

THE LORD AND HIS CHURCH

by Ray C. Stedman

The following study grows out of a question that was handed me on one occasion during a question and answer hour. Many have asked it before and since, and it deserves an honest and straightforward answer. The question is, "On what basis do you feel that the present church government at Peninsula Bible Church is scriptural?" I am very happy to attempt an answer, for I feel that it is a great and important issue. Church government is a matter of real concern and one that we need to be very sure is based on the principles of the Word of God.

Among the great denominations of our American church life there are three major forms of church government today:

1. One of them (undoubtedly the oldest), is the *episcopal* form of government. This form is found in churches such as the Roman Catholic, the Anglican, the Methodist, and certain smaller groups as well. Final authority in the episcopal form of government rests in a bishop. There are other governing agencies besides the bishop, of course, but, by and large, the major, final decisions are made by the bishop. This form of government grew out of an attempt to recreate apostolic authority. The apostles were recognized as the final human authority in the early church, and, in more or less degree, the churches that follow this type of government are trying to recreate that apostolic authority.
2. Another form that is quite widespread in this country, as well as in Scotland, is the *presbyterian* form of government. This stems largely from Reformation days, when the reformers broke away from the rigid control represented in the Catholic church and established what they felt was a more modified and more scriptural form of government. This is represented in this country by Presbyterian churches of various types. Final authority here is vested largely in a group of ministers called a *presbytery*. It is made up of the pastors of a given number of churches within a specified district or area. They make final decisions about matters of policy and matters of government, control buildings and property, and settle disciplinary problems. This form of government seems to have arisen out of the concept of the ascendancy of the clergy over the laity, that is, that the clergy are especially ordained by God to exercise ruling power within the church.
3. The third, and most widespread, type of church government in our country is called the *congregational* form. This is utilized by the Congregational churches, Baptist churches, the Church of Christ, and many other similar groups. It is probably one of the newest forms of church government, dating back no further than the early part of the 17th, or even the later part of the 16th century. It arose out of the widespread adherence of democratic ideals that came with the rising of democracies in our western world. It was assumed that in the church the people ought to have the voice of authority, and in congregationally governed churches the voice of the people (usually determined by a majority vote) is the final voice, and the church is regarded as a democracy.

Now, in examining these systems, I recognize that men are very apt to be creatures of their times. It is easy to be influenced by our background of politics and the customs of the times in which we live. Therefore, if I take the position, as I most sincerely do, that none of these systems represents a clearly scriptural position, it is not in any sense an attempt to be critical. I am sure that Peninsula Bible Church is doubtless missing the full scriptural pattern as well. There are things to which we are emotionally blind and which are not in accord with the Scriptures, for we too have been influenced by traditional thinking. I would like to make it clear that there is no sense of criticism intended along this line.

But having said all the above, I firmly believe that the present form of government at Peninsula Bible Church is the closest to the Biblical pattern that I have seen. If there is one primary reason for this, it is because the men

who began this work were unconscious of the Spirit's goal. They did not begin with the idea of forming a church, so there was no occasion to intrude their own concepts of church government in the planning involved. Peninsula Bible Church began in 1949 with five businessmen who were led of the Lord to begin a little Bible class, which met Sunday evenings in the Community Center in Palo Alto. These five men could not foresee, and did not foresee, that in setting up the organization as they then envisaged it that it would become a church. So they could not, and did not, go into the question of church government. In many ways, therefore, Peninsula Bible Church, like Topsy, just grew. But, in looking back on those early days, we can see the over-superintendency of the Holy Spirit in setting up the form of government. These five men became aware only later, as the Lord made evident what was taking place here, that a New Testament pattern had been woven into the warp and woof of the original constitution and articles of incorporation that were drawn up to govern this group.

Now, the thing at question, of course, is what is it that marks Peninsula Bible Church as a Biblical church? Unquestionably, it is the enthronement here of the central idea from the Bible of what a church ought to be. The basic idea of church government in the Scriptures is the Headship of Christ!

Let me state that negatively. The church is definitely not a democracy, nor is it to be governed by clergy. Neither of these two ideas finds any support in the New Testament:

The concept of the clergy as a special governing class is decried throughout the New Testament. It finds its most severe condemnation in the letters to the seven churches in Revelation. There the deeds and the doctrines of the clergy as a separate group that ought to be elevated above the laity and run things within the church is decried. Christ says, "I hate those things." To make a distinction between the clergy and the laity in governmental matters is to invite endless difficulties.

