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# New Testament Church Government: Fidelity and Flexibility

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## NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH GOVERNMENT: FIDELITY AND FLEXIBILITY

A. Boyd Luter, Jr.

*In spite of disagreement over what constitutes the biblical form of local church government, it is still normally assumed that all churches should have the same governmental structure and that the qualifications for a particular leadership position should be the same. Such an approach pours all the major structure and qualification passages into the same mold, ignoring significant evidence for "flexibility" in regard to churches at different stages of growth. Particularly suggestive are variations between the supposed "twin" passages: 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9. Careful consideration of the similarities and differences leads to the conclusion that it is preferable to allow for a moderate level of sensitive structural flexibility while still maintaining proper scriptural fidelity.*

Mushrooming interest in church growth has prompted many evangelicals to rethink their positions on a number of previously "untouchable" subjects, including local church government. The resulting thoughts may not all be good since the pendulum easily can swing too far, especially in the rapidly changing culture around us. However, Gordon MacDonald has detected a necessary relationship between flexibility (especially in church organization) and church growth:

Many churches are based on a constitutional and programmatic structure put together when they were one-fifth their present size. They wonder why growth is not taking place. . . . Today a church should be willing to change anything except its doctrinal distinctives.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Gordon MacDonald, "Ten Conditions for Church Growth," *Leadership* 4:1 (Winter, 1983): 45.

Now MacDonald is not a lone evangelical "voice crying in the wilderness." In his epochal work, *The Problem of Wineskins*, Howard Snyder wrote, "Structure must be flexible." Then, after a plea for "biblical fidelity," he goes on to say that such flexibility is desirable in "most aspects of church government."<sup>2</sup>

More recently, the late distinguished missiologist George Peters observed that if the church is indeed a spiritual organism, ever-growing and ever-changing,

The structure must be flexible and adaptable, never fixed or restrictive. . . . The form of the church must be granted considerable latitude and freedom, limited only by the precepts and precedents of the Scriptures. History and tradition, no matter how sacred they may seem, must not be decisive.<sup>3</sup>

The common elements in these quotations are *scriptural fidelity* and *circumstantial flexibility*. When wrestling with how to balance these two emphases, the church leader must face the virtually undebatable conclusion of Womack (and many others) that, "before a church may add to its mass of members and adherents, it must expand its base of organization and ministry (leadership)."<sup>4</sup>

Unfortunately, such balance is much more easily advised than achieved. This is seen in the words of two theologians with the same last name. Louis Berkhof, prominent Reformed leader of the last generation, allowed that, "some of the details (of church government) may be changed in the proper ecclesiastical manner, (but) the general structure must be rigidly maintained."<sup>5</sup> While it is not immediately transparent what he means by "the general structure," in the ensuing discussion it is seen to include certain "ordinary officers" of the local church as

<sup>2</sup> Howard Snyder, *The Problem of Wineskins* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1975), 124.

<sup>3</sup> George W. Peters, *A Theology of Church Growth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1981), 172.

<sup>4</sup> David A. Womack, *The Pyramid Principle* (Minneapolis: Bethany Fellowship, 1977), 79.

<sup>5</sup> L. Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1939, 1941), 581.

well as the qualifications for those who held these offices,<sup>6</sup> the two focal points of this article.

On the other hand, European theologian Hendrikus Berkhof has sounded a radically different note on this subject:

In our rapidly changing world the flexible situational aspects of all church polity are again strongly emphasized . . . Over the years sociology has discovered certain things concerning the function of laws to which all institutions, churches included, are subject . . . This awareness is useful if it makes one more conscious of the changeability of church order . . . Church order--certainly in our time--should be loose-leaf!<sup>7</sup>

In the face of these almost mutually-exclusive prescriptions, is it possible to maintain *scriptural fidelity* without rigid structure? Can there be *sensitive flexibility* to the rapidly changing needs around us without being swept into a sociologically based merry-go-round?

#### PURPOSE AND PROCEDURE OF THIS EXAMINATION

The studied conviction of the writer is that neither 'rigid' structure nor 'loose-leaf' church polity is the true New Testament position. Thus my aim is to demonstrate the moderate degree to which the form of church government seen in the New Testament is indeed flexible. This will be observed in regard to: 1) certain offices in the local church; and 2) the qualifications or requirements for office.

