

*Reflections on
Church Governance*



Stephen Gunawan



1. Summary of my View

The issue of church governance normally grows in importance as a congregation grows in size. Such pragmatic approach, though common, is potentially damaging. As the saying goes, a failure to plan is a plan to fail. And considering a system of governance only when the need arises could mean that certain complexities have already arisen that will hinder the placement of an effective system. As such, this article serves to consider the different system of church governance, for early placement. I would encourage those who are involved in ecclesiastical work to ponder upon this, not when the issue becomes pertinent, but as early as possible.

Having said that, I also do not think that a recent church plant should make a rushed and legalistic establishment of the offices when the people are not ready. A simplistic reasoning, which I will explain further, is that a recent church plant may not yet be able to determine which members exhibit biblical maturity both doctrinally and in life example. However, the consideration for which system of governance the congregation intend to submit themselves under must be clarified early in the establishment, so that its members can begin to work towards the design.

Okay, now the beefy part.

The Bible does not *explicitly* prescribe the form of church governance in the New Testament; and I believe there are reasons for that. The New Testament and Old Testament systems of leadership were also not stagnant – ie. They hold the same principles but change with time. The Old Testament leadership went from being patriarchal to tribal, to national/ monarchic to priestly. Similarly, the New Testament model was not the same when Jesus ascended as when the apostolic era ended.

So I generally (though not specifically) concur with Wayne Grudem when he said this:

The form of church government is not a major doctrine like the Trinity, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, or the authority of Scripture... It seems to me, then, that there ought to be room for evangelical Christians to differ amicably over this question in the hope that further understanding may be gained. And it also seems that individual Christians – while they may have a preference for one system or another, and while they may wish at appropriate times to argue forcefully for one system or another – should nevertheless be willing to live and minister within any of several different Protestant systems of church government in which they may find themselves from time to time.

Three systems, I believe, could be reasoned fairly consistently; which are the Presbyterian system, the Episcopalian system and the Congregational system. But that does not mean I do not have a view on which I think is more biblical. My reason for agreeing with Grudem is due to the fact that history has proven (even biblical history!) that the best system put in place cannot and will not be foolproof. The deceitfulness of human heart will almost always find a way to spoil the best of systems. However, it is exactly because of this deceitfulness of heart that I think the Presbyterian system to be one that can better ensure proper checks and balances for the long run.

The best system put in place cannot and will not be foolproof, because of the deceitfulness of the human heart. However, it is exactly because of this fact deceitfulness of heart that I think the Presbyterian system to be one that can better ensure proper checks and balances for the long term.

So let me say upfront that I favor the Presbyterian system for the very reason that it best keeps our corrupted hearts at bay. Prof Jul Medenblik gave one leadership axiom that struck me: “To go quick, go alone. To go far, go with others.” This corresponds with the “many advisers” of Prov 15:22. A centralized system could achieve big results quickly, especially when the top leaders are not self-serving and are spiritually mature. But when the system breaks down, the highly hierarchical decision-making system will mean that the corruption would permeate the entire system; making recovery very difficult. A decentralized system will indeed require



a great deal of patience, especially when some elders are much more mature than others. But I believe this is exactly what is required in the ecclesiastical community of believers. And more foundationally, although the New Testament does not explicitly prescribe a certain type of governance, however, we can already see the two offices that the apostles commanded, which were the elders (interchangeably used with the terms overseers and ministers/ bishops); and we can already see the New Testament commanding for plurality of elders. This, and many more arguments, are what I will set forth in the article.

With that, I shall not beat around the bush and proceed to argue for Presbyterianism. I hope being this brutally honest in the opening will not cause you to tuck this away; for I will try to explain my way to this conclusion, hopefully giving each system a fair consideration.

Let me just mention one final note. This article is not meant to be a systematic thesis for this issue, but an invitation to meditative pondering on it. As such, I am assuming that the readers are at the very least aware of the differentiating characteristics of each system of church governance. If you are not, but are interested to find out the defining characteristics of each, I think there are ample materials available both online and offline which you can find. I want to avoid an overly lengthy article that puts off the intended audience, so I am skipping that part.

