

EVANGELICAL REUNION
Part 2: Some Roads back to Unity
Chapter 11: Dealing with Differences in Government

by John M. Frame

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Differences in government fit under all the previous categories, but they pose particular problems for unity. One can consider toleration within many areas of doctrine and practice. But, after all, a single church – the one, true church – can only be governed in one way. Or so it seems.

I don't have any easy answer here, or in any other area of our discussion. It may be that in God's providence governmental differences will prevent church union. Or perhaps union will simply not be possible unless the Spirit (working contrary to the forces of denominationalism which tend to harden our differences) teaches the whole church some new things from the Scriptures.

Of course, ultimate reunion, by most prognostications, is a long way off, unless the Lord intends to come very soon. So if we do not see an answer to the question of how the reorganized one, true church will be governed, for the present we can simply resolve to "cross that bridge when we come to it," meanwhile chipping away at those other barriers which may be easier to handle at the moment. Perhaps in time we may be able to reorganize into three great evangelical denominations: one Episcopal, one Presbyterian, and one Congregational association. Once that is done we could start to worry about government!

But let me say a few things about church government which may stimulate us to further thought.

The New Testament contains relatively little normative teaching about church government, compared to its teaching on the person of Christ, the atonement, the resurrection, the Spirit, justification, Christian morality, and the

last days. Much is said about the church as the body of Christ, about its gifts and unity, about its tasks in worship, evangelism and instruction; but little is said about how it is to be governed. The book of Acts makes clear that the apostles were the rulers of the church in their day, and that they appointed assistants for various tasks (6:1ff.), but there is remarkably no indication of how the church is to be governed after the deaths of the apostles. The Pastoral epistles and other books make references to church officers such as "bishops," "elders"¹ and "deacons," and require obedience to them. Qualifications for these offices are stated (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Tit. 1:5-9), exhortations to the officers are made (Acts 20:17-37; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), but their powers and relations to one another are never stated and the manner of choosing them is somewhat obscure. In one case, something like an election seems to have taken place (Acts 6:3,5); in another, an apostolic representative was given power to appoint (Tit. 1:5). The latter example may be taken to favor Episcopacy, the former to favor Presbyterianism or Congregationalism.

I am, as I stated earlier, a Presbyterian, because I believe in a body of congregations connected to one another by a plurality of elected representative officers. I believe this because: (a) I find in the New Testament some indication that the Christians followed in general the organization of the synagogues from which they came; (b) it appears that bodies larger than local house-churches functioned as "churches"; and (c) the New Testament always refers to church rulers ("the bishops," "the elders") in the plural. Pragmatically, the Presbyterian form seems to me to allow the best combination of mutual accountability with local control and freedom. It is a system which forms the pattern, e.g., for the remarkably successful structure of the U. S. civil government.

I would hope that the one, true church will one day, by God's grace, achieve reunion and adopt the Presbyterian form of government as its pattern for reorganization. However, the arguments for Presbyterianism summarized above are certainly not watertight. Certainly they don't have the same force as those for the deity of Christ or for salvation by grace. After all, the New Testament never *commands* us to follow the "synagogue pattern" alluded to in (a). And although the evidence for city-churches (presbyteries) is strong in the New Testament, it is harder to establish the existence of courts higher than those, except for the one which included the apostolic band itself (Acts 15) and which had only one meeting that we know of; so (b) may not lead us to a full-blown Presbyterian structure. And although the New Testament speaks of bishops and elders in the plural (c), this fact does not quite prove that all churches were normatively required to have a plurality of elders. Can we be sure that there was never any church in which only one man was qualified for the eldership? Can we be sure

¹ As most Presbyterians, I believe that "bishop" and "elder" are synonymous, the latter term being more easily understood among Jews and the former among Gentiles

that there were no distinctions of gifts, wisdom and responsibilities among the elders such that one could become *primus inter pares*?