Then we will look at the significance of this structural flexibility for what Gordon Fee calls "genuinely comparable contexts"<sup>8</sup> in our churches today. This is the order in which we must proceed to achieve proper biblical understanding and application on the subject. While there is danger in the

<sup>6</sup> Ibid., 585-88.

<sup>7</sup> Hendrikus Berkhof, *The Christian Faith* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 384.

<sup>8</sup> Gordon D. Fee, "Hermeneutics and Common Sense: An Exploratory Essay on the Hermeneutics of the Epistles," in *Inerrancy and Common Sense*, ed. by Roger Nicole and Ramsey Michaels (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 177. See also Fee's elaboration in Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982).

interpretive process "that the words may never leave the first century,"<sup>9</sup> we must make sure we do not get the cart before the horse (i.e. significance before meaning.)<sup>10</sup> In our zeal for relevance, we too frequently grasp the New Testament passages to squeeze from them what they *mean* to us today before we adequately determine what they *meant* in the first century setting. It has been rightly said that "interpretation without application is abortion," but application before sufficient interpretation is an equally fatal "miscarriage" of biblical authority.

#### THE COMPLEXITY OF LOCAL CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Theologian Robert Saucy summarizes the working conclusion of most evangelical exegetes:

The New Testament refers to two permanent offices in the local church. . . That these are the only two offices of the church is seen in the fact that when Paul deals with the qualifications for church officers, only these two are mentioned.<sup>11</sup>

The holders of these two offices are called "overseer"/"elder" (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1, 2; Titus 1:5, 7, etc.) and "deacon" (Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:8, 12).<sup>12</sup>

Though this two-office form of government may have been the norm in New Testament churches, it cannot be proven

<sup>9</sup> Fee, "Hermeneutics of the Epistles," 169.

<sup>10</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., "Legitimate Hermeneutics," in *Inerrancy*, ed. by Norman L. Geisler (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980), 147.

<sup>11</sup> Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 140. For succinct discussions, see Charles C. Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 142-46 and Ryrie, *Basic Theology* (Wheaton: Victor), 412-419; Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981), 763; H. Ridderbos, *Paul: An Outline of His Theology* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 456-60.

<sup>12</sup> It is outside the scope of this treatment to discuss whether the New Testament Church had 'deaconesses,' which Guthrie believes is "not clear" and "a matter of debate" (763). For compact, but thorough, discussions of the evidence and opposite conclusions, see Charles C. Ryrie, *The Role of Women in the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1968), 85-91 and Saucy, *God's Program*, 159-61.

from the Scripture that both offices existed in *every* church. For example, in the new churches planted on the first missionary journey, we read in Acts 14:23 only that Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in every church." (NASB)<sup>13</sup> In Titus 1, in dealing with the leadership needs of the infant assemblies on Crete, just elders/overseers are mentioned (vv. 5,7). Furthermore, although it is more difficult to know what significance to attach to the data in the persecuted, predominantly Hebrew Christian churches seen in James (5:14) and 1 Peter (5:1-4),<sup>14</sup> elders are the only officials in the local assemblies referred to in these passages.

Certainly this is an argument from silence from which some may conclude that the absence of reference to deacons in these passages does not make that office "optional at all."<sup>15</sup> The lack of focus on deacons when Paul met with the Ephesian elders at Miletus in Acts 20 for example can hardly be considered proof that the church at Ephesus did not have the office of deacon at that point (cf. 1 Timothy 3:8-13).

Nevertheless, this widespread silence about deacons, especially in the 'newborn' and smaller church bodies seen in the New Testament, may provide a significant clue to an intended flexibility built into their original form of polity. Such is the view of George W. Knight, who writes:

When the congregation is first being formed, the deacons may be omitted from the officers elected and their functions are carried on by the elders until the work is heavy and the men are available for such services (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5ff; cf. Acts 6:1-6).<sup>16</sup>

<sup>13</sup> F.F. Bruce, in his *Paul: Apostle of the Heart Set Free* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977), 172, defends Luke's use of elder at this early stage of church history as having the same essential significance as in the Pastorals.

<sup>14</sup> See Guthrie, 784, for the less than fully convincing view that "elder" in 1 Peter 5 is used "in the sense of seniority of age rather than in the sense of ruling elder." W. Grudem concludes that the reference is indeed to local church elders in *1 Peter* (TNTC replacement series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988), 185-91.

