage says that Paul had “no small dissension” with the men. Each side refused to give way, so they decided to take the matter to the church in Jerusalem to get the matter resolved by the Apostles. All parties recognized it is not profitable for the gospel to have people hearing mixed messages with regard to the responsibilities of a Christian after believing in Christ. When the parties arrived in Jerusalem, the elders and apostles gathered to discuss the issue. We are told that “when there had been much dispute” Peter rose up to speak. Peter explained that Christians, whether they be Jews or Greeks, are saved by the grace of God, not by any works that man does. Peter accuses the Judaizers of tempting God or testing God when he asks why they would want to put a yoke around the neck of the Gentiles that neither their forefathers nor they had been able to bear. After Peter spoke the room grew silent. They started listening to stories from Paul and Barnabas on the mission trail. Then, we are told that James¹ began to speak. He began his comments by saying, “Listen to me.” He is demanding the attention of all. He is the last person to speak on the issue which indicates he had some ability to settle the dispute. He begins his concluding comments with the words, “I judge.” The word for judge in Greek is “krino” and has connotations of a final judgment. Apparently, James had been placed in a position where he would listen to arguments of various issues and make a final determination as to the appropriate path to take forward. This is one of the verses that has led scholars to the view that James was the leader of the early church. James essentially agreed with Peter on the issue. Every indication is that all parties joyfully accepted the verdict. After the verdict, we are told in verse 22 that “it pleased the apostles, the elders and the whole church” to send men with Paul and Barnabas with a letter rendering a final decision on the matter. Evidently, the chosen men would be witnesses that Paul and Barnabas were not acting in their self-interests, but were actually reporting what took place in the Jerusalem Council. We are told they were sent with a letter from the apostles, the elders, and the brethren.

¹ This is James, the brother of Christ. James, the brother of John has been put to death by this time. See Acts 12:2.

We are also told the letter said that the decision made by the Jerusalem Council seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to them. Thus, we have a clear indication that the church leaders spent time in prayer, seeking the will of the Holy Spirit as a central part of their deliberation process. Thus, in this passage, we see the apostles and the elders discussing and debating the issue; we see James in a position as the judge making final resolution of the issue; and we see the church body joyfully accepting and agreeing to the decision as they convey the decision to the church at Antioch. Somehow, the church body was brought into the picture. They had their questions answered, and they fully bought into the decision. Thus, the church operated in unity under the direction of the Holy Spirit. This passage provides a model for how decisions should be made with regard to matters of doctrine and the church.

Therefore, the model of church government described in the Bible is for a church to be governed by a plurality of elders. The leadership style is one of leading by service and by example, rather than subjection. The goal of elders is to seek the will of the Holy Spirit in all matters related to the church. Once the will of the Holy Spirit is ascertained by the elders, it is necessary to bring the matter to the church body for prayer and consideration. The implication of this action is that the church cannot act unless and until there is substantial unity among the body. There is no example in Scripture where a church body overturns a decision of elders. There are admonitions in Scripture to members of a body to obey their leaders. However, the scriptural pattern is for elders and members to operate in unity. This implies that members are not required to simply go along with elders, against what they believe to be the leading of the Holy Spirit. Apparently, elders should continue to teach and pray about an issue until there is general unity between the elders and the body as a whole.

In the discussion regarding congregationalism, the argument was made that care should be exercised when establishing doctrine based on limited passages where the meanings of words are somewhat obscurer. Although, there is greater support for the Biblical Church Government Model than any other model described above, there is not sufficient scriptural evidence to be completely dogmatic on the issue. I am not aware of any person in church history who has argued that church government is an essential doctrine of the church. As such, it is necessary to treat with charity believers who subscribe to alternate models of church government.

At this point it may be useful to employ a Q&A format to explore some additional issues surrounding Biblical Church Government.

Why is the office title elders and not bishops or pastors?

Although all three titles are used synonymously in Scripture, the term elder is used significantly more than the others to describe the office. The word “pastor” is used one time in Scripture (Ephesians 4:11) to describe a gift, rather than an office. The word “bishop” has been closely associated with hierarchical systems of church government.

How are elders appointed?