2. What's Needed: Christocentric Governance

Before we proceed any further, let me state the obvious. Jesus Christ is the founder (Matt 16:18), head (Eph 5:23), and final purpose – *telos* - of the Church (2 Cor 11:2; Rev 21:2-3). As such, any system of church governance must reflect such doxological Christocentricity – that is, it must bring the church to Jesus Christ. Such Christocentric governance, I would suggest, need to have the following characteristics:

- **Affirming the supremacy of Christ over His church, the system must:**
 - **Acknowledge the doxological nature of Church governance (as opposed to the usurping of power for an individual's - or group of individuals' - will).** In such leadership, man is at no liberty to teach apart from the full revelation of Scriptures – the full counsel of God's will (Acts 20:27-28); and as such disallowed from adding to or subtracting from God's Word (Rev 22:18-19). In short, man is to lead the church under principle of *Sola Scriptura*.
 - **Acknowledge the fallenness of man and guards against it (as opposed to a naïve system that wishes for the best to happen, or that trusts certain individuals' ability to resist corruption).** Power corrupts the best of us; and as such the best governance is one where its leaders are constantly reminded of their servitude to One truly worthy. The Old Testament in Deut 17:14-20 stripped the Israelite king of the usual kingly misuse of power, wealth and fidelity and gave him the duty to remind himself of the Torah he served to administer. Man's fallen nature, at the very least, demands the plurality of leadership (or in the New Testament sense of the word, plurality of elders). Reflective of the Trinitarian Godhead, the leadership must consist of elders with equal authority but can differ in the roles they play.
- **Ensuring growth into Christ-likeness, the system must:**
 - **Ensure that its members are taught the truth of Scriptures; for the purpose of independence and not dependence.** A leadership is paradoxically more successful when it is less needed; when the people it serves grow into maturity and are able to exercise discernment (Heb 5:11-14). Leadership that obscures the truth, or mystifies it to the point that Christ becomes unknowable to the simple, acts not in the interest of the Church. Instead, leadership must strive to uncover and to declare the mystery of God's will which he revealed in Christ (Rom 16:25; 1 Cor 2:7; Eph 1:9-10).
 - **Ensure that gifts are exercised and developed in the church; for the purpose of engagement, rather than disengagement.** Each member, with their Spirit-given gifts, are equipped through Scriptures for every good work (2 Tim 3:16), and comes together for mutual edification (1 Cor 14:26). The final purpose of such mutual edification is for the whole body to grow into the maturity of Christlikeness by building itself up in love, with each part doing its



- work (Eph 4:14-16). Each part is to exercise the gifts which the Holy Spirit has sovereignly assigned, in accordance to the order that the Scriptures has revealed.
- **Ensure that proper Church discipline is in place.** This could be the most difficult aspect to carry through, but it is vital. We don't like doing the rebuking or the disciplining, but a system that is put in place needs to assume the worst, not only the ideal. Matt 18:15-20 gives the principle for church discipline even for the smallest unit of the community of believers – ie. with two or three believers only. It shows that church discipline is a must even when the numbers are small; and that accountability to God and one another is what characterizes a fellowship in light.

So, we should seek for a system that is better able to achieve the above. Now, I need to emphasize again that I do not believe in being rigid in the placement of system. To illustrate the obvious, it will be extremely silly for a gathering of five to be forced into the appointment of elders and deacons! But even a gathering of few need to implement all of the above. That way, as the community grow numerically, the values that are put in place early will ensure that leaders that are spiritual (and not merely influential) are appreciated and elected; that a culture is put in place that encourages openness and transparency even for the best of us; that members are taught to be like the Bereans who are able to judge for themselves the truth of Scriptures; that members grow communally by exercising the spiritual gifts that has been given to them; and that church discipline is in place to ensure the purity of the Body of Christ. I believe, in the long run, the Presbyterian system is better able to achieve this, for reasons I will disclose in the later section on Presbyterianism.

3. Biblical Data

Now, let us consider some of the biblical data that are given to us with regards to Church governance. I shall take into account the historical development of leadership in the Old Testament, because although the entity in question in the Old Testament was not yet called the Church per se, yet I believe the leadership principles nonetheless applies.

One of the earliest observation regarding Old Testament leadership is that it is developmental, as opposed to being stagnant; formative as opposed to prescriptive. As I have mentioned, the leadership styles found in the Old Testament went from Patriarchal (Abraham – Isaac), to Tribal (Moses – Judges), to National-Monarchic (Saul – kings) and then to Priestly (Return from exile to the time of Jesus). In short, the format of leadership developed as God guided His people Israel. However, one thing is for sure. With each development wherein they were led by different groups of leaders (patriarchs/ leaders/ judges/ kings/ priests), they were at no liberty to opt for themselves another system. For example, under the rule of the kings of Judah, the people could not simply say that they preferred to revert back to being led by judges.

There were naturalistic as well as providential aspects to these developments; and it should be noted that a system of governance that works for a gathering of few would not be effective when the Israelites were blessed with numerical growth. As the people grew, from being an elect familial line to one big nation, complexities arose that called for a different format of governance. There were continuities and discontinuities that God providentially brought forward; such that care needs to be taken when trying to apply the text to the present context.

