

Who's in Charge of the Church?

*A sermon preached at Faith Bible Fellowship, Oak Ridge, Tennessee
by Pastor Chris Bunn, February 19, 2006*

One of favorite memories as the pastor of Faith Bible Fellowship occurred probably ten years ago, when we were still in the storefront. My “office” was a partitioned-off area in a larger room, and I overheard children talking about me. Some were writing on a white board with markers – nothing naughty, mind you – just writing and drawing on the board, but another child said something like, “*Uh-oh! You are going to be in trouble! Because Chris Bunn is the boss of this church, and he is mean!*”

Something similar happened on our church’s mission trip to Croatia in ’04. It was our first night at the Svid Rock Café in Rijeka, when we were treating all the students who wanted to come hang out with us after our first English language workshop. If memory serves we had about twenty people – including one of our elders, Dave Richards, which is very important to the story because Dave is a very distinctive looking gentleman, and was so especially in Croatia with that white beard and tall frame, and whatever else you can say about Dave he is no shrinking violet. After everyone was served, the waiter, Edo, brought the bill to me, and said in his eastern European accent, “*I bring the bill to you, because you look like the boss.*” I liked Edo immediately, because Dave looked like the boss to me. And Edo continued to endear himself to me by calling me “*boss*” all week long.

What’s worrisome about those two stories is that children and waiters can be keen observers of people, and sometimes they can see what others assume is invisible, and sometimes they say what everyone else is too polite to say. It’s worrisome because churches that really do have *church bosses* can be very unhealthy churches.

Every church needs leadership, but spiritual and administrative leadership and “church bossiness” are two different things. A spiritual leader leads – he models, he shows as well as tells what to do. The church boss says, “*You push – I’ll steer.*” Spiritual leaders stay on the side of the people they lead. Church bosses coerce, they defeat, they subject, they get their own way one way or another.

A few years ago when I was on the district board of the EFCA, a certain church in a neighboring county sought affiliation with the district & denomination. Affiliation is a fairly careful process, with a probationary period, and we entered the process. The church needed a pastor, and we helped bring one in – a fellow moved with his family up from another state to be the pastor of this church.

He soon found out that one of the church board members was the employer of several other board members, which certainly created a potential conflict of interest. Can you go against your boss in the church board meeting? It’s not necessarily an impossible situation (largely depending on the maturity and integrity of the boss), but it was certainly something to keep a close eye on.

Then this particular board member purchased a piece of property on behalf of the church – no meetings, no discussion, no minutes, no vote – he simply took it upon himself to enter into a purchase agreement as a proxy for the church. The property did appear to be well-located for the possible relocation of the church, but the new pastor didn’t believe the process was a biblical or responsible one, and in his inquiries he discovered something the church boss had intended to remain unknown, that the church boss was also the seller of the property. So the church boss in effect had singularly transferred church funds to himself.

The pastor also discovered that two other board members had had very recent violations of marital fidelity, and he asked these two to quietly resign from leadership.

So the church leadership had a meeting: This would be a great story if the church boss had repented of his high-handedness, and of his treatment of God’s church as his own personal property. It would be a good story if the two morally failed leaders had repented of their sin, and resigned their leadership

positions. But the story didn't end that way, or that well either, because they simply voted to fire the pastor!

Our district superintendent negotiated a severance pay, and when the severance agreement had been fulfilled, he wrote a letter outlining the things that would have to change were they to be admitted to membership in the Evangelical Free Church. They did not respond, and so we went our separate ways.

How a church is governed is important! Surely it cannot be God's intention that His church should be run by the wealthiest person in the room. Surely it cannot be God's will that His church should be controlled by the strongest personality in the room, regardless of spiritual qualifications; regardless of official role. Surely the New Testament has not left us without any sense of direction when it comes to the government of the church for which Christ died!

The matter of church government or "polity" has been a very divisive one in the history of the church.

Some have adopted a form of church government that has come to be called "episcopalianism." The episcopal form of church government comes from the Greek term for bishop, *episkopos*. It's probably translated "overseer" in your New Testament, as in 1 Timothy 3:1-2: *"It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer [episkopos], it is a fine work he desires to do. An overseer[episkopos], then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, . . ."*

The episcopal form of government is based on a three-fold ministry in the leadership of the church. "Bishops" (the "overseers" in your New Testament) represent the top level of leadership. Under them are the "presbyters," which are referred to as "elders" in your New Testament, but who serve as "priests" in most episcopally governed churches. Then come the "deacons," who historically (though not biblically) have been trainees for the priesthood. The "bishops" in such churches are the ones who hold the exclusive right to ordain to the other offices (presbyter-priests, and deacons). Their authority can extend beyond individual churches to multiple churches (and sometimes to the whole denomination).

No doubt you've already guessed that this is the form of government that has been adopted by the "Episcopal" church, but they are not the only ones. The Roman Catholic Church is the granddaddy of all churches that are "episcopal" in their form of church government, claiming an unbroken succession of such bishops going all the way back to Peter, who was given the keys of the kingdom by Jesus! Being Protest-ants, we protest the points of their argument, but that is their argument.

