



Church Polity

Understanding Elder Governance In the Local Church

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There is a pressing need for the Church to look analytically at the internal structure of the organization. This structure is called **polity**, a particular form or system of governing the church. How a local church is internally structured has much to do with the effectiveness of ministry, particularly reaching people who are not yet believers, and transforming them into fully devoted followers of Jesus Christ. The Church is a living, spiritual entity, one described by the Apostle Paul as being like that of a human body with many parts (see I Corinthians 12:12-27), and an essential element of the body of Christ is her internal structure, or **polity**.

It is interesting to note that the human body has an essential internal structure, enabling it both to function and to grow—the **skeletal system**. The skeleton has primary functions. For example, the skeleton provides the human body with shape, support, while the skeletal joints enable the body to move. Further, the skeleton produces life-giving blood cells, while storing necessary nutrients such as calcium. Without the human skeleton—an internal structure—it would be impossible for our bodies to grow and function effectively. In the same manner of thought, an internal structure (polity) is essential for the Church to expand and function effectively.

The First Century Church

In Acts 6:1-7, the first century church models for us the importance of internal structures. Faced with a church growth problem, the early church did not ignore an internal issue. Instead, leadership addressed the issue effectively.

Verse 1

In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Grecian Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

Comments

“In those days” refers to the early church in her earliest beginnings. This could have been in the first few months, or even the first few years, and the Church (i.e., number of converts) kept growing numerically (present tense for “increasing”). Those growing numbers resulted in some growing pains: Greek-speaking widows were being neglected when food was distributed to those in need. The Hebrew-speaking widows were getting food, but not Greek-speaking widows, and this did not happen only once

or twice, but repeatedly (imperfect tense for “overlook”). This begs us to ask the question why there were so many Greek-speaking widows in “First Christian Church of Jerusalem,” then the capital of the Jewish homeland. Answer: They wanted to be there! On the Day of Pentecost, tens of thousands of Jewish people were in Jerusalem for the Feast of Pentecost. Acts 2 indicates that when the Holy Spirit was given and the Church was created, three thousand Jewish people came to believe that Jesus was the Messiah. Many of those Jews came from countries in which Greek was spoken as the primary language. Some of those people stayed in Jerusalem after Pentecost, enjoying the sense of community described in Acts 2:42-47. Life was exciting, and the Church was a dynamic group of people doing life at deep levels of satisfaction, and Greek-speaking widows would have been within that group. As well, Hellenistic Jews returned to Jerusalem in their old age, wanting to live out their final days in the Holy City. There came to be an abundance of Greek-speaking widows who had out-lived their husbands.

Verses 2-4

So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, "It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word."

Comments

The apostles proposed a significant change. They knew they had to do something because the complaining was just a symptom of a far greater problem: prejudice. Two ethnic groups were clashing and if ignored, the Church could suffer great harm. The leaders did not point a finger of blame at anyone except themselves. They knew they were being stretched too thin, and they were unable to be faithful to their primary calling: prayer and the ministry of the Word (i.e., “ministry” is *diakonia* meaning “to labor”). They wanted to focus their efforts on prayer and making known the Word of God. This situation accentuates their need for internal structure to accommodate the ministry demands of a large, continually growing church. Not ignoring this need, the apostles created a **polity** (internal structure) that would meet the needs of those being overlooked. The apostles wanted to effectively delegate responsibility to another leadership level. The first century church was very Jewish in their practices, as seen in this matter. This distribution of food was called the Custom of the *Kuppah* (i.e., basket). Individuals went from house to house and business to business to collect food and money for those in need (i.e., particularly widows and orphans). This collection was made with a *kuppah*, or basket. Continuing this ministry of benevolence in a fast-growing church required a more effective internal structure.

Verses 5-6

This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them.

Comments

When they implemented the new structural method of feeding all the widows, it was immediately embraced by the believers. The leaders even solved the problem with people who were a part of the group impacted by the problem: Greeks. The Greek-speaking widows would be certain to get food because the seven men chosen to lead and serve at this new level all had Greek names. The seven men were presented to the apostles, who then prayed over them by laying hands on them, which was a visible symbol of communicating that both responsibility and authority had been granted.