In the Patriarchal stage, leadership came in the form of the firstborn right; as Esau served Jacob and as the sons of Jacob served Joseph. But as we get to the time of Moses, they needed a judge to face the complexities that had arisen. Even then, the leadership structure developed according to the situation at hand. The exodus only needed a solitary leader. However, by Ex 18, the complexities have begun to overwhelm Moses, so much so that the need presented itself to appoint delegatory judges (18:21. Compare the similarity of the language to Acts 6:1-7). But because the leaders were not yet ready, Moses was to progressively teach them (19:20), and still had to take it upon himself to handle the difficult cases (18:22, 26). But in case one is tempted to appeal to such hierarchical structure as a pattern for modern leadership; I need to state that the Mosaic



authority was never fully passed down. What? Didn't Moses have a successor in the person of Joshua? Well yes he did. But even his subsequent did not hold the level of authority that Moses had, for despite the fact that God commanded Moses to appoint Joshua a leader over the whole community (Num 27:15-17), He nonetheless only commanded Moses to give Joshua some of his authority (27:20), and Eleazar the priest will now stand alongside Joshua to obtain decisions for him (27:21). In fact, the discontinuity is so clearly concluded in Deut 34:10, which explained that there would be no subsequent prophet to whom God would speak face to face, as He did to Moses. When the time came for them to enter the Promised Land, they needed to prepare for permanency, and they were commanded then to appoint judges for every town (Deut 16:18). But even this was not enough, as the Book of Judges would show us, for the absence of a national leader caused the people to do as they saw fit (Jdg 17:6; 21:25). We can continue to witness further evolutions; as subsequent kings were appointed but mostly failed to keep their heart faithful to God. During the exile that came as a result of their unfaithfulness, they no longer had a structure. But leadership was nonetheless found in exemplary figures like Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego. And as they were finally granted return by the Persian Empire, but did not have the sovereign kingdom reestablished, they were consequentially led by priests.

That's a very simplistic summary of the development of Old Testament governance. But as you can see, the form was not stagnant; but rather dependent on God's (sometimes) providential and (other times) revelatory guidance.

Such pattern is again observed in the New Testament. When Jesus ascended to heaven, there were no deacons, no elders present. All they had were the eyewitnesses of Jesus Christ led by the Apostles. In Mrk 3:14, the twelve were appointed. In Luk 10:1, the seventy two were appointed. In Acts 6:1-7, the seven deacons were chosen. The Christians got scattered because of persecution, but the Gospel grow because of it. And the need arose to appoint elders in each town to be overseers of the flock (Acts 14:23; Tit 1:5). My point? The need drove the format.

What am I saying here? Am I condoning a flexible and unfixed system? Absolutely not! What I am saying is that the Bible is not prescriptive on the format of the governance; but instead lays out the principles with which a system is to be formed. In the next section I will comment on each of the system – Congregational, Episcopalian and finally Presbyterian.

4. Spectrums of Church Governance

4.1 Congregational

I will comment on Congregationalism first, because it is the simplest form of the three. Again, I assume the readers as being familiar with the differences of the systems; and am skipping the definitions.

A multiple-elder congregationalism may actually suit the governance of a small but vibrant local church; but when it gets big and more complex, what normally happens, as L. Roy Taylor had observed, would be a *de facto* Presbyterian government. A single-elder congregationalism may actually result from one reformer's conviction of the corrupt governance of his existing church. But my argument is, if he allows such single-elder congregationalism to continue without establishing effective checks and balances, it would turn into a *de facto* Episcopalian system. And the problem with this is that the first generation single-elder congregation might have resulted from a sincere leader who was sacrificing his own career to break free from a presently corrupt system; and that would mean that the congregation was established on a noble if not divine vision. However, as the congregation grows and policies and facilities need to be put in place, the danger is immense that the subsequent leaders may not share the ideals of the founder, and thus usurp the system for their own benefits. If this indeed happens, then would I be right in saying that a system that had caused the congregation to grow in the first place would be the very same system that ensure their demise? And despite this being a grossly simplified account of history; should we not at the very least learn how such centralized system had caused the Roman Catholic church to be unable to recover from its heresy; and that has presently caused the



congregation within the Church of England to be legally unable to denounce the heresy which the state may choose to enforce?