We have already discussed that the church is to be led by the Holy Spirit. Some people believe this does not apply to the appointment of church leadership. In Acts 6, when the prototype of the deacon position was created, it is argued that there is no mention of the Holy Spirit in the decision. Additionally, it is argued that Paul was urgently and haphazardly directing Titus to appoint elders in every city in Titus 1. While it is hard to make the case for the dependence on the Holy Spirit from those two passages, there is a broad theme in the New Testament of the church being led by the Holy Spirit. In Acts 13:2, the Holy Spirit is leading the separation of Paul and Barnabas. In Acts 15, James wrote in his letter to the church in Antioch that it seemed good to the Holy Spirit that they not lay the burden of circumcision and the law on the church of Antioch. The clincher is really in Acts 20, where Paul specifically tells the elders that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers.

There is one example (Acts 6) where the group that was the prototype of what was to become deacons was left to the church body. The Bible is silent on the role of the Holy Spirit in the selection. However, the only method in the Bible for selecting elders was appointment (Acts 14, Titus 1). Thus, the Bible teaches that the Holy Spirit is the person who sets elders apart for the task, and we are told that elders are inducted into office by the laying on of hands of the eldership (1 Timothy 4:14). It is not difficult to harmonize these two positions to show that the Biblical method for choosing elders is for godly church leaders to pray for the leading of the Holy Spirit to reveal those He has set apart for the task, and then to appoint those people to the task.

Scripture teaches that Christ is the head of the church, and the church is led by the Holy Spirit. It seems logical that there would be a group of men, who had a demonstrated commitment to personal prayer, tasked with the assignment to join together in prayer to seek the leading of the Holy Spirit. If most or all of the men could agree on the direction the Holy Spirit is leading the church, it seems that would be a good indication that the will of the Holy Spirit was found. Men are fallible and are given to allowing their own preferences to come into play from time to time. However, if you had a group of men devoted to seeking the will of the Holy Spirit and most, if not all, were in agreement on an issue, you could be assured you had eliminated the influence of personal preferences of any one person.

What is the role of the elder in the church?

Elders are responsible for the management and governance of the church. In 1 Timothy 3, leading the church is likened to managing a household. This is an indication of the depth and breadth of oversight responsibilities assigned to elders. In Titus 1, Paul uses the phrase “a steward of God” when listing the qualifications of elders. The word for steward in Greek is oikonomos. This is a word frequently associated with a person given responsibility for the management of a household. The

use of the phrase “a steward of God” indicates that an elder has been given a stewardship by God and has a responsibility to God to be a good manager of the church, which is also known as the bride of Christ. In the same sense in which the steward is not a point of focus - the owner of the house is, so too, an elder is not to be a focus of attention, but should recognize he is merely a steward, and God is the key figure for the church.

What is the role of the body?

Biblically, all members of the body of Christ are ministers (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12, etc.). The vast majority of ministry in the building up of the body takes place when members of the body exercise their gifts ministering to one another. The elder’s role is to facilitate this body ministry. It is clear from Scripture that the body needs to be informed of all unresolved disciplinary issues. It also appears that while the body as a whole cannot overturn an action of elders, it has a role of concurring with decisions of the elders.

What are the Biblical offices of church government?

The two offices designated in Scripture are enumerated in 1 Timothy 3 and are bishops, or elders or pastors, and deacons. We do not see a role for a pastor above the elder board or a senior pastor above a staff of pastors.

This is probably the point to add a caveat. Yigo Baptist Church is a small church and has been operating under this church governance structure since 1997. The experience has been marked by some very challenging situations. We cannot point to a history of successes and claim that others should follow our model. We are merely attempting to be faithful to the scriptures and we pray that in the end we will be found faithful to the calling God has placed on our lives.

We are encouraged, however, by what we know of the former ministry of John Piper at Bethlehem Baptist Church in Minneapolis. This is a very large church, where plural elder leadership appears to be based on the Biblical model. Although John Piper had a significant personal ministry with a radio program and book and DVD ministries, it appears that his ministry was fully subjected to the governance of the elder board of which he was one member. It appears the elder board has full authority in the church over matters of doctrine and church life. John Piper has held the title of Senior Pastor for many years; however, his role appears to fall within the structure enumerated in the New Testament. Although Piper would not agree with all of our conclusions, Bethlehem Baptist appears to be an example of the Biblical model functioning successfully over a long period of time.

