

Biblical Church Government

Acts 14:8–28

The title of the message this morning is “Biblical Church Government”—a phrase that will cause some people’s eyes to glaze over. But before you let that happen to you, consider: if the Bible teaches a form of church government, then it is the church’s duty to put that form of government into practice. Church members need to know what biblical church government is, so that they can hold their church leaders accountable to implement it and follow it. As we shall see, if a church practices biblical church government, it is a safeguard for the sheep. It is then vitally important to listen carefully this morning.

So, what does the Bible teach about church government? Some people say that it makes no difference how a church is governed. Man has liberty to organize a church however he wants, according to local needs and circumstances. Therefore, any form of church government is valid. I submit to you that our text this morning decimates that idea. Walk with me, if you will, through this Scripture.

1. Background

Our key text this morning is the first clause of verse 23, “when they had appointed elders in every church,” but let’s look at the context. Acts 13 and 14 are the inspired account of the apostle Paul’s first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas, two of the “prophets and teachers” in the church at Antioch, were set apart for missionary service. The church prayed and fasted, laid hands on them (ordination) and sent them out as evangelists to preach Christ’s gospel.

In Lystra the Lord used Paul to perform a miracle that dramatically demonstrated that he was preaching not his own human opinion but was speaking on behalf of God, as a minister of Christ. He healed a man who had never in his life been able to walk, but had been a “cripple” from birth. Now this term, and its synonym *lame*, are now considered to be offensive and not to be used in polite speech. But historically such terms were used to refer to a person with a physical or mobility impairment. The Bible never uses *crippled* or *lame* as a put-down, or implying that those with physical defects are less than human. They are a fact of life in a fallen world, awaiting Christ’s final command, “Behold, I make all things new!” If they describe you, then know that there is hope! They are temporary. One day, in the presence of Christ, you will be whole!

Here was a man who had never walked. Paul, seeing that he had faith to be healed, commanded him: “Stand up straight on your feet!” What happened? “He leaped and walked.” Our God, who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, healed the crippled man. He not only enabled this crippled man to stand up straight, but also empowered him to leap and walk! Truly, God is a

prayer-answering God! Luke, the “beloved physician,”¹ records the miracle in straightforward, factual language—no attempt to exaggerate or overdramatize what he had seen with his own eyes. Here was the eschatological kingdom breaking into the natural world—a foreshadowing of the eternal kingdom. Paul raised this man by the power of Christ—a clear miracle.

Believer, whatever your need, Christ is able! “He forgives all our sins, he heals all our diseases.”² He heals us physically, so far as it serves for God’s glory and our good. Sometimes, as in the case of Paul’s thorn in the flesh, he allows us to suffer for a time, so as to glorify himself in his strengthening and upholding us during a painful trial.³ But at the final day there will be no more death, sorrow, crying, or pain, for the former things will have passed away.⁴ What a day that will be!

When Paul performed this miracle, there was an immediate commotion. The townsfolk exclaimed: “The gods have come down to us in the likeness of men!” The crowd wanted to worship the missionaries—though they tried to restrain them. But rabble-rousers arrive, and the crowd abruptly turns from adoration to murder. They savagely pelt Paul with stones until he stops breathing and drag his body out of the city, thinking him to be dead. The disciples gather around him, mourning and praying, and God does another miracle. Paul gets up under his own power and goes into the city. The next day he leaves for Derbe.

Now what would you do if you had labored to bring the gospel to a people who had never heard, and then they stoned you and left you for dead? Can you imagine how terrifying it would be for a large crowd to turn against you and cry out for your blood? Can you imagine what it would be like to suddenly be bombarded with stones from all sides, with nowhere to hide? People know that we are Christians—they do, don’t they?—and most of the time we encounter little opposition. There is general religious toleration in our society, but Christians are persecuted in many parts of the world. Even here in the U.S. there is intolerance for one religion—Christianity—because of Christ’s claim to be the only way to the Father.

Paul and Barnabas get chased out of Lystra for preaching Christ and go on to preach Christ in Derbe. May God help us all not to be quitters, but to witness for him as long as he gives us breath! God gave Paul and Barnabas much fruit in Derbe as they preached and made disciples. This is the fundamental duty of every church. When a church stops preaching the gospel and making disciples, it devolves into just another social club.

This brings us to the part of the text where Christ teaches his church about

¹ Col. 4:14

² Ps. 103:3

³ 2 Cor. 12:7

⁴ Rev. 21:4

2. Biblical church government

After preaching in Derbe, Paul and Barnabas decide to return to the cities where they had preached, “strengthening the souls of the disciples, exhorting them to continue in the faith,” and preparing them to endure persecution.

Becoming a Christian in many places has become just a one-time event: you go to a big meeting, you hear a powerful sermon, you walk down the aisle, indicating that you have made a “decision” for Christ. You fill out a decision card or write down the date in your Bible. You are now a Christian. You are told that your name is in the Lamb’s book of life, and you should never, ever doubt that.