My argument, then, is that Congregationalism could only be a temporary system at best, which need to be refined when complexities begin to arise. As mentioned above, a single-elder congregational church may arise out of necessity – during which time it is inevitable. But unless the situation dictates it, I would never favor singularity. A multiple-elder congregation incorporates into its system proper checks and balances; but the very commandment of the Lord's Supper demands a more universal relationship amongst the churches (1 Cor 11:29); where a local church can be brought into accountability by a larger community – thereby guarding against a communal descent into apostasy. So, the argument is for Congregational governance to prepare for the complexities it cannot accommodate.

4.2 Episcopalianism

Amongst the systems of church governance, Episcopalianism is the most hierarchical; with archbishops, bishops, priests, and laity serving in a top-down structure. But this is my first and biggest problem with such system. Try to read the Bible's description hierarchically, and see what you get:

- Paul (Apostle) and Barnabas (Apostle) appointed elders (Acts 14:23). Apostles are above elders.
- Paul and Barnabas went to Jerusalem's elders for clarification (Acts 15:2). Some apostles are below other apostles and even elders.
- Paul rebuked Peter (we'll not call him pope, okay?). (Gal 2). New apostle above senior apostle
- Lay people judged apostle (Acts 7:11). Lay people judged heresy of apostles and angels and condemns it (Gal 1:8). Laity above apostle.

So the apostle is above elders and below them, the apostle is above bishops and below them, and the laity is above all. Well, it was a joke, but I hope you get my point.

One argument for the justification of the Episcopalian system would be heavy references to history – especially the first few centuries of the Christian Church. Indeed, most proponents of Episcopalianism would be quick to admit that their view of church governance cannot be *solely* derived from evidence of Scripture, but rather finds aid in what they deduced about the structure of the church from documents sourced from the first few centuries of the Christian Church. That episcopos (bishops) in the early churches seemed to be hierarchically superior than the elders, they argue, meant that God had providentially formed the model for church governance that should be followed by subsequent church systems. But I would like to propose that there are some fallacies to that line of thought:

- **The Lessons from History**

We learn from history, but what lessons are specifically learned depends largely on interpretation. There are so many examples of people looking at the same story, but extracting very different meanings. While one can perhaps strongly argue for the existence very hierarchical structures in the early church, nonetheless the fact that the form of government was not explicitly commanded by Christ or His apostles should attest to its relativity. By appealing to sola scriptura, had church governance been absolute, and necessary for godly living, it would have been prescribed by Scriptures (read 2 Pet 1:3).

Having said that, I would not trivialize historical legacies. As is famously said by Santayana, those who fail to learn from history are doomed to repeat its mistakes. What should we learn then, from the governance of the churches of the first few centuries?

- **Historical and theological context. Canonization of Scriptures and establishment of orthodoxy through creeds.**

I have already argued that governance, as found in the Old Testament and the New, was progressive rather than stagnant. I would like to take the discussion up from there. Scriptural evidence shows that



Jesus and the Apostles left little instruction on what form Church leadership should take; and that some of the apostolic authorities were not permanent measures. For example, I think I could safely assume that the audience of this article would agree with me that the case of Acts 8 – where Apostolic confirmation were a pre-requisite to the people receiving the Holy Spirit (and thus the establishment of a local church) – is not prescriptive of churches today. This was a one-time event – a progressive revealing of the spread of the Gospel to non-Jewish people that had to be witnessed by the Apostles. There is no further evidence of such requirement, either in the New Testament, or in subsequent church traditions. The point? That roles and authority at the times of the Apostles were still progressive. For one, the Apostles and church fathers themselves had not yet written the full canon of the New Testament Scriptures (and it would be some time before the canonization was complete); and the understanding of even the Apostles themselves were still undergoing formation (consider how difficult it initially was for even Peter to understand that God included Cornelius the Gentiles to the elect!). So while we will all concur that Apostolic approval was important in the cases of the spread of the Gospel to Samaria and Judea, we will also agree that such requirements were not prescriptive of subsequent churches in the New Testament (much less for churches today).

And we can extend such argument forward. Within the next centuries of the history of the Christian Church, the formation of Christian orthodoxy which many now take for granted took prominent focus. With dangerous traditions such as the various forms of proto-Gnosticism and Docetism which abounded even during the times of the Apostles, getting the message from true Apostles of Christ became very important to ensure reliability. How else would that be achieved but to trace the teachings to the Apostles themselves; to those who were the Apostles' reliable contemporaries or to those who were their disciples? So, should we be surprised, under such condition, that Irenaeus of Lyons sought after the apostolic see as he combatted the prominent danger of Gnosticism? Within the next centuries, we would see the slow-but-sure formation of the vital Confessions and Creeds we now use as guidelines for orthodoxy. This way, orthodoxy was providentially formed based on apostolicity. Should we not consider, then, how some of these leaders served before the Council in Nicaea which established the doctrine of the Trinity; and before Chalcedon which established proper Christology? How about considering the massive contribution that the Council of Constantinople brought to Christendom, without forgetting that it was wrought by an emperor whose allegiance to Christianity *might* have been politically motivated rather than being a result of true conversion? Subsequent developments of doctrines followed the same pattern, with God allowing for the weaknesses of the church, and the heresies of the age to call the church to rise up and form what we now hold as orthodoxy.