But neither is the church a democracy! When you read in the New Testament that Christ is Head of the Church, you immediately are saying that it cannot be a democracy. If the Head has final authority then the people cannot be the authority. Now it is interesting that the final authority of Christ is given great emphasis in the very first mention of the church in the New Testament. In the sixteenth chapter of Matthew, the Lord says to Peter,

I will build my church [*my church*] and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it, {Matt 16:18 KJV}.

Why will not the gates of hell prevail? Because it is his church! He will govern it and defend it. This is the first and most essential thing about the church -- it is a body under the headship of Christ.

The Epistle to the Ephesians is the great letter of the New Testament that has to do with the church, and in that letter Paul develops two figures to illustrate the nature of the church:

- One is that the church is a body and it has a head. Just as our body is governed physically by our head, and our hands and our feet and all the other elements of our body never move except by the command of the head, so the church is a living organism, a body that is not to move except by direct command of the Head, and Christ is the Head.
- Then, in another passage, Paul compares the church to a building. It is a temple, he says, that is holy, spotless, and growing gradually to be a holy temple that is to be occupied by the Lord himself.

In both figures the idea of growth is emphasized -- the body is growing, the building is growing. But in each case, as well, all authority is vested in the Lord. Christ is the Head of the body; he is the Lord of the temple. Therefore, the basic function of church government is to make room for the ministry and superintendency of Christ as the Head of the church, through the Holy Spirit.

Now it is also revealed in our New Testament that the Lord chooses to make known his will through men whom he designates and equips to carry on the spiritual oversight of his work. These are called by various names in the Scriptures. They are designated as elders in one place, and in another place they are named bishops or overseers (the same word in the Greek), and in still another place they are called pastors and

teachers. These all refer to the same office, but they designate different aspects.

- The word "elder" is a reference to the man himself. It indicates a man of maturity, a man not necessarily old in years, but mature in judgement.
- The word "bishop," or "overseer," is a word that has reference to the work. Such a one is to have the oversight: he is to be in superintendency over a group.
- Then the double word, "pastor and teacher," has a regard to the duties involved. A pastor is a shepherd.

The job of these men in any church is to shepherd the flock, to see that they are fed from the Word of God, to see that they are disciplined if necessary, to see that their needs are met, whatever they may be. This is the important task of those who are bishops, elders, pastors, teachers, or whatever title may be used in the Word of God.

It is also clearly evident that there was never just one of these in any given church. There is no instance in the Bible of there being but one individual in authority in the church, other than the story in Third John where Diotrephes is referred to, and John speaks in the most severe terms of this man who "loveth to have the preeminence" {3 Jn 1:9 KJV}, and who lifted himself up and singlehandedly started running the church. In all other churches there were always several elders in charge. Also, in every case, you will notice that these elders (plural) were to serve for life, or until conduct or circumstances rendered it no longer possible for them to serve. This can easily be established as you read through the New Testament. There is never any place where a term of office is mentioned for these men. They were evidently to serve for life, and the only thing that was ever brought to question was their fitness to serve on the basis of their conduct, or the fact that they had moved away, or were otherwise incapacitated.

Immediately, the great question is: "How were these men selected?" What method was used to determine who should serve in this capacity? This is the very heart of the issue. As you read through your New Testament, it is quite obvious that they were, first of all, appointed by the apostles.

In Acts, the 14th chapter, Verse 22, we learn that the apostles, Paul and Barnabas, came back down through the cities that they had formerly visited,

... confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must, through much tribulation, enter into the kingdom of God. And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. {Acts 14:22-23 KJV}

Here is a clear-cut instance of the apostles selecting these individuals, ordaining elders in every church, praying with them, and then commending them to the Lord. These men were not chosen willfully, according of the apostles' own desires. They did not go into a church and take the first good looking man who had become a Christian, and had a pretty sizable bank account, and make him an elder. They were not guided simply by personal preference. It is clearly indicated in the Word of God that they prayed and fasted over this, seeking the mind of the Lord. Who does the Lord want? What does the Head of the Church want as instruments in the governing of his church?

Again, this is made manifest in Acts 20, Verse 17, "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church." Then in Verse 28 he says of them,

Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. {Acts 20:28 KJV}

Here are men that the apostles had appointed to their office, but they had first determined that these were men chosen of the Holy Ghost, gifted by God.

Then, later on, it is apparent that the apostles appointed apostolic delegates to do this task. Two of these were

Timothy and Titus. These were two young men who traveled with Paul, and both were commissioned to this work. In Titus, first chapter, verse five, Paul says,

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee. {Tit 1:5 KJV}

Though Titus was not an apostle, yet he could represent Paul and was commissioned to this task. In First Timothy, the third chapter, Verses 1-7, Timothy was likewise commanded to ordain elders and the qualifications were given specifically that they might recognize the ones whom the Holy Spirit had chosen.