But God’s plan is not just a one-time event; rather, it is that the *gospel* ought to be preached in every church the world over—week in and week out—till Jesus returns to receive his church unto himself. The gospel is that *Christ saves sinners*; it is *not* that sinners save themselves with Christ’s help. If a church does not preach the gospel, then it is no true church.

As Paul and Barnabas revisited the churches they had established, they sought to establish the new believers in the faith. But this is not all. Verse 23 explains that they also “appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” Here is the biblical case for presbyterian government in a single short clause. The verb for “appointed” is χειροτονέω *cheirotoneō*, which means *choose or elect by raising hands*). The prefix *cheiro* is the root of our English word *chiropractor*, someone who treats disorders by manipulating vertebrae with the hands. *Cheiro* refers to the hands. In the case of the word “appointed” in our text, it means *to elect by raising hands*.

Note that the early church elected elders by raising hands. This was obviously done in person, physically. The congregation gathered in an orderly, public meeting for the purpose of electing elders who would have oversight in that particular congregation. Note well that overseers were not imposed by Paul and Barnabas without the congregation’s concurrence. Rather, godly men were put forward, no doubt with the evangelists’ support, and the congregation chose the men to whom they were going to submit in the Lord. Their vote indicated: *we believe these men give evidence that they are called by God to this sacred office; we certify, to the best of our knowledge, that they understand and are able to teach sound doctrine, as believed and confessed in all the churches; we verify that these men possess the godly character required of men who exercise oversight in Christ’s church, and we publicly declare that we are willing, henceforward, to submit in the Lord to their spiritual oversight*. How do we know that this is what their vote indicated? Because the vote was overseen by the apostle Paul and his missionary team, and these very points would be taught in Paul’s inspired epistles.

Who was eligible to vote? Anybody who happened to walk in off the street that day? Hardly! In first-century culture it was most likely heads of families who had

publicly confessed Christ and were in good and regular fellowship as members of the local congregations established by the evangelists.

Who oversaw the vote? Paul and Barnabas, of whom the Holy Spirit had said, “Now separate to Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”⁵ These votes, taking place in the local congregations planted by the divinely-sent missionary team, established a precedent to be followed by the whole Christian church for all time. In other words, what we read in our text is not merely *descriptive*, recording, under divine inspiration, what actually happened in the churches of Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, as they chose their spiritual overseers, but are also *prescriptive*, that is, binding upon all churches everywhere for all time. It is noteworthy that Paul and Barnabas did not, as bishops, impose overseers upon the local churches; rather, they oversaw an orderly process whereby the churches chose their own overseers. This process avoided two extremes: a top-down hierarchy which ran the church like CEOs (chief executive officers) in a corporation, on the one hand; and a system whereby a persuasive, smooth-talking individual appoints himself as the sole overseer in a congregation, on the other hand. In other words, Paul and Barnabas did not act like bishops in Romanist or Anglican congregations, imposing their will upon the churches; neither did they permit the churches of Christ to be led by a single man possessing sole, exclusive, unchallengeable authority, such as in many Baptist and congregational churches.

This was, if you will, *presbyterian* government (from πρεσβυτέριον *presbyterion*, meaning *body of presbyters or elders*). The churches established by Paul and Barnabas were headed by godly elders known personally by the congregation, chosen in an orderly process by majority vote in a face-to-face congregational meeting. That is presbyterian government! The elders were not imposed from above (Romanism, Anglicanism), neither did a single individual assume sole, unchallengeable oversight (Baptist, independent: no higher church courts). It was a plurality of elders, chosen by the people (Presbyterianism). *This* was the government of the early church! As Old Testament Israel was led by elders—mature men, sound in faith—so the church of Christ for all time is to be led by elders (mature men, sound in faith). It is noteworthy that the term *elders* appears twelve times in the book of Revelation, a topic that is beyond the scope of this sermon. But know this: even in the eternal state, godly elders will play a key role!

So how do we put this into practice? By becoming members of faithful presbyterian churches, if at all possible. (Not that a church must have “presbyterian” in its name; presbyterian government is practiced in the Reformed churches, as well as—to a lesser degree—churches without higher courts to serve as checks and balances on overbearing local sessions.) If a faithful presbyterian

⁵ Acts 13:2

church (small *p*) is available, then by all means go there, become a member, voluntarily put yourself under a faithful board of elders, and support such a church with your tithes and offerings. God will bless you as you put this truth into practice. Thirdly, consider

3. The biblical case for church membership

There are some Christians who claim to be in fellowship with Christ in heaven but don't want to be in a formal, committed relationship with his body on earth. Why not? Those who belong to Christ should *want* to be in good and regular fellowship with local flocks, under the godly oversight which Christ himself established for his people's protection.

It is important to understand that the word *church* is used in two different senses in Scripture. There's "Christ loved the *church*"—that is, the whole body of Christ in every age (Eph. 5:25). But in the New Testament the word *church* most frequently refers to *local* churches—"the church in Corinth," "the churches of Galatia," the church that met in a well-to-do member's large home, such as Philemon's.

