

# Sermon Notes

## The Doctrine of the Church Forms of Church Government

"Few topics in theology in general and ecclesiology in particular have the ability to induce sleepiness among many while also generating heated debate among others as does the issue of church government." Greg Allison

The Scriptures are wholly sufficient and instruct us in a form of church order and government.

### A Survey of Forms of Church Governments

#### 1. Episcopal

- a) There are three offices (bishops, presbyters/priests, Deacons).  
The bishop exercises authority over a diocese, or a region of churches.
- b) The idea of a bishop is based on both Scripture and tradition. Scripture, but only in seed form (e.g., Timothy and Titus, ) and early church tradition (Ignatius and Cyprian).
- c) The traditions that hold to this form: RCC, Episcopal Church, Methodists, and some Pentecostal denominations.
- d) Critique: the exegetical fact is that *episkopos* (KJV, Bishop, Overseer) is interchangeable with *presbyteros* (elder).  
Practical reasons why an episcopal form of government is a bad idea.

#### 2. Presbyterian (John Calvin the architect and John Knox the great practitioner).

- a) A representative form of church government
- b) Each congregation has a teaching elder and ruling elders.
- c) Each church's leadership, consisting of teaching elder/s and ruling elders makes up the church's session (in other Reformed traditions, consistory)
- d) There are regional presbyteries (classis), which are made up of representatives from each session (the teaching elders and one ruling elder).
- e) Teaching elders and ruling elders from each Presbytery are chosen to represent that Presbytery at the General Assembly.
- f) 1 Tim. 5:17 and Acts 15 form the biblical basis for this form of government.



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## 3. Congregational

- a) Each church or congregation is independent.  
Congregationalists – John Owen, John Cotton, Thomas Goodwin, Jonathan Edwards  
Sometimes called “Independents”. Most Baptists would be Congregationalists.

The authority of the congregation rests with each congregation, there is no hierarchical structure. Each church is autonomous, although not disconnected or isolated (should not be).

- b) Matt. 18:15-20 (it is the congregation itself which is the final court of authority).  
Acts 6:1-6  
Acts 11:19-24; 13:1-3; 14:24-28; 20:17-35  
Rev. 1-3 (addressed as single, independent, local churches).
- c) Models of Congregationalism
1. Single-elder congregationalism
  2. Plural-eldership congregationalism (Elder led)
  3. Elder ruled congregationalism
- d) A defense of plural-elder led congregationalism
1. NT congregationalism ~
  2. Plurality of elders in each church  
Acts 14:21-23; Phil. 1:1; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1-4

## Summary

1. Local congregations exist under the headship of Jesus. They are in no other ecclesiastical authority structure.
2. Congregationalism acknowledges not only the autonomy of the local church to regulate its own affairs, call its own leaders, etc. It also acknowledges that the local church itself is the final court of authority in certain areas.
3. Plural eldership in each local congregation fills out the way we understand congregationalism. Each congregation is led by a plurality of duly qualified elders. Congregationalism sees the ultimate authority over the congregation in Jesus Christ, and vested in the congregation, which includes choosing its own elders and deacons.