Verse 7

So the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.

Comments

There is a particular Greek tense in this verse that is used three times, and the tense means that the action referred to continued without ceasing. The Word of God kept spreading, and then spread some more. This does not mean that more and more books of the Bible were being written, but that the Word of God kept spreading into the lives of people and having a life-changing impact. Moreover, the number of disciples (i.e., new Christians) kept increasing. More Jewish priests became obedient to the Christian faith—as they, too, converted. Christianity made enormous inroads to the Jewish leadership in Jerusalem. The 1st century Jewish historian Josephus wrote that there were four tribes of priests, each with roughly 5,000 priests, making for roughly 20,000 Jewish priests in Jerusalem and a large number of them became obedient to the Christian faith! Why? Leaders were willing to create internal structure within the first century church. The Church remained unified, while the Church multiplied.

The 21st Century Church

Creating an evangelistic environment that fosters continual growth in the number of people coming to faith in Christ requires an effective internal structure. Far too many congregations have a **polity** in place that is restrictive in nature. Church boards have a tendency to micromanage people, making it necessary for individuals to “jump through hoops” of regulations and bylaws. Churches that use Roberts Rules of Order create a divisive environment in which “some win and some lose.” The small- church board mentality keeps small churches small.

In contrast, a church that develops and implements an internal structure of **elder governance** will create an evangelistic environment, fostering continual numerical growth. To understand **elder governance**, we must first understand a recent movement called **policy governance**.

The History of Policy Governance

Dr. John Carver (www.policygovernance.com) is the internationally recognized creator of the **policy governance model**, now being implemented by boards literally around the world. **Policy governance** is a results-oriented approach to board operations, making leadership more effective in how they lead an organization.

Policy governance is a theory or approach to board operations, and can be implemented by organizations at will. Policy governance is based on fundamental principles, such as trust, as those leading organizations are answerable to individuals not seated on a board. As well, a board speaks with one voice, which helps to create a spirit of unanimity. A board, which operates under policy governance, makes policy decisions that are a reflection of the values and vision of the board. Once policies are in place, the board delegates responsibility and authority to individuals within the organization.

Elder Governance

In much the same manner, **elder governance** is a theory or an approach to leading the local congregation, making more effective the internal structure of the church. When the **polity** of the local church is more effective, there is potential for the church to be healthier—and a healthy church is a growing church.

Elder governance embraces similar principles of policy governance. For example, there is the principle of trust. The Apostle Paul wrote, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful” (1 Corinthians 4:2).

Elders—and others at an exceptional level of leadership in the church—have been given a trust by God, and they must be faithful in that responsibility. As well, Jesus taught a parable of the ten talents (see Matthew 25:14-30), in which His Kingdom has been entrusted to leaders. These leaders will be held accountable by Jesus at His second coming for how they led His Church in His absence.

Elder governance calls for unanimity among elders, which is then expressed in “one voice.” Unity is of vital importance to Jesus, as He prayed that we would be one as He and the Father are one, and that we would be brought to complete unity (see John 17:20-23). On the last night of His life, the Church was the focus of the prayers of Jesus, which calls Christ-followers to strive for unity, particularly among those who have been entrusted with His Church.

Elder governance makes policy decisions. Rather than micromanage church staff and volunteers, elders using this model establish policies to be followed by others within the local church. Once policies are established and implemented, elders are able to focus on issues that are more spiritual in nature.

Elder governance intentionally delegates responsibility and authority to others, particularly in the area of their giftedness and calling. Only by establishing policies can elders effectively delegate responsibilities to people, accompanied with the authority to exercise ministry.

When a congregation is organized according to **elder governance**, there are four primary functions of an **elder board**. To stay focused on these four primary tasks, the elders can arrange a meeting agenda using these four categories, and if an issue does not fit one of these categories, it is likely that the task should be handled by another leadership team within the church. The four primary functions within **elder governance** are: 1) to establish policy, 2) the ministry of prayer, 3) the ministry of the Word, and 4) oversight of pastoral matters. Day-to-day operational matters are not the concern of elders, nor are administrative or financial issues. These responsibilities—and their accompanying authority—have been delegated by the elders to individuals capable of leading in these areas.

