

Let Home Churches Have Government that Fits Changing Needs
About 8 minutes, based on Acts 13:1-3; 15:1-29 & Titus 15-9.

Note: This skit is meant for church leaders.

Participants (*No need to memorize lines; the aim is simply to inform, not to perform*)

Paul
Mel
Warren

Paul Mel and Warren, some of our believers argue about church government. They want our home churches to take on an established form of rule.

Warren You're right, Paul. Their different views cause confusion.

Paul I've heard of three classic forms of church government: episcopal, presbyterian and congregational. We should choose the form that fits our home churches.

Warren Is Paul right, Mel? You're our scholar.

Mel It is not that simple, guys. Our churches should not all embrace just one form. All three classic forms of government have both strengths and weaknesses. The New Testament does not limit government to just one form. The apostles let church rule fit the churches' maturity and other conditions.

Paul Okay, Mel, so which form will help our new churches serve each other?

Mel We have to face an unpopular fact first, Paul. No church always follows one form of rule. Influential people inside or outside of a church will control eventually, some in godly ways, others in ungodly ways. At times they heed approved bylaws; and at times they use hidden power structures. Sooner or later, all three types of rule will exert influence, but few people will be aware of it.

Warren So what do we do to have healthy church life now, Mel?

Mel No form of rule assures our churches' health, Warren, It depends on the leaders.

Paul You said the rule should fit church's maturity. Explain that, Mel.

Mel Let government be flexible and adapt to current conditions as they change. Older churches often recognize only one of the classic forms of government. Episcopal rule gives authority to bishops. Presbyterian rule gives authority to elders. Congregational rule gives authority to all the believers.

Paul So who really has the authority under Christ, Mel?

Mel A church's need shifts from one type of government to another as it matures. Paul, your children are all small. Can they go places without supervision?

- Paul No. Bullies would mistreat them.
- Mel So their dad goes with the children when they go down the street. He's their bishop, their overseer, not one of the children's own congregation.
- Warren I see. That's episcopal government.
- Mel Yes. Likewise, new churches with new believers need an outsider's supervision, as in Titus 15-9. Paul had Titus, an outsider, exercise episcopal rule in its primitive form over baby churches.
- Warren A church I once attended had a godly bishop; he kept good order, and we needed it.
- Mel But he will retire. What then, Warren?
My illustration about the children shows a potential flaw in bishops' rule; some fathers abuse or neglect their role, and their children go astray.
- Warren That's for sure. History abounds with cases of hierarchical abuse.
- Paul But it also abounds with cases of godly episcopal rule.
- Mel Paul, your children will grow, and you will let them go out without you. The older brothers will care for them, as "elders," and part of the kids' own flock.
- Paul I see! That's presbyterian rule by elders.
- Mel Yes. Presbyters are shepherding leaders, according to the New Testament; and the word is always plural. In Acts 15:1-29, churches sent elders to Jerusalem to heal a severe division.
- Warren Yes, but there's also a potential flaw in presbyterian form. The older brothers can bully their younger siblings. I have seen church elders abuse their authority.
- Mel Yes; some elders neglect their shepherding duties and only make rules. Good leadership of any form requires good character.
- Paul I tried to get our churches' elders to decide issues in the presbyterian way, but they squabbled, Mel.
- Mel They're not ready for elders' government yet, Paul. Now, your children grow up, but remain close. They respect dad's advice but decide most issues as a group, without always yielding to the older brothers.
- Paul I see. That's congregational rule.
- Mel Precisely. The mature Antioch church in Acts 13:1-3 had several capable leaders, and decided as a local body to send Paul and Barnabas afar to plant churches. A danger in self-government is that a church can become too independent and lack accountability.
- Warren I've seen young churches with immature leaders exercise self-rule and make unwise decisions, Mel.
- Mel Under any form of government, leaders can fail to be accountable to others and become tyrants. A flock should never depend on one single person.

- Warren Also, if rule is too democratic. Uninformed believers can make bad decisions.
- Paul Mel, why do some churches demand just one type of rule, regardless of their level of maturity?
- Mel They inherit the form, Paul.
Furthermore, churches that register with the state often let state requirements push them into a secular form of organization; it easily becomes crystallized permanently, and becomes program-oriented instead of gift-oriented as the apostles repeatedly required of a church body.
- Paul I attended a church with bylaws requiring that every January we elect elders for a three year term and to have seven elders. But we did not have seven qualified believers! So we named unqualified people to satisfy our man-made statutes. None of them shepherded in the way that Scripture requires. They only met in monthly sessions to define activities and control.
- Mel To follow man-made statutes rather than the New Testament is devastating.
- Paul Later, things changed. The church had more than seven qualified elders, and they all had God's shepherding gift, but we couldn't name them all as elders; we could only name seven! Fortunately, the Holy Spirit ignored our bylaws; He refused to take away those godly shepherd's gifts after the three years! Several of them are shepherding small daughter churches now.
- Mel The farther a church drifts from New Testament norms, the less healthy it becomes.
- Paul Mel, are there not historical reasons why churches follow just one form of rule?
- Mel Yes. Emperor Constantine united the churches with his Roman Empire in the 4th century; they took on episcopal rule just like the imperial hierarchy. Orthodox and Catholic churches still follow it, as do other churches with roots going back to when monarchs ruled.
- Paul And presbyterian government?
- Mel It gained impetus when kings lost absolute control; districts sent delegates to represent them in regional or national councils. Church elders began representing believers and shepherding them locally, instead of one cleric wielding total control.
- Paul That was fortunate.
- Mel More recently, congregational rule grew along with the new democracy. House churches in different places are thriving now with all three of these forms of rule, and some house churches clusters combine the three. The key is to do what fits the current need.
- Warren My church cannot govern itself now. Its members bickered heatedly in our last business meeting. It brought out the worst in them. I'm afraid I only threw fuel on the fire.
- Mel Good church rule helps all members use their different spiritual gifts in loving harmony, as 2 Corinthians 12 requires. This is the crucial test of effective government.

Warren My flock needs guidance from the outside; it is still in the tiny tots' phase.

Paul Some in my flock do not want any kind of rule,
neither by bishop, nor elder nor congregation.
It's like shepherding a flock of squirrels, Mel!

Mel That will change. Simply adapt rule to current needs and maturity.

Warren I've been part of our problem; I've fueled the squabbling among the elders,
and I provoked members into arguing in business meetings.
Paul, I've resisted your leadership at times; please forgive me.
I welcome you as the leader of our new churches.
I agree that it's foolish to demand just one rigid form of church rule.

Mel Hallelujah!