

How Is The New Testament Church Governed?

Bible Answers About The Church

The local churches of the New Testament were independent and autonomous, i.e., self-governing. They were not dependent upon a hierarchy, a denominational headquarters, or a “mother” church. Each church was responsible for its own leadership, its own business, its own discipline, and its own affairs. When Paul and Barnabas visited the newly established churches on their first missionary journey, they appointed elders for them in every church (“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed” Acts 14:23 NAS). When Paul called for the elders of the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), he urged them to “Be on guard for yourselves and for 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” (Acts 20:28 NAS). As you can see each church had its own overseers to whom the church was responsible (“Obey your leaders, and submit {to them} for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you” Heb 13:17 NAS).

In these verses Paul addresses the elders as overseers and shepherds. These terms are used interchangeably in the New Testament to refer to the same office or function (cf. I Tim. 3:1; Titus 1:5-9). The idea that bishops (overseers) had more authority than elders and that bishops were to rule over many churches was a development much later than the New Testament. John Chrysostom, in the fourth century, said, “presbyters (elders) of old were called bishops.... and bishops presbyters” (Homily 11 in I Timothy). Peter, who calls himself a fellow-elder, gave instructions for his fellow shepherds to exercise oversight (a form of “overseer”) over the flock among you (I Pet. 5:1-4). The shepherds were not to “lord it over those allotted to their charge” (I Pet. 5:4). Their authority was limited to the specific congregation they served.

For a church to be autonomous does not mean that each church can decide truth for itself because God put all things in subjection under the feet of Jesus (Eph. 1:20-23; Col. 1:18; Matt. 28:18). Jesus is the only one who has a right to legislate truth for the church. If we are true disciples, we must abide in His word (Jno. 8:31-32). Neither man, nor a group of people can determine truth for God’s people. This is the problem with denominationalism. Every denomination has some kind of a creed, written or unwritten, in addition to the will of God to govern them. If a creed has more than the Bible, it has too much; if it has less than the Bible, it doesn’t have enough; and if a creed has the same as the Bible, it isn’t needed anyway.

Autonomy means that churches can govern themselves in matters of expediency. That churches should gather on the first day of the week has been decided by the Lord (Acts 20:7; I Cor. 16:1-2). But, where a church should gather, the hour it should gather, and whether it should own a church

building, are matters of expediency. God gave wise elders the responsibility and the authority to decide matters of expediency for the local churches. Such expediciencies are matters of opinion, not matters of faith. Good men will often differ over what is expedient from one church to another. With regard to expediciencies, no church has a right to assert its will over another church. Each church is especially self-governing in such matters. However, in matters of faith, every church must conform to the will of God.

God wisely planned for church government to be congregational in form, so that each church could tend to its own business. If the church in Thyatira had been swept away by Jezebel's teaching the other six churches could still survive. Had Thyatira's leadership extended to several churches in a hierarchical form, their toleration of her immoral heresy could have damaged all the churches involved (Rev. 2:18-29). However, God wisely had elders to be appointed in every church to keep one church from affecting the other churches.

In contrast, Roman Catholicism has a hierarchy consisting of a pope, cardinals, patriarchs, archbishops, bishops and priests. This structure is designed for the universal church, hence is without divine approval. The Church of England is governed by three orders of ecclesiastics: bishops, priests, and deacons and is therefore unscriptural. The Methodist Church has a General Conference which meets every four years and issues legislation which concerns every congregation making it unscriptural as well. Other churches have "general assemblies," "synods," "conventions" and other forms of government larger than the function of a local assembly, thereby making them unscriptural as well.

The church that meets at Monte Vista is organized according to the will of God as expressed in the Bible. We have wise men appointed as elders to govern us in matters of expediciencies and to make sure the will of God is obeyed. We invite you to visit our services.

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