Should any one elder have a unique role on the elder board?

The role of James in the Jerusalem Council appears to indicate one person was given the responsibility for facilitating discussion and for discerning the will of the Holy Spirit, as expressed through an elder board. We believe there is a role for a Board Chairman or President who is recognized for his gifts at facilitating the board governance process.

Are there different classes of elders?

We don't think so. 1 Timothy 5:17 reads as follows: "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of a double honor especially those who labor in the word and doctrine." Some have taken this to mean there should be two classes of elders: those who teach and those who govern. However, just two chapters earlier, when Paul is listing the qualifications, he says that an elder must be able to teach. Clearly, there is an expectation that all elders be skilled in the handling of the Word of God. The Greek word translated labor in the passage above is "kopaio" which means to grow weary or exhausted in labor. We take this to mean that some elders may be called and gifted to a deeper ministry of the Word than others; however, taking all the passages on governance as a whole, it indicates there is an equality of elders even though there will be some differences in giftings.

We also recognize that anytime a new elder is added to an elder board, there will have to be a learning process where the person learns the role and learns how to function effectively. We believe the scriptural model leaves room for the idea that while all elders have an equal voice with equal weight, newer elders holding the position will undoubtedly go through a transition process where they learn from more experienced elders as they grow into the position.

Is there a role for a seminary degree in the selection of an elder?

As we have mentioned there is a requirement that an elder be able to teach. This implies that an elder will be well read. Pursuing a seminary degree is one way to become exposed to the historical teachings of the church, however, a seminary degree in itself is not sufficient to prepare a person for the teaching ministry or governance ministry of the church and it is not the only way to become prepared for such a calling. A calling as an elder is a lifelong commitment to learning and growing in service to our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. A seminary degree can be a part of this learning process but there are other paths to achieve the same objectives. We also recognize that a person can obtain a degree from modern seminaries and have very little exposure to historical Christian teachings.

Can women serve in the position of elder?

There is a creation principle that while men and women are equal before God, they are called to differing roles within the spheres of the church and the home. This is evident in Genesis 2 that God could not find a suitable helper for Adam and created Eve for this purpose. Thus, man and woman were created with different purposes in

mind. The woman was created to be a helper for the man. This principle is carried throughout scripture and is nowhere more evident than in Ephesians chapter 5. We are told that the husband is the head of the wife in the same manner that Christ is the head of the church. The husband and wife are equal in the sight of God and are equally responsible to God to account for their sins but are assigned differing roles within the family.

In this same way, the Bible makes clear that men and women are given differing roles within the church. In 1 Timothy 2:12 Paul says that he does not allow a women to teach or have authority over a man. There are no examples of women teaching **men** in the New Testament. There are linkages in scripture between the church and the home (i.e. 1 Timothy 3:5) that make it apparent that a home is microcosm of the church. Thus, it would follow that the differing roles that are made clear in the home are present in the church as well.

If there is a Biblical prohibition against a women teaching or having authority over a man, it is clear that a woman cannot hold the office of elder. This does not change just because the culture around us changes. However, we should point out that this is the only limitation of the service of women in the church and women are free to pursue and grow in all other ministry avenues.

Concluding Comment

All Christians are familiar with the stand that Martin Luther took towards the doctrine of justification by faith alone. He labeled the teaching as the doctrine upon which the church stands or falls. However, that was not the only doctrine about which Luther was concerned. He used the Latin phrase “Ecclesia Reformata semper reformanda” to describe his view on church reformation. The phrase translates as “the church reformed, always reforming.” He didn’t view the reformation of the church as a one-time event, but rather an ongoing process whereby the church needed to continually be conformed to the Word of God. We believe this element of Luther’s reformation mindset has been lost in the church. We believe the church should continually measure itself against the Word of God and continue the reformation process where necessary.

We hope this paper has been helpful in examining what the Bible has to say about church governance and in providing an understanding of the basis of the governance model employed in Yigo Baptist Church.

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