"But," you say, "we do not have apostles or apostolic delegates today!" Yes, we do. There are apostles authorized by the Lord to select elders today!

I remember, on one occasion, I was meeting with two or three Mormons in a home in which we were discussing the tenets of the Mormon faith. One of their constant boasts is that they have the only church that has twelve apostles as well as a council of seventy. They claim, of course, that this is the mark of the true church. They said to me, "You do not belong to the true church. Your church doesn't even have apostles, but our church has twelve apostles." I said, "You are mistaken, my friends, our church does have apostles." They said, "What do you mean? What sect do you belong to?" And I said, "The group I belong to makes no difference, but the apostles that we have are the true apostles." He said, "Well, who are they?" I said, "The apostles we have are the original ones, Paul, John, Peter, James and others who are listed in the New Testament."

"How do you mean," they said, "how can that be?" I said, "Any time I want to find out what the Apostle Paul has to say about a subject, I simply turn to Romans through Hebrews and read his words. If I want to know what the Apostle Peter has to say, I turn to Peter's letters and there is Peter still speaking today." The church was built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, and they still speak to us today. Christ's plan for government has never changed. If you desire to know the qualifications for elders, go to Paul the Apostle, and he will tell you what qualifications you must look for. Ask Peter what are their duties, and he will outline them for you. Then those in positions of leadership see men gifted in this way by the Holy Spirit and they are to recognize that the Spirit of God has chosen such to be in a position of authority within the church. It is really the Apostle Paul who has identified him. He has given us the qualifications by which that man is to be chosen. He still speaks to guide the saints in recognizing who among them the Lord has marked out for this work."

Here is a most significant point. Never once in the whole of the New Testament do you read of churches choosing their own leaders. Never once! Sheep never choose their shepherd. That is always the job of the Chief Shepherd. The sheep never get together and have an election to decide who is going to be their shepherd. Neither is the church, the flock of God, to do it. But, once chosen, the flock is constantly exhorted to recognize that the Chief Shepherd has set these men among them and that they are to honor them, to respect them, and to follow them. In the letter to the Hebrews, believers are exhorted,

"Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." {Heb 13:7 KJV}

Again,

Obey them that have rule over you, and submit yourselves for they watch for your souls as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy and not with grief, for that is unprofitable for you. {Heb 13:8 KJV}

Then in First Thessalonians, Paul writes,

We beseech you, brethren, to know them which labor among you and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake, and be at peace among yourselves. {1 Th 5:12-13 KJV}

This is the Apostle's word to the church concerning those who are in positions of authority over them.

Neither are these men left to their own devices on how to run the church. They are carefully instructed by the apostles as to their duties. The Apostle Peter addresses "the elders which are among you" {1 Pet 5:1a KJV}, and urges them:

Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind, neither as being lords over God's heritage, {1 Pet 5:2-3a KJV}

That is, do not think that you are to be the boss of the church and are simply to give orders and everyone must follow what you say. No, remember, this is God's flock, and you are not to lord it over them.

... but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away. {1 Pet 5:3b-4 KJV}

These are wise words and they are very badly needed in church government. Other instructions appear in First Timothy and Titus, given to inform the elders of the church where their limitations lie and what form of activities they are to engage in.

Perhaps someone is saying, "Why has this been so largely abandoned today?" Let me answer this with a quotation from W. E. Vine, a noted English scholar. He says:

The course of departure from apostolic teaching and precept is easily traceable. Human pride and rivalry, a struggle for ascendancy and power early produced a class of ecclesiastical officials who obtained their position in a manner very different from what is set forth in Scripture. The case of Diotrophes provides an illustration. The method was adopted, too, of electing church officials by vote, hence the popular or the strong man obtained a coveted position. Dependence on the Spirit of God and the recognition of the evidence of his operation have given place to officialism and formality, and the evil spread gradually but surely, and eventually became general.

I am greatly in the belief that the strong and wonderful fellowship of the Spirit we enjoy here at Peninsula Bible Church is largely because we have been unconsciously led of the Lord into this ancient form of government which so nearly represents what the New Testament sets forth. It is wonderful to see how the Lord can control men whom he has set in the position of authority.

