

The Structure of Church Government

Generally speaking, there are 3 basic forms of Church government

Episcopal

- From the Greek “episkopos,” which means overseer
- I Timothy 3.1-2
- Translated “Bishop,” “Overseer,” or “visitation,” (Luke 19.44; I Peter 2.12)
- This is a “top-down” form of government: the bishops have authority over the Church
- The congregation has little or no authority

Presbyterian

- From the Greek “presbuteros,” which means elder
- I Peter 5.1
- It refers to age, or office
- This is a “bottom-up” form of government, in which Churches elect those with authority over a group of local Churches

Congregational

- Local Churches are independent of other Churches in their governance
- Their doctrine is local, emanating from the local assembly

Independent Congregations may practice

- Elder Rule
- In an independent Church setting, Elder Rule is a Presbyterian form of government, but is confined to a particular local assembly, unlike most Presbyterian Churches
- Pastor/Deacon led

3 words describe the office of pastor

- I Peter 5.1-4
- Elder: the “presbytery”
- Feed: the shepherd. Acts 20.28
- Oversight: the “episkopos”

Much of the difference between “elder rule” and the pastor/deacon model lies in these 3 words

- Those who advocate the Pastor/Deacon model maintain that one office is described by 3 words
- Those who advocate the Elder Rule model maintain that not all elder are pastors

I Timothy 5.17

- Is Paul explaining that there are elders who rule and elders who teach?
- Or is Paul magnifying the work of the elder?
- “Especially” is an “adverbial superlative”
- Its function is to magnify the work, not separate it.
- They rule (preside) well by this labor

- I Timothy 5.17 doesn't really support the idea that some elders teach, and others rule
- Especially in light of I Timothy 3.2, where "apt to teach" is one of the requirements

On the other hand....

- Acts 14.23 indicates a plurality of elders in a singular congregation
- “Ordained” refers to a “vote by raising the hand.” This wasn’t an appointment.
- “Elders” is plural (Presbyterians)
- “Every Church” is singular
- James 5.14 indicates a plurality of elders in a singular congregation

Here's what should never happen

- No single man should function as the head of the Church—making all decisions, or making a pretense out of congregational input
- No congregation should delegate its responsibility and authority to a body within the assembly

The Bible pattern is

- Churches participate in decision making about the roles of members. Acts 6; Acts 14.23
- Churches have disciplinary responsibility, Matthew 18; I Corinthians 5
- Churches have the responsibility to participate in the doctrinal position of the Church. Acts 15.1-22