

Purpose: To connect with those who have an active relationship with Church Doctor Ministries as peers in ministry, clients, and partners in prayer and support.

Your Church: Organizational Bureaucracy or Spiritual Movement?

There is a fictional story about a church that caught fire. All the members of the church board perished in the terrible disaster. Why? They couldn't find the procedure in *Robert's Rules of Order* to properly adjourn in the case of an emergency!

That fictitious report has the power of a parable: The drift from Scripture cripples the local church in many forms, including its approach to governance. As the Christian movement continues to decline, there are several ailments that need to be addressed. One of the most severe is the decision-making approach that creeps into congregations from secular and unspiritual origins. John Maxwell once said, "Everything rises and falls on leadership." If you were the enemy of Christ, doesn't it make sense that you would subtly create havoc among local church and denominational leaders who "baptize" secular approaches foreign to Scripture — and make them feel "popular" and "wise"?

Church decision making, the politics of leadership, is no small matter. Christ-followers have fought for the truth of Scripture for centuries, through reformations, revivals, and movements. Jesus faced Pilate on the subject:

For the past 20 years, Kent Hunter and Church Doctor Ministries have helped dozens of churches



remove the political shackles of church governance structures patterned after a corporate world. In this issue, Kent Hunter shares key elements of his upcoming book about the biblical approach that frees congregations — and denominations — from the political gridlock that subtly cripples the movement that Jesus launched.

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“What is truth?” (John 18:38). He also challenged the Pharisees on the subject of structure: “New wine needs new wineskins” (Matthew 9:17). Structure matters. *How* you make decisions for ministry is vital. *Who* makes ministry decisions is important. Church governance matters. The container in which leaders make decisions — seek God’s will