Some well-meaning Christians say, "I confess Christ; I am a member of Christ; I don't need to be a member of any visible local body." They might even consider that their view is more spiritual: that they enjoy sweet fellowship with Christ; why should they get involved with the messiness of formal union with other Christians—imperfectly sanctified? However, if Christ never intended that his people be formally a part of a local congregation, then we would expect that every occurrence of the word *church* should refer to the church universal. But clearly, it does not; rather, almost all occurrences of the word *church* in the New Testament refer to local bodies.

Please understand that the Christian's duty is to "hear the *church*" (Matt. 18:17). Of course we should hear the Holy Scriptures! But Jesus specifically says, "If he refuses to hear the *church*." Make no mistake. The duty of every Christian is to hear the *church*—the *believing* church, not churches that teach that man is saved by his own self-effort. Man's duty is to read the Scriptures *with the church*. An attitude "I know better than the whole church" is not only prideful, it is dangerous! Christ wants those who confess him to live in submission to the visible church—his body on earth. His Word teaches that "in the multitude of counselors there is safety."⁶ It does *not* teach: "in me, my Bible and my intuition there is safety"!

God did not give the Bible to any private individual; he gave it to the *church*. In his wisdom he gave us the Bible *and* the church. If there were no visible church government, there would be no way that the church could decide anything officially. There would be no way that the church could exclude heretical beliefs,

⁶ Prov. 11:14

such as Arianism (the view that Jesus is just a mere creature and not the eternal God—for example, the Jehovah’s Witnesses). It would be impossible for the church to do anything decently and in order. Church meetings would become a free-for-all, with every participant clamoring to be heard, no matter how outlandish his views. The most powerful personalities would dominate. There would be no way to exclude unruly or heterodox members. There would be no stability. There would be no way to determine how Christ was ruling in the midst of his visible church. It would be no different from Korah’s rebellion—no way to determine who is right, Korah or Moses (Num. 16). Clearly, Christ, the great Creator, and the one in whom all wisdom is resident, is not the author of confusion but of order.

It is actually very prideful to assume that one’s personal understanding is better than that of the faithful elders of the church, speaking as a body. To have the attitude *I know best*. If any single individual thinks his understanding is better than that of the whole church, expressed in its creeds and confessions—if all one needs to do is to read his Bible and decide what it means definitively, on his own, and that he does not need the visible church—then God himself has ordained doctrinal confusion. One day we will all stand before Christ at the final judgment. Will he say, “Bless you, son; bless you, daughter, because you knew better than the visible church which I established, and never became a part of it; you are truly the one who knew the Father’s will”? Will he not say, “I gave you the visible church, but you wanted nothing to do with it; I told you that you should hear the church, but you refused; I told you that you should honor the men that have spiritual authority over you, but you refused”?

You might say, “But don’t the Psalms say, “I have more understanding than all my teachers: for thy testimonies are my meditation”⁷? Yes, they do, but this Psalm is ultimately fulfilled in the Christ-child, who, while on a visit to Jerusalem, sat in the temple in the midst of the teachers, both listening to them, and asking him questions, and “all that heard him were astonished at his understanding and answers.”⁸

If a person refuses listen to the church, then he is *not* in submission to the church. He should not receive the Lord’s supper, which is for the visible church. Significantly, Jesus said that the church is to observe the Supper *till he returns*⁹; after that, there will be no need for the sign, since the thing signified—the marriage supper of the Lamb—will be a reality. The church in heaven will have no more need of the sacraments. There will be no baptisms in heaven. There will be no weekly observance of the Lord’s supper in heaven.

⁷ Ps. 119:99

⁸ Luke 2:47

⁹ Matt. 26:29, 1 Cor. 11:26

Some people object to the idea of a church roll. They consider it to be a manmade innovation. They say, “Were the names of members placed on a church roll in the Bible?” Yes! Listen to Ezekiel 13:9, “they shall not be in the assembly of My people, *nor be written in the record of the house of Israel.*” Elders in Bible times knew those over whom they had spiritual oversight.

The Christian’s duty is to “*receive with meekness* the implanted word, which is able to save your soul” (James 1:21). In other words, the default position of the Christian is to receive the teaching of the church, unless it is plainly contrary to Scripture.¹⁰

If you are in submission to the lawful government of a faithful church, then those who have oversight over you are themselves under the oversight of the courts of the church: the session, presbytery and general assembly. They are ultimately under the authority of Christ. They are not independent spirits who on their own initiative decide for themselves what the Bible means. They are duty-bound to teach the whole counsel of God¹¹—whatever is taught in the Bible, and nothing that is not taught in the Bible.

May God bless us, brothers and sisters, as we submit to one another, and to Christ our head, in the practice of biblical church government. Amen.

¹⁰ What is the “implanted word”? It is that word which is planted into the fruitful ground of a heart prepared by the Spirit of God—seed that falls on good ground and yields a crop (Matt. 13:8).

¹¹ Acts 20:27