But what happened next in the history of Christendom (at least from how I personally interpret history), after orthodoxy was formed, was a decline from it. Bishops gained not only religious powers, but also political ones, and the Bishop of Rome ended up reserving for himself the right to appoint bishops for the English dioceses and even to receive taxes. The slippery slope to the corruption of power was as much an effect of the structure then, as it was a departure from it. Should we blame the system then? Not entirely, I believe. The deceitfulness of man's heart will always corrupt the best systems. In the Old Testament's examples of governance – the Patriarchal, Tribal, National/ Monarchic, or Priestly - the success or failure of each system depended not on the system's inherent perfection or lack thereof (note that each of the system were situationally given), but on how much each subscriber submitted to God through the system. I believe this is why the New Testament's emphasis was never on the FORM of governance as much as the CHARACTER of the ones put in power. That although we are not given the form of church government prescriptively, we are given very detailed requirements of the characters elders, and even deacons are supposed to exhibit.

I believe this is why the New Testament's emphasis was never on the FORM of governance as much as the CHARACTER of the ones put in power

Of course, that submission was of primary importance did not mean that they were at liberty to change the format of governance as they saw fit. The people of Judah did not have a choice to revert back to a tribal system of governance; not even when the whole monarchy was in a complete mess! These were



providential systems through which God was progressively revealing the Messianic Kingdom which was to come only through Christ. Each weakness served to advance the hope for the Messianic salvation.

One more food for thought about Old Testament governance and we'll proceed. The whole of the history of Israel in the Old Testament climaxed at the time of the Davidic Kingdom; and the intent of showing such eschatological picture was made obvious when we compare the achievement during the time of Solomon when it was time for the Temple to be built. The putting of all enemies under the king's feet, and the rest on every side (1 Kings 5:3-4) bespoke of the eschatological time when Christ's enemies shall be made a footstool for His feet (Heb 1:13). And such final rest on every side, the final shalom, shall be fulfilled as prophesied in Rev 21, when the true dwelling (temple) of God will be with His people without the need for a physical temple. At the time, the governance that was put in place was through the offices of King-Prophet-Priest; each made to be in checks and balances to each other, and each made to submit to the only absolute authority found in the Torah. The wisdom found in such system was such that inspired the democratic system of Executive-Legislative-Judiciary branches of government; where each served as checks and balances to the other, and where each served the more foundational Constitution. This arguably most holistic of system ensured that the individual leaders' selfish ambitions were kept in check. Though a king, David acknowledged the authority of Nathan the prophet and sought not to usurp it. Each branch of the government served its function, in its jurisdiction; and because of it they all functioned as checks and balances to the other; lest the deceitfulness of heart gains prominence.

But even then, this system was far from faultless, as history again can show. When subsequent kings were judged if they were like David; they mostly fell short. They usurped authority (especially in the most common form of kings raising prophets that he could subjugate, and enrolling priests under his payroll). In the Old Testament, as in secular history, we witness one branch of government usurping the authority of the other and claiming absoluteness. Again, the deceitfulness of sin corrupts the good intent of the system.

How is this relevant to the present topic though? Well for one, I propose this lesson from history: That whatever failure current systems display should not discourage us, but rather encourage us to look forward to the coming Kingdom. Secondly, that we should perhaps put away the thought of putting in place a faultless system where morality is kept in check robotically; but rather to trust in God to piece every puzzle into the perfect picture that (now) only He sees. Thirdly, it is exactly because of the sinful tendencies of the human heart that we should avoid putting too much power into one man's hand (or, for that matter, one group of men's hands), but need to instead ensure an environment where checks and balances; mutual edification; and proper church discipline can be effectively carried out.

Okay, a closing word about my objection to Episcopalianism's justification through history. Episcopalianism tend to equate what God allowed with what He intended; and equating what God providentially used with what He purposed. But such interpretation would not only be irresponsible, it could be extremely misleading. Let me give you a straightforward (but intentionally exaggerated) example. It is a known fact that many of the Old Testament elects were involved in polygamy. Abraham, David, Solomon (and that's taking polygamy to a whole new level!). And God seemed rather permissive with it; by not directly punishing them. Yet, responsible

Equating what God allowed and what He intended; what He providentially used with what He purposed can be irresponsible and dangerous.

hermeneutics tells us that despite what God had permitted, polygamy was far from what God intended, which was exclusive marital relations between one man and one woman. And despite the fact that the relationship of David with Bathsheba was providentially used by God for the Messianic lineage, no sane theologian would mistake this providence with God's design and command. Thus, differentiating between what God allows and what He intends is very important indeed. And what God intends, He reveals sufficiently through Scriptures.