So there is some uncertainty about the original form of government in the New Testament. If it were important to God that the church be governed in one and only one way, I have no doubt that he would have made it more clear. Therefore, I am inclined to take the issue of church government a bit less seriously than many people do.² I think that God regards the structure and method of church government to be less important than the reality of Jesus' own government of the church as its supreme priest-king. The relative indifference of the New Testament to matters of human government would seem to be an invitation to us to take the reality of Jesus' own government more seriously. Related to this, another reason, perhaps, for the uncertainty about governmental structure is that this structure is less important than the spiritual qualities of the leaders and the people. When those spiritual qualities are lacking, the best form of government (the Presbyterian, of course) will be a curse upon God's people. When they are present, even inadequate forms of government will work well.³

Mutual trust is especially important. Many Christians (especially Presbyterians) think that no government will be adequate unless there are many checks and balances against the abuse of power such as we find in the various denominational Forms of Government. But formal procedures become important only when there is conflict to be resolved, distrust of informal agreements, etc. Until Jesus returns, sin will be in the world, and we will always need some sorts of formal checks and balances, some formal procedures for doing things, some standard ways of redressing grievances, etc. But the more mutual trust there is, the less of that will be necessary. The more we genuinely love each other, the less difference it will make whether, e.g., there are three or five men on some

² No one, at least, claims that one particular form of government is essential to the existence of the true church, so that any body without that form of government is not really a church. Most would therefore agree that their particular system of church government is part of the "well being" (*bene esse*), not the "being" (*esse*) of the church.

³ Someone might ask, "If church government is relatively unimportant, then why the blistering attack on denominational separation? Isn't that essentially a question about church government?" My reply: (1) One may make a plausible biblical case for Episcopal, Presbyterian, or Congregational government; but there is *no* case to be made for denominationalism. (2) The issue of denominationalism is not only an issue of church government, but also concerns fellowship, mutual sharing of gifts, our full expression of brotherly love, the church's theological unity, our witness to the world, and many other matters. If the issue were only one of singular vs. multiple or centralized vs. diversified government, I would not be sufficiently interested to write a book about it.

committee, or whether judicial appellants must first submit their appeals to a committee of presbytery.⁴

I suspect that if God ever permits the one, true church to reunite under a common government, he will at the same time bring about a great increase in our love and trust for one another. How else could reunion even be conceivable? And when that happens, even though I dearly hope that the church will be Presbyterian, it won't bother me terribly if my dear brothers choose another system to govern God's people. I trust that this attitude of mine is not motivated by theological indifference, but by a desire to respect the emphasis, as well as the specific teaching, of the Word of God, and to promote the unity of the church which the Word of God requires more clearly than it requires any particular governmental structure.

Consider the following.⁵ We have seen that the relative silence in the New Testament about form of government is related to the importance of theocentric government, the rule of Christ himself through the Spirit. Bureaucracy and constitution are at best expressions of the life of the Spirit and of immense potential value because of it, at worst they are presiders over a corpse or a counterfeit.

Moreover, it could be argued that our fascination with bureaucracy and constitution is partly a cultural reflex, an attempt to map civic political power relations directly onto the church, and vice versa. Thus, the debates among Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Episcopalians recapitulate the debates among democrats, republicans, monarchists.

Granting, then, that the fundamental issue for the New Testament is the rule of God through the Spirit, the biblical method of determining policy must not be majority vote as such, but Spirit-generated consensus among the leadership. The elders did have Christ's authority to rule, but they recognized a world of difference between godly rule and worldly tyranny. They were to rule in a unique, non-worldly way, as "servant-leaders," following the steps of Jesus himself (Matt. 20:26-28). Further, they knew that they were not the depositories of all wisdom, and that no leader with any sense thinks that he can drive the sheep where they have no inkling to go. Good leadership is always consultative, in the sense of consulting the well-being of those led. It listens to the whole people of God, and

⁴ These are the sorts of questions that are debated endlessly, it seems, at presbytery meetings and spelled out meticulously in the various books of church government and canon law.