<sup>15</sup> Ryrie, *A Survey of Bible Doctrine*, 144.

<sup>16</sup> George W. Knight, III, "The Number and Function of the Permanent Offices in the New Testament Church," *Presbyterian: Covenant Seminary Review*, Fall, 1975, 113-14. See also Knight's related comments on the crux passages (1 Timothy and Titus 1) in the *Evangelical Commentary on*

Ryrie allows that this 'loud silence' may indicate "that the churches were not large enough yet to require more than elders to lead them. . ." <sup>17</sup>

Before leaving this subject, it should be stated clearly that the silence just noted cannot be legitimately explained by an 'evolution' in the ecclesiology of the New Testament era. Single office (i.e., elders only) church organization is observed both as early as the mid A.D. 40's in Acts 14 (and possibly James 5) and as late as the early to mid A.D. 60's in Titus 1 (and probably 1 Peter 5).<sup>18</sup> Thus the option to have overseers only in a local church seems to have continued, especially under the circumstances discussed above.

Even though we possibly may call the "Magnificent Seven" of Acts 6:1-6 "proto-deacons",<sup>19</sup> the technical use of the word is not encountered until Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8-13 in the early 60's A.D. So, it is even possible that the prevailing form of polity in the earliest decades of the church was 'elders only.' It is quite probable that both approaches existed side-by-side from mid-century on, flexibly dependent on the duration or size of the church in question.

To sum up: the relevant New Testament passages strongly imply that, as a local church grew and matured, its form of government would naturally 'flex' to meet increased needs.

*the Bible* ed. Walter A. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1989), 1105-06, 1115-16. Further elaboration can be expected in Knight's larger forthcoming volume on the Pastorals in the prestigious *New International Greek Testament Commentary* series (Eerdmans).

<sup>17</sup> Ryrie, *Survey*, 144.

<sup>18</sup> For helpful, conservative discussions on the dating of such New Testament books, see D. Guthrie, *New Testament Introduction* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1970) and Robert Gromacki, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974).

<sup>19</sup> Ryrie, *Survey*, 144. See also Gray Lambert, "Church Government in the Apostolic Age," in the *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1975), 1:861. See also William F. Baker, "Acts" in *ECB*, 892; and I. Howard Marshall, "Acts" (TNTC replacement series; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980), 125-27, for differing stances.

### THE QUALIFICATIONS FOR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERS

The second area in which significant flexibility is seen has to do with character qualities required for officers. That this is not commonly recognized is reflected in what could well be called the "Harmony of the Pastorals" approach, which assumes that the 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 passages are saying almost exactly the same things in different ways.

In recent years great interest has rekindled over the necessity of having godly, mature leaders in our local churches. Much profitable, highly practical study has been focused on these parallel sections in the Pastoral Epistles in which Paul details the qualifications for leaders-to-be: 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9.<sup>20</sup> For such a return to biblical values and requirements, we are indeed grateful.

However, to treat the two passages as if they were *exact* parallels is to be blind to the flexibility of New Testament polity. We have already noted that the churches on Crete (in Titus) were unquestionably younger and smaller than the Ephesian church (in 1 Timothy). Also, the absence of any discussion about deacons in Titus 1 was deemed important and in keeping with the embryonic age and size of the Cretan assemblies.

With those background factors in mind, another glaring omission should be probed. In 1 Timothy 3:6 the phrase "not a new convert" (NASB; Gk. *neophytos*) is obviously a very important requirement for an overseer in the Ephesian church. The supporting explanation of the potential danger of conceit in the life of an immature leader (3:6) shows clearly why this qualification was included.

However, there is not a comparable time/maturity requirement for the elder/overseer in Titus 1. What are we to make of this? Guthrie reasons that the "more recent establishment" of the Cretan church rendered such a longevity requirement "inappropriate."<sup>21</sup> Kent expresses the same

<sup>20</sup> E.g., Gene Getz, *Sharpening the Focus of the Church* (Chicago: Moody, 1974), 105-08. See also Getz, *The Measure of a Man* (Glendale: Regal, 1974) and Bob Smith, *When All Else Fails . . . Read the Directions* (Waco: Word, 1974), 29-30.