Now there are others who see no biblically justifiable distinction between *episkopos* (bishops/overseers) and *presbuteros* (elders), and they find a pretty good case in Titus 1:5-7: *"For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders [presbuteros] in every city as I directed you, namely, if any man be above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. For the overseer [episkopos] must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain, . . ."*

Did you catch that? An "elder" in verse five is an "overseer" in verse seven. The terms appear synonymous. "Elder" and "overseer" are not two offices, but one! And it is those "elders" or "presbyters" who are to have authority over the church!

Surely you can guess that this form of church government is called "presbyterianism." And "capital P" Presbyterians are certainly not the only ones who are presbyterian in their form of church government. Strong elements of presbyterianism live on here at FBF. The nightmare church I told you about earlier had strong strains of presbyterianism, even if they had very weak and spiritually immature "presbyters."

But the biblical case for elder rule is not difficult to make. 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of *"elders who rule well"* being worthy of double honor. Hebrews 13:17 commands, *"Obey your leaders and submit to them,*

for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account.” Elders have an important role in any biblically governed church.

But that’s still not the end of the story, because still others have said, *“Wait a minute, when Jesus instructed us on matters of church discipline in MT 18:15-17, the highest level of authority is the church itself! If your brother sins, first go to him in private. If he does not respond, go to him again with two or three witnesses. If he still does not respond, Jesus says to take the matter to the whole church. He doesn’t say, take it to the bishop, or to the presbyterian synod, or to the Session. The church itself is at the top of the organizational chart!”*

In 2 Corinthians 6:6, Paul wants to advise that church discipline shouldn’t be too harsh, and he says, *“Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority.”* The majority of what? Not the majority of the elders, or of the bishops, but of the church!

When the first deacons were chosen, the Bible says, *“And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, ‘It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.’ And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the HS, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch.”* (Acts 6:2-5).

This selection of deacons was to be a congregational exercise. *They* had the authority and the responsibility to choose spiritually qualified people to serve.

And so a third form of church government is called “congregationalism.” It dovetails neatly with the New Testament teaching of the priesthood of every believer – every believer needed, every believer gifted, and every believer entrusted with the work of the ministry. And it dovetails neatly with the New Testament teaching of a mutually interdependent church, with Christ as its head.

The other day the phone rang, and a fellow said, “May I speak to the owner of the business?” You know how you usually can’t think of what to say until after the opportunity passes? This time the right thing came to me just in time. I said, “Sure! Just put your hands together, close your eyes, and talk!” The caller chuckled, said, “thank you for your time,” and hung up – I guess so he could pray.

Christ is the head of the church! And we are the members of His body.

The EFCA has a strong historical preference for “congregational” church government. Our denomination’s founders had no interest in seeing officials from outside the local church impose decisions upon them. They had that in the state churches in the mother countries, and they wanted no more of it. They had experienced top-down management by people not connected to the local church in any way, and in many cases by people who were not even believers! So for them, it was, *“Been there, done that, and never want to do it again.”*

So they established a denomination of autonomous, congregationally governed churches. It was so important, they put it right there in the name – the Evangelical FREE Church of America. Furthermore, they made congregationalism a part of the Statement of Faith. #10 (of 12) reads, *“We believe that Jesus Christ is the Lord and Head of the Church, and that every local church has the right under Christ to decide and govern its own affairs.”*

And of course, we have strong elements of congregationalism in our government. here – the congregation must approve an annual budget, elders and deacons, and other important decisions are placed before the congregation.

I have to say, though, that we are not purely congregational in our form of government. Churches that are more pure than ours in our congregationalism do things like have monthly business meetings. That wouldn’t fly here. The idea of having congregational business meetings twice a year instead of just once

was voted down flat a couple of years ago. Our congregationalism is heavily laced with presbyterianism – in other words, lots of issues are handled at the elder level.

In the current working revision of the EFCA statement of faith, form of church government. is simply left unaddressed. The framers of the revision state, “*We suggest that this affirmation does not belong in our doctrinal statement, which is centered on the essentials of the gospel and which expresses the truth of the “Evangelical” part of our name. Matters of church polity are secondary to the gospel itself.*”

We could add that church polity is not strictly a doctrine at all. A specific and detailed form of church government simply does not arise out of the Scriptures as do the cardinal doctrines of the faith. We can find in the Scripture justification for congregational elements of church government, we can find Scriptural justification for presbyterian (elder-led) elements of church government, and (if we take into account apostolic leadership in the first century) we can even find elements of episcopal government in the New Testament.

Nowhere do we find, however, a passage of Scripture that specifically and prescriptively defines the limits of congregational authority. Nor do we find specific instruction on how the authority of elders meshes with the responsibilities of the whole congregation.