⁵ The next paragraphs are my paraphrases of a letter sent to me by Vern Poythress. I thought the letter was a vintage example of the "multi-perspectivalism" that he and I both emphasize. Some of the following words are his own, but I will not use quotation marks, for I intend, as I must, to take responsibility for any problems emerging from my formulation.

particularly to those for whom it is responsible. Of course, it does not merely capitulate to what the sheep already think their well-being is, but educates them. And by educating them it is able to lead them rather than simply to drive them.

But that means that in a healthy church the debate between Congregationalism and Presbyterianism is largely an academic one. What difference does it make to Spiritual life? If you start with the leaders (Presbyterianism), you nevertheless discover at the heart of biblical leadership the consultative, or better, servant pattern which recognizes and uses the gifts (including gifts of administration) residing in the congregation as a whole and in its members individually in varying degrees. If you start with the congregation (Congregationalism), you find, at the heart of biblical wisdom in the congregation's decision-making, the necessary conviction that some are more gifted and that their gifts (which are gifts of the Lord and not merely the congregation's property to manage as it wishes) must be given full scope for exercise.

The differences between the two emerge when controversy strikes. There the formal constitution determines the rules of the fight. In such cases, however, Congregationalism can degenerate into mob mania and Presbyterianism into high handedness. Then the only solution is to recover the spiritual priority: Spirit-led consensus, servant leadership. While broader courts can help some (and thus I prefer Presbyterianism), our goal is not to have some solution imposed by a broader authority, but to have restored the brotherly unity of mind which comes only from God's grace.

Now let us perspectivalize Episcopacy. James is the informal bishop in Acts 15, I think. Any good bishop acts like any other good leader: he is consultative. James sums up the arguments, the state of consensus. By doing so he may even create somewhat greater consensus. But how could anyone with biblical wisdom necessary to become a bishop think that all wisdom was summed up in him or in his superiors alone? He has listened to a debate, and almost certainly learned something from it. Outside modern constitutional arrangements, many traditional cultures operate a good deal by consensus. There are, of course, the usual opportunities for abuse. But again, wise leaders can't get too far ahead of their followers. And wise minorities will know when to show proper deference to leaders, even when the consensus of those leaders is distasteful to them.

On the above principles, a monarchical bishop would not be a terribly bad thing, especially if: (1) he were appointed from below, by consensus, rather than from above (though it would be proper for the consensus to be influenced by those who are already in leadership positions); and (2) one could make an appeal over the bishop to correct abuses. One thinks of the checks and balances in the U. S. Constitution. Analogous checks could help in the church situation.

What of Independency? The Independents have given up on all constitutions and bureaucracies broader than the parish size (what an arbitrary stopping point!), mostly because they see people preoccupied with the formal structures and not with the Spiritual life that the structures are supposed to facilitate.

The main conclusion: if we take seriously the biblical principles (1) that God himself rules the church (2) through his Word by way of Spirit-led consensus (3) administered by servant leaders who understand their limitations and the gifts of others in the body, then the practical differences between Presbyterianism, Congregationalism and Episcopalianism would be very small. These terms, indeed, could describe a single form of government from three different perspectives!

The way to unity is precisely a renewal of that love and respect for God and one another that will lead to a Spirit-led church government.⁶ As I write these words, incredible changes in government are occurring in what once was the "Communist bloc." Can we not pray that God will work within his own people as well to bring about government which will honor him and therefore lead to reunion?

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⁶ Besides the letter from Poythress, I was greatly moved by a recent interview in *The Christian Observer* (Nov. 3, 1989, pp. 17f) in which Rousas J. Rushdoony describes the government of his denomination, the Anglican Churches of America and Associates. His emphasis also is that government should be first pastoral and consultative, and that this emphasis should far outweigh the bureaucratic and judicial elements. I had never heard of this denomination before, but from Rushdoony's description it is enormously attractive to me.