<sup>21</sup> Donald Guthrie, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1957),

perspective in saying:

The Ephesian church at this time had been in existence at least twelve years, and spiritually mature men could be found. In the case of Crete, such a qualification was not given (Titus 1) because it was apparently a new work and the ideal could not be insisted upon.<sup>22</sup>

Nor can this question be entirely limited to 1 Timothy and Titus. Although the record of the first missionary journey in Acts 14 is obviously an overview, the sequence and duration of 14:21-23 are, without doubt, essentially the same as the establishment of the churches on Crete. It could hardly have been more than a few months from the initial evangelizing and discipling of Acts 14:21-22 until elders were appointed "in every church" (14:23).<sup>23</sup> While this observation should not be pushed, it is doubtful that Luke would have developed this passage the way he did and have chosen the theologically pregnant terminology he employed<sup>24</sup> if it had no bearing on primitive church polity.<sup>25</sup>

That there was substantial awareness even at that early juncture of the necessity of qualifying spiritually for church leadership is seen in Acts 1:21-22, 11:24, and especially 6:1-6. Those seven deacons (or "elders before elders" [?]; cf. 11:30) were to be "of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and of wisdom. . ." (Acts 6:3, NASB).

Sometimes a few choice words can speak volumes. That is true in this case; brief reflection reveals that the focal passages in the Pastorals are to a great extent an expansion and clarification of Acts 6:3. Though such sensitivity to spiritual qualifications for local church leadership was the rule even in the

82.

<sup>22</sup> Homer Kent, Jr., *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1958), 134.

<sup>23</sup> Baker, "Acts," 906.

<sup>24</sup> Walter C. Kaiser, Jr., (in *Toward an Exegetical Theology* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981] esp. 150-52) helpfully discusses "antecedent theology", the prior, informing understanding of the biblical writer. That would certainly seem to be true in regard to Luke's use of obvious Great Commission terminology in Acts 14:21-23.

<sup>25</sup> See Edwin S. Nelson, "Paul's First Missionary Journey as Paradigm," Ph.D. dissertation, Boston University Graduate School, 1982, esp. 118-51.

newer churches, it still appears that elders were characteristically appointed relatively soon to give adequate stability and guidance to the expanding body. However, as a church grew and time elapsed, potential problems of pride (cf. 1 Timothy 3:6) and pressure (cf. Acts 6:1ff) had to be faced. So Paul included the qualification "not a *neophyte*" in 1 Timothy 3, focusing on a more *established, larger church*.

A further contrast between the two Pastoral lists involves the difference between the wording of the teaching qualification in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9. In 1 Timothy the phrase "able to teach" is a single word in the Greek (*didaktikos*). In striking contrast, however the parallel concept in Titus requires twenty-one words in Greek. Most who comment at all on this extremely odd proportioning view the two passages as basically interchangeable.<sup>26</sup> White says of the requirement in 1 Timothy 3: "The notion is expanded in Titus 1:9."<sup>27</sup> However, a most interesting comparison can be made between the first phrase of Titus 1:9 ("holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching. . ."[NASB]) and the doctrinal requirement for the deacon in 1 Timothy 3:9 ("holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." [NASB]). Certainly the requirement for the elder in Titus goes far beyond this obvious parallel. But, perhaps it is not intended to approximate the "able to teach" qualification on 1 Timothy 3:2.

Undoubtedly the Apostle Paul took pains to define a kind of "teaching" in Titus 1:9. Perhaps, however, the functions "to exhort in the sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (NASB) do not represent the well-rounded, total teaching ministry envisioned in 1 Timothy 3:2. For example, in 2 Timothy 4:2 the same Greek words, *elenchō* (refute) and *parakaleō* (exhort) seemingly refer to specialized aspects of Timothy's preaching ministry.<sup>28</sup> The same might be said of 1 Timothy 4:13, though the terminology is not identical.

Two possibilities exist: 1) in the younger, smaller

<sup>26</sup> E.g., Saucy, 148; Getz, *Sharpening The Focus of the Church*, 106; Smith, 29.

<sup>27</sup> Newport J.D. White, "The First and Second Epistles to Timothy," in *Expositor's Greek Testament* ed. W.R. Nicoll (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., reprint, n.d.), IV: 112.