Elder governance calls for establishing policy. In Acts 15, the apostles and elders in Jerusalem establish a policy regarding outreach to Gentiles. There was a significant dispute in the early church, which resulted in what is referred to as the Jerusalem Council. A dispute arose in the church at Antioch, making necessary a trip by Paul, Barnabas and Peter to settle this matter with church leaders. The issue was over whether a Gentile had to be circumcised in order to be saved. James, who has been called the “chief elder” of the Jerusalem church, rendered a “policy decision” beginning in verse 13 (“listen to me”). The elders sent Paul and Barnabas back to Antioch with instructions not to make it too difficult for the Gentiles to enter the Kingdom of God, as they were turning to God. A policy was established and issued. Moreover, both responsibility and authority were given to church leaders to do ministry according to the policy. Paul, Barnabas and others were not micromanaged as they carried out their ministry. That was establishing a policy guideline. Therefore,

- 1) Elders establish policies for the church. The staff will be highly involved in the writing of policy drafts, which are then reviewed, edited (if needed), and adopted by the elders.
- 2) The elders oversee the compiling of a written Policy Manual.
- 3) Policies provide parameters for the operation of the church.
- 4) Elders delegate the authority to the staff to operate the church (i.e., decision making).
- 5) This limits micromanagement of the staff by the elders.

Elder governance calls for oversight of pastoral matters. The above text (i.e., Acts 15:1f, the Jerusalem Council) also highlights the pastoral nature of elders’ ministry. In verse 4, Paul and his companions “reported in” (i.e., they were being held accountable) to James the Just and the other elders of the church in Jerusalem. The elders in Jerusalem had sent Barnabas to Antioch to do ministry among the Gentiles. Both Paul and Barnabas had a sense of accountability to the elders in Jerusalem. As well, the very nature of this matter was highly spiritual in content, and so it was deferred to the elders as a matter of pastoral concern. Therefore,

- 1) Elders are involved in the lives of people within the congregation, in particular by establishing a culture of accountability with one another.
- 2) Moreover, elders “send out” (i.e., ordain) those prepared for full-time Christian ministry, and an accountable relationship is established between these individuals and the elders. People are ordained by the local church only after successfully completing both written and oral exams administered by the elders to determine an individual’s capability to represent the gospel

of Jesus Christ as an ordained minister. Those “sent out” from the local church are provided pastoral care and continuing ministry development in a covenant relationship with the ordaining church.

- 3) Elders are involved in providing pastoral care in the area of spiritual matters, which includes, but is not limited to, caring for emotional, spiritual and physical needs of people, caring for relational needs of people, as well as administering church discipline when deemed necessary.
- 4) Elders minister pastorally to people who are ill, shut-in, spiritually inactive, grieving, etc. To that end, elders are visibly present in the lives of people, whether that is in the church, in their homes, at hospitals, etc.

Elder governance calls for the ministry of prayer. In Acts 6:1-7, the apostles emphasized their need to minister to people through prayer. By appointing the first deacons to oversee the physical needs of widows in need of food, the spiritual leaders in the early church devoted themselves to prayer. By delegating operational tasks to others, elders in the 21st century church can devote themselves to the ministry of prayer. Therefore,

- 1) Elders are intentionally—and persistently—involved in prayer.
- 2) Elders make themselves more readily and visibly available for intercessory prayer, particularly during corporate worship. Elders must develop a reputation among the believers as being powerful in prayer (James 5:16).
- 3) Elders lead in prayer by example (1 Corinthians 11:1). We cannot expect people in the local church to develop powerful prayer lives if the spiritual leaders of the church are not modeling the same behavior.