In Isaiah 11, there is a wonderful passage which predicts a time when the wolf shall lie down with the lamb, and the calf and the lion and the fatling shall lie down together and a little child shall lead them. In reading that I have often thought, "This sounds like a Board of Directors' meeting at Peninsula Bible Church." If you know these men intimately, as I have had occasion to know them, you would recognize that some of them are pretty strong-minded men. One fellow is like a lion, taking the leadership like a lion, a strong, wonderful man that way. Another one is like a leopard, quiet but deadly! Then another one is more like a wolf. He can snap a bit at times. Still another fellow in his weak moments is more like a bear, sometimes surly and growly. And here am I, poor innocent lamb, in the midst of all these wild animals! But I can testify with a full heart that when we meet together as Directors of Peninsula Bible Church, a miracle takes place. The wolf lies down with the lamb; and the lion and the fatling lie down together; the cow and the bear feed together, and so on. We have found a deep bond of peace and fellowship because of the superintendency of the Spirit of God in all these matters.

Perhaps somebody says, "Are we just to leave the church to be run by these men, with the congregation never allowed to decide anything at all?" The answer is, "No." This group is not to decide all questions within the church. On spiritual matters and matters of essential policy within the church their job is to determine the mind of the Lord. They are not to determine their own will, or the will of the people, but the will of the Lord. We believe this is best determined by seeking unanimous action on decisions so that, through the years, there has been an unwritten law that the Board of Directors will not operate by majority vote, but there must be a unanimous vote. Sometimes we must wait quite a while before the Lord gets some of the lions and the bears around to the place where they agree, but it has always been accomplished. When there is unanimity, we believe the mind of the Lord is made manifest. But on matters that have to do with the disbursement of funds for major projects, the voice of the people is rightly heard. This is a matter that concerns the church. When

people give money they have a right to say where it is going. A giver has the right to direct his gift. We have tried to recognize this and to set up opportunities for the voice of the congregation to be heard about matters that have to do with the undertaking of missionary projects, building programs, and that type of thing.

I sincerely believe that at Peninsula Bible Church we follow this New Testament pattern as closely as it is possible to do today, and yet I am aware that, even as I write this, there are doubtless areas of failure to which we are blind because of our closeness to the situation, our varied backgrounds, and the times in which we live. Yet I thank God that we have been led of him into a basic form of organization that is close to the New Testament pattern.

Now, before I bring this to a close, let me come back to the all important thing, and that is the Lordship of Christ: How comforting it is to know that we are not left to run things ourselves. We do not have to make final decisions on church matters. When problems come before the church, we do not need to stew and fret, and attempt to solve them ourselves. We are, of course, to investigate and discuss and plan. The Lord wants us to know what is happening. We are to look into matters to see what the underlying principles affecting them may be. The Lord does not work apart from us, but through us. But in the final analysis, we are not to listen to the voice of the people; we are to listen only to the voice of the Lord. We can be sure that when he is in the midst of his church, direction will be given. This church is not ours, it is his church. It was bought with his blood. He cleansed it, and purified it by his Word. He appointed its ordinances. He is the one who has chosen those to guide in spiritual matters, and has equipped them with the necessary qualifications to do the work. It is the Lord who has distributed the talents of gifts and ministry among the whole congregation so that each one has a special talent, a special gift to be exercised in the ministry of the church. It is to the Lord that we bring our gifts, not to the church. If they are withheld, you withhold them from the Lord, not from the church. If you bring them, you bring them to the Lord, not to the church. That is what he meant when he said, "Inasmuch as you did it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me," {cf, Matt 25:40b}.

This is the place where God's honor dwells, where evil doctrines and evil associates are not to have any practice or place. I do not mean this building, I mean this people. This is the place of worship in spirit and in truth. This is the place of witness in love and in power. Of this church, as of all other churches, it is written, "If any man defile the church of God, him will God destroy," {cf, 1 Cor 3:17}. And of this church it is written,

"I will build my church and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it," {Matt 16:18b KJV}

So traditions and customs and the trappings of men must be put away. We must now take our Bibles and search out these things, and walk in the light of his Word, dwelling together in unity and in peace, speaking the truth in love, and above all else, holding to the Head, who alone has the right to raise up and to put down, to direct and to guide, and before whom we must all give an account.

Prayer

Our Holy Father, we thank you for the wonder of the church. We thank you that we have become part of this living organism by faith in thy beloved Son, that he it was who cleansed us with his blood, and that blessed Spirit's baptism has united us to this body and made us to share in its united life. Lord, we pray that we may honor thee and ever seek to remember that thou art alive and walking in the midst of thy church and holding its lampstand in thy hand. Help us, therefore, to be aware of our testimony in this area, in this neighborhood, and to faithfully walk in fellowship with our living Lord, for we pray in his name, Amen.

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