<sup>28</sup> Guthrie, *Pastoral Epistles*, 166.

churches on Crete, the doctrinal/teaching requirement for the elder was 'in-between' that of the elder and deacon found in 1 Timothy 3. Clearly he was to be more qualified than the deacon, whose "relation to theology is passive."<sup>29</sup> However, he may not have been required to be the full-orbed teacher that an Ephesian elder would have been. 2) It is plausible that, since every Ephesian elder did not "work hard at preaching and teaching" (1 Timothy 5:17), the elders in the younger Cretan church were recognized initially as serving in the category of those with less didactic responsibility. They were no less elders, but their teaching function was more limited (or narrow) than their ruling function (cf. 1 Timothy 5:17).

In summary, the two primary lists of qualifications for local church leadership in the New Testament, particularly for the position of elder/overseer, are significantly similar but not identical. The contrast between the strong statement, "not a new convert", in an older, larger church, and the silence on the matter in younger churches is clear enough. It is also quite possible that there is a similar distinction in the expected level of teaching ability and function of the overseer in a more mature church than in a fledgling congregation (although pressing this concept further might propel us into the realm of speculation).

## CONCLUSION AND APPLICATION

In connection with the organization and structure of the local church, Peters observed, "There must be room for flexibility, adaptability, and creativity if the corpus is not to become a corpse."<sup>30</sup> While this statement is considerably more restrained than H. Berkhof's envisioned "loose-leaf church order," it also is distant from a rigid structure and the levelling of all local bodies and contexts before an insensitive monolithic form of local church government presumably derived from the New Testament.

In concluding it is possible to nail down the "genuinely comparable contexts" (Fee) and to "principlize"<sup>31</sup> the passages

<sup>29</sup>White, 112.

<sup>30</sup> Peters, 173.

<sup>31</sup>See the various discussions on "principlizing" in Bernard Ramm, *Protestant Biblical Interpretation* 3rd Revised Ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker,

we have studied. The following list (and accompanying chart), though purposely brief, does address major areas of concern:

1. Simple government is the rule in newer or smaller churches. There is no need for a second level of government (i.e., deacons) at this point in a church's development (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5-9).

2. Standards for church leadership should be realistically amended in newer churches to reflect the content of Titus 1:5-9 (in contrast to 1 Timothy 3:1ff.) One still must be unquestionably "above reproach" (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6), but the contexts are sufficiently different to allow for some meaningful 'flex' between them.

3. As younger and smaller church bodies begin to mature spiritually and in size, or desire to do so, it would be natural and wise (cf. Acts 6:1-6) to consider adding the office of deacon in order to spur, and stabilize such progress.

4. When a local church has grown to a substantial size over a period of years, it becomes absolutely necessary to emphasize stricter standards of leadership qualifications. More people means more power and more danger for the elder (1 Timothy 3:6). Under no circumstance should a novice become an overseer in a large, long-standing church.

Discovering this appropriate 'flexibility within boundaries' in the New Testament churches provides opportunity to apply similar scriptural adaptability within our local churches today. Such flexibility could be one key difference between stunted growth and significant expansion. But, you must ever be careful to connect *scriptural fidelity* with *sensitive structural flexibility*.

CHURCH GOVERNMENT IN THE PASTORAL EPISTLES:  
COMPARING POSITIONS, QUALIFICATIONS, AND CHURCH TYPES

TITUS 1:5-9		LEADERSHIP		1 TIMOTHY 3:1-13	
Elder (v.5) Overseer (v.7) No Deacons (mentioned)		Positions	Overseer (v.1) Elder (5:17)	Deacon (vv. 8, 12)	
"Exhort-Retire" Qualification (v.9b)			(Full-Orbed) "Teaching" Qualifications (v.2)	Not a Young Believer (v.6)	
"Belief" Qualification (v.9a)			"Exhort-Retire" Qualification (implied)		
Basic Moral-Relational Qualifications		Qualifications for Positions	"Belief" Qualification (implied)		"Belief" Qualification (v.9) Basic Moral-Relational Qualifications
New, Smaller Churches (Crete)		Types of Churches	Basic Moral-Relational Qualifications		Older, Larger Churches (Ephesus) Qualifications

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1970), 199-200; Kaiser, *Exegetical Theology*, 150ff.; Roy B. Zuck, "Application in Biblical Hermeneutics and Exposition" in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, edited by Donald K. Campbell (Chicago: Moody, 1982), 226ff.; and Zuck's chapter "Applying God's Word Today" in *Basic Bible Interpretation* (Wheaton: Victor, 1991), 279-99.