We may do well to recall that the error of papacy and the monopoly of theology by the clergies came out of a very hierarchical church governance - a misuse and corruption of the Episcopalian-like system. And it is also the retaining of "holy tradition" and the interpretative authority of the magistrates that contributes to Catholicism's extreme difficulty to exit from its erroneous position; despite blatant inconsistencies in its



theologies. Now of course we could view this two ways - that it was a corruption of an otherwise good system (which will always happen because of the deceitfulness of our sinful hearts), or that it was a result of a loophole in that system. I think it was a little of both. Nonetheless, the corruption of early hierarchy was what gave rise to the need for reformation in the first place, and that too, is history. What then does the history of early Episcopalianism teach us? When studied as unconnected segments, the weaknesses of men (even powerful and godly men) would be extremely prominent. But when seen as a connected whole, we can witness God providentially working all things for good and directing history according to His good, pleasing and perfect will. In conclusion, I have little doubt that the Episcopalian system has much lesson to teach; I only perhaps disagree on what it teaches.

- **Historical and Sociocultural context.**

Let's now consider some sociocultural contexts of the early churches' governance. Why is this important? For one, common sense alone would tell us that governance would be (and should be) radically different when churches were openly persecuted and in diaspora; compared to when they are gathered together and at a political advantage. But the first few centuries of the Christian church contained both of these contexts. It makes sense, then, that what kept the churches together in times of difficulty could be the very cause of their corruption in times of prosperity.

Just do the common math, and count the difference between the benefits of being identified as a leader of a group is in persecution, and one in prominence. Persecution almost gives an antidote to selfish leadership (which really warns how we are often not ready for comfort). But prominence makes leadership to be coveted, and many could and would sit in positions in authority to gain political power. And Christianity in the first few centuries was not stagnant. In some periods, as was in the time of Nero and Domitian, persecution was intense and widespread. At other times, especially after the conversion of Emperor Constantine; and even more so after the declaration of Christianity as the official religion of the Roman empire under Emperor Theodosius I; being a Christian became increasingly advantageous. And I don't have to stress how different the situations would have been for the Christians then; and what bearings that would have on the leadership conditions of the church.

Concluding Thoughts on Episcopalianism

To speak about the Episcopalian system is to speak about how one reacts to historical data. In no way am I absolutizing my personal reflection above, although I would argue for its biblicality. We can argue on that without end. But it is exactly because of such relativity that I feel the issue of sola scriptura must be used as being sufficient for godly living; which entails godly communal living.

History also teaches us one other thing. That whatever system we put in place will eventually be corrupted by evil men. There are some who would argue that this means the choice of system bears little significance. I would argue the direct opposite. The inevitable decline of any system in fact demands a better system to be put in place. Let me illustrate. The eventual and inevitable death of our physical bodies should not lead to such absurd thinking that we can do whatever we please with it. To do so would almost certainly hasten its demise. We furthermore must place better habit/ system because of ownership. Because our bodies ultimately belong to God, we do not have a freedom to do with it as we deem pleasurable. And because we have the eschatological hope for a new body, (we know what it's intended to be for) we show our understanding by living in accordance to that hope of glory, not against it. Thus, putting in place a good system is being good stewards of what God has entrusted to us; and living it out displays a hope of glory for the ultimate reign of Christ. With such understanding, we can be better equipped and consider the systems without being trapped with the extremities of either naiveté, or compromise.

4.3 Presbyterianism

Well, I have been quite open about my position, so you will think that this section will just be an unending praise for the Presbyterian system. It will not be so. If the Presbyterian system is so high and mighty, the PCUSA would not have given its final approval for same-sex marriage. That fact alone should be a wake up call for those who think of Presbyterianism as everything they should fight for when talking about Church governance. I know that this is a



simplistic conclusion of a complex debate; but I think the point still stands that if the Presbyterian system was foolproof to begin with, that it was not prone to misuse, such blatant error would have been prevented by the system before it began.