Elder governance calls for the ministry of the Word. In Acts 20, the Apostle Paul said farewell to the elders of the church in Ephesus. It is interesting to note that he prophesied that from these men, some elders would arise and distort the truth (verse 30). After he left Ephesus, Timothy became the minister of that congregation, and Paul found it necessary to write to Timothy and tell him to “stay in Ephesus to command certain men not to teach false doctrine” (1 Timothy 1:3). Who were these men? They were from among the elders of the church! In his farewell to the Ephesian elders, Paul commanded them to “guard the flock” that was under their care. Hence, elders are to guard the doctrinal purity of the Church through the ministry of the Word. Therefore,

- 1) Elders protect believers from false doctrine.
- 2) Elders must have significant scriptural knowledge in order to guard the doctrinal purity of the church (i.e., what is taught, preached, believed, etc.).

- 3) Elders must foster an environment of continual learning, modeling biblical literacy for the congregation.
- 4) Elders must live the Word, as well as know the Word.

Elder Profile

When following the **elder governance** model, it is essential to select elders in a more biblical manner than is experienced in most congregations. Historically, many denominations have been influenced by democratic forms of government. When our nation was birthed in democracy, many new churches in the late 1700s adopted similar democratic principles, procedures and patterns for the local church. For example, many churches developed—and still use—nominating committees to present a field of candidates to the congregation for election through a process of voting. Using this process to select leaders creates division in the local church, as some individuals win the majority of votes, and others do not. Where in the New Testament is this practice described? Moreover, many churches organize around a traditional board structure, and those participating at the board level are elders, deacons and ministerial staff.

Typically, elders and deacons possess voting privileges, whereas ministers do not. Again, this creates division in the local church as “some win and some lose” through a process of voting on issues. Further, just as there are three branches of government, some churches think of the elders, deacons and staff as representative of three branches of leadership in the church. Supposedly, this provides a system of checks and balances so there is no imbalance of power. Yet, ministers on the board are viewed in an advisory capacity because—if the minister had voting privileges—there would be an apparent conflict of interest. Again, where in the New Testament is this structure described?

In light of the above, it is imperative that elder selection be both biblical and careful, as opposed to being democratic.

Having a sense of **calling** is essential for an elder candidate. In keeping with 1 Peter 5:1-4, an elder must desire to serve in this capacity. All Christians are “called out of darkness into His wonderful light” (1 Peter 2:9), which is a call to be saved. As well, there are examples in the Scripture of people being called into significant roles of

leadership. In Acts 9, Paul was called into spiritual leadership. In Mark 1, Jesus called Peter into spiritual leadership. In Luke 1, John the Baptist was called into spiritual leadership. When selecting elders, there must be a sense of God's calling on the individual's life, resulting in a desire to serve in this capacity.

Possessing certain **competencies** is essential for an elder candidate. In addition to reflecting the traits listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, 5:17-22 and Titus 1:5-9, an elder candidate should possess competency in the following areas:

- exceptional biblical knowledge
- able to teach others such biblical knowledge
- be a proven steward, both in the church and in the home
- analytical perceptivity
- uncommon discernment, particularly in selecting other spiritual leaders such as ministry team leaders (i.e., deacons)
- forward looking and thinking in a visionary sense
- able to lead others to Christ, articulating salvation
- pastoral skills of shepherding, extending empathy, etc.

Protecting one's **character** will be of utmost concern for the elder candidate. Being that an elder must be above reproach (1 Timothy 3:2) and blameless (Titus 1:6), his spiritual integrity is an essential criteria for being selected. An elder candidate must:

- have a healthy sense of humility
- pursue righteousness while fleeing from evil
- desire a clear conscience
- model marital fidelity and family commitment.

Once selected and set apart as an elder, the individual is evaluated annually by his peers. **Peer evaluation** is an essential part of elder governance as it reflects the principle of trust. Elders are accountable to God in providing leadership of His Church, and as well, elders must be trustworthy in the sight of the people they are serving. To that end, elders do not live an unexamined life. Annually, they conduct an evaluation of their service to the local church, and if their performance is lacking in some manner, corrective action must be taken to maintain a standard of excellence.