We *could* argue, however, that the absence of prescriptive biblical instruction suggests that this is an area that allows every church and association of churches a certain degree of *liberty* in the orderly functioning of the church. Even if the Free church is an association of independent congregations who are to one degree or another are congregational in their form of government (and it is) – that is not the same as saying the way we do it is the way the Bible says everybody should be doing it. We are what we are in our church government, but we cannot say that if you’re not doing it like we are, then you are not following the Bible!

In Revelation 2 & 3 (as many of you know, especially those of you who attend Ed Jaeger’s Sunday School Class), the risen Christ addresses particular local churches in Asia Minor: Ephesus, Smyrna, Pergamum, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, and Laodicea.

Every church is made up of individuals, but every church takes on a personality of its own, with its own strengths, weaknesses, and idiosyncrasies. I suspect it’s part of the reason we found each other in the first place, and I suspect also that we rub off on one another once we’re here.

In Revelation 2 and 3, Jesus weighs the churches, and He commends some of them for areas of spiritual strength and faithfulness. Here is a hard-working church. Here is one that faithfully tests teachers and leaders before putting them into service. And here is another church that held fast to the faith during a time of persecution.

But the risen, glorified Jesus also speaks to their corporate weaknesses. Here is a church that is going through the motions of church, but without the love of the Lord. Here is another that gives a foothold to false teaching. Here is another that has a great reputation for being alive – a reputation undeserved, for it is nearly dead. Here is another that is lukewarm and half-hearted, and makes Jesus say “Yuck!”

But to none of those seven churches does Jesus say, “You’ve got the wrong form of government!” “You’re organizational flow chart is all messed up.” “You’ve got the boxes in the wrong places – and the connecting lines are in the wrong places.” He does not say, “You’ve got the gardening committee reporting to the women’s auxiliary, when it should be a function of the deacon-board!

Now I’m just being silly, but there is a serious point, which I’ll end on. A congregational form of government makes no difference at all if the congregation is not attentive and submitted to the Head of the Church, who is Christ! What good is having the congregation at the top of the organizational chart, if the congregation does not take its stewardship of the church seriously; if the congregation takes no ownership in the church; if it has no sense of responsibility FOR the church which Jesus purchased with His own blood?

We can argue rightly from Acts 6 that the congregation chose the first “deacons” – but the point is not only that they chose, but that they chose WELL – “seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom” (Acts 6:3). What good would “congregational” government have been if instead of choosing “Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit,” they had chosen “Rex, the son of the man who was giving the most money,” or, “Romena, because she was the only one willing”?

Sometimes people refer to their church membership by saying, “I belong to FBF.” It would be more right to say, “FBF belongs to me.” And it would be even MORE right to say, “FBF belongs to Jesus Christ, and I am one of its caretakers until He comes for His property.”

What difference does it make if you have a pastor and elders, if they do not, as the Bible instructs, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28)? What good is it to fill positions of church leadership if we are too timid to judge whether such leaders are as the Bible says they MUST be: “above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money, . . . able to manage his own household, . . . not a new convert, a good reputation w/ those outside the church” (1 Timothy 3:2-7)? What value is there in appointing spiritually qualified to positions of spiritual leadership, if the congregation does not accept their right or responsibility to speak into our lives, as the Bible instructs all of us when it says in HE 13:17, “Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.”?

When I read the Bible looking for verses that pertain to church government, I don’t get (and I don’t think any of us should get) a smug feeling of “Aha! We’re right and other churches are wrong!” I get the sense that spiritual authority in the church is a weighty responsibility for which the whole church will give an account before God, and it sobers me to realize that we live in a generation that is increasingly LESS friendly to and supportive of authority in all its forms, whether parental, or generational, or civil, or spiritual.

On the question of church structure, we’ve made a good-faith effort to set up something that fits within the biblical parameters. I guess we’re some sort of congregational presbyterians in structure (with, if I am the boss – as children and waiters have observed – an unfortunate and unintentional dash of episcopalianism).

But the question of church FUNCTION—of true spiritual leadership, and of respect for spiritual authority, is the far more important consideration and it should drive us to the Head of the Church for mercy for the things we have done (or failed to do) in ignorance or disobedience, for courage and wisdom to obey the Lord and His Word more closely, for a holiness that earns a respect that cannot be merely demanded, and for a humility that respects the authorities that God has established.

Because Christ is the Head of the Church. It belongs to Him – it is His property which He purchased with His own blood, and we are merely its caretakers

Father, forgive us for every time we have failed to treat the church as the blood-bought property of Jesus Christ. Show us – any of us and all of us – if we are treating lightly something that is holy, as if it existed to fulfill OUR desires, or to do OUR bidding, or to meet with OUR approval. Cause and help our leaders (in whatever capacity they serve) to be men of God, holy in their character and behavior, and filled with the Holy Spirit, that we might lead and lead well, after the servant-leadership model of Jesus Himself. Cause and help us to know our calling, for which we will give an account. Help every member and every friend of Faith Bible Fellowship to honor and obey the Head of the Church, Jesus Christ, by recognizing the authorities He has established (in the home, in the workplace, in the community, and in the church), and by having ears to hear what the Spirit says to the churches. We pray in the name of Jesus, amen.