But yet, I would argue for Presbyterianism in the same logic that Winston Churchill argued for democracy. Churchill said that “democracy is the worst form of government, except for all those other forms that have been tried from time to time.” Presbyterianism is not perfect. And we live in a fallen world. In a perfect world, it may not even matter what form of governance we choose. If the system can ensure that an archbishop is blameless, Episcopalianism could work. If the system can ensure that every voting member is spiritually mature in the definition of Heb 5:14, Congregationalism could work. But we are all works-in-progress. And because of that, the representational system prescribed by the Presbyterian system would be best able to restrain evil.

4.1 Weaknesses of the Presbyterian System

Here’s a chapter you may not expect from a person who may be militantly Presbyterian. There are weaknesses in the Presbyterian system; but I would argue that these are weaknesses that the Bible predicts, and weaknesses that the Bible effectively regulates through the Presbyterian system.

- **Presbyterianism is “slow”**. Here’s a food for thought. Had Martin Luther first formed a Presbyterian structure before he nailed his thesis and begun a reformation; had he first sought the advice of his fellow elders before he took action; I think the reformation might not have happened. So, I will not argue that at times, leadership may take the form of a single individual personally convicted by the Holy Spirit in opposition to an otherwise crooked generation. But I would argue, even for the case of Martin Luther’s reformation, that subsequent governance need to be set up in order to sustain the good work that had already begun. And I would argue that it was the failure of such establishment that caused the Lutheran church to degrade in morality so quickly in its history.

Realistically speaking, it is not possible to have everyone in eldership on an equal spiritual maturity level. And if the votes of the spiritually immature is taken as being of equal value with those who are mature, we will have a big problem: Righteousness will be voted out every single time! So, Luther’s individual move that resulted from his conviction was providentially used by God to bring the ultimate good.

And the New Testament is not ignorant of this matter. Paul, for example, gave the principles on what to do when the need arises to regulate practices in a congregation with varied level of maturity (which is, always). In 1 Cor 8, he was talking about the current issue then; food sacrificed to idols. His solution was this. The mature will know something the immature doesn’t; but being the more equipped of the two, he needs to be the one who serves. The one with the weaker conscience needs to be served by the one stronger. Is this quick? Most of the time, no! But the option was to enforce certain regulations on weaker people unemphatically forcing them to obey principles they do not understand. And what is the normal result of this kind of practice? The greatest danger is that of *Legalism*. When people are forced to succumb to a system they do not understand at all, legalistic obedience becomes the norm. And differences are a necessity, as Paul explains, “no doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God’s approval” (1 Cor 11:19). But when sharp disagreement arises, few would admit of being the one spiritually inferior. What to do, then, in that kind of situation? The principle of 1 Cor 8, I would argue, gives the following advice: ① If you feel spiritually superior, then you are the one placed in position of responsibility to understand the other party and bear with him; ② but that the tolerance needs to be directed with the absolute truth of Scripture, lest it becomes compromise. In other words, “if it is possible, as far as it depends on you, live at peace with everyone” (Rom 12:18). When it depends just on the differing spiritual maturity it depends on you. When biblical truth is at stake, it no longer depends on you.

My conclusion on this point is this. The Presbyterian system is slow because it waits for the people. It seeks to imitate God’s own incarnation, of Him revealing the unfathomable God in what must have been to Him a divine babble. Using not only human, but simple human language to reveal divine truth. As 2 Pet 3:9, this is not being slow but rather being patient!

- **What of God’s Will?** This is perhaps a similar argument, but with a different emphasis. Plurality will always mean differences. But don’t you think that the Christian faith should be more about God’s will rather than



man's ideas on what is good? An elder who has really discerned the will of God may be deterred by the others who don't.

But the Scriptures appeal to the same problem, but with a radically different solution. "No doubt there have to be differences among you to show which of you have God's approval" (1 Cor 11:19). Notice the logic. It is for the very reason of discerning God's approval that there needs to be differences! The logic goes that differences are in fact essential in nature; and that when spiritual leaders iron out differences, God's will can be more clearly discerned. But what accounts for the differences in the view of the nature of conflicts?

The answer, I believe, lies in the presupposition of the depravity of men. That man, no matter how spiritual they may seem, are still works-in-progress and thus not infallible. Thus, systems that assume the infallibility of certain individuals – no matter how strict it is – falls short of the biblical standard. And this gave rise to the corruption of the papacy. Conversely, the biblical system assumes the worst – of man's fallible nature. And it follows, then, that the system needs to incorporate certain checks and balances for the purpose of man sharpening one another through conflicts (Prov 27:17). But when men, who confessionally work for the glory of God, are put in accountability structures, it follows that they need to guard their hearts and minds, which corruption may be made evident through conflicts. There needs to be differences among us for the very reason of discerning God's will.

4.2 Presbyterianism's Strengths: It is a system that best provide an environment for biblical practices and discernment

Despite its necessary weaknesses, I am still in favor of the Presbyterian system, because I think it satisfies the biblical requirements I laid out in point 2. And it does so by exhibiting the following characteristics:

- **It balances ordo and involvement in ensuring orthodoxy.** Systems that are too hierarchical discourage involvement, and places much of the burden of orthodoxy at the hands of the clergies. On the other hand, systems that forgets to differentiate between the learned and the sympathizers will be extremely loose, and will not be able to be firm with heresies and dangerous teachings.
- **It encourages the leaders and the laity to exercise and be responsible for discernment.** Who guards orthodoxy in the Church? Well, the elders are given the express commandment to guard orthodoxy (Acts 20:27-31; Tit 1:9-11), however they do so by teaching the congregation to discern for themselves (eg. Acts 17:11; Gal 1:8). And a successful system will be one where the lay members can (and do) put every teaching to the test of Scriptural authority.
- **It balances transparency and authority.** The common practice of the hierarchical system is that the laity are discouraged from rebuking the clergies. But the common practice of the undifferentiated system is that the clergies gain no authority from the members, even to enforce orthodoxy. The Bible condones neither. You see, the lay members are encouraged to judge the clergies (Acts 17:11; Gal 1:8; 1 Thess 5:21); and elders do deserve double honor (1 Tim 5:17).
- **It differentiates roles, but gets everyone involved.** We are faced with yet polar opposites. Churches with hierarchical structures tend to limit the involvement of the laity; and all of the liturgies are monopolized by the clergies whilst the lay people are left to menial tasks like ushering and counting the offering. On the other hand, the undifferentiated system gets everyone involved in everything, such that even the laity can and do preach without proper theological training. The hierarchical system pushes women to the sides and almost obliterates their involvement in church settings; whilst the undifferentiated system gets everyone involved and even ordains women in direct disobedience to 1 Tim 2:12. The Bible, on the other hand, gets everyone involved in bringing ministries to the Body for the purpose of edification (1 Cor 14:26); but yet differentiates and regulates the ministries in the same context with the final purpose of a fitting and orderly way (1 Cor 14:40).
- **It facilitates Church Discipline.** Lastly, a hierarchical structure complicates church discipline; forcing members to go through layer upon layer of needless formalities, making the practice of 1 Tim 5:20 a painful journey. But an undifferentiated system encourages gossip and accusations against an elder are uncontrolled in direct opposition to 1 Tim 5:19-20. The Bible teaches the election of an elder must be



based on good repute and thus must be respected for it; but that they must still subsequently be open to rebuke.

Now, to put it into a more straightforward fashion, the Episcopalian system tend to be overly hierarchical. But many modern churches, especially those that embrace the church growth movement tend to be overly undifferentiated. In the first, even qualified members are deterred from office unless they go through a rigorous system of ordination that exceeds the biblical requirement. In the latter, even lay members can self-proclaim themselves to be pastors; performing the sacraments when their understanding of it is questionable.

All in all, the Presbyterian system can best give the environment in which such balance can be exercised; and where the laity's conscience and understanding of Scripture can be trained but also exercised.

5. Concluding Thoughts

I had initially thought of making a more systematic paper. But the complexity found in this topic had deterred me from going in that direction. But I believe this was necessary because governance in a fallen world must indeed take into account the deceitfulness of heart – for the purpose of the restraint of evil. Using rigidity to control agility is no easy task; but I believe biblical wisdom means that we are getting divine help.

But I would like to conclude not in complexity but in simplicity.

The main issue at stake here is for us to decide which of the issues we discussed are in fact relative and secondary in its importance; and which of the issues are absolute and primary. Those which are absolute must be defended with vigor; whilst those which are relative must become training ground for speaking truth in love. A training on practicing tolerance without compromise; and upholding truth without being harsh. A practice of God's attributes of being absolute yet relational.

And the main methodology to do this must be faithful biblical hermeneutics. That every application of Scriptural truth need to be benchmarked to its conformity to Scriptures. And when we see the issue of Church Governance in the Scriptures, I think at least this much can be ascertained: That the requirement for godly (which is imperative) character must precede system (which is indicative). All the verses about the establishment of governance in the Scriptures focuses on character; and we must prioritize that which the Bible prioritizes.

In conclusion, I believe I have attempted to prove that Presbyterianism provides a better framework within which the biblical priorities can be prioritized. But the selection of a system is but the beginning of the journey. If the requirements for godliness is of any indication, much more is to be learned in its application, where we iron out our differences with the sole purpose of being conformed to the likeness of Jesus Christ.

Soli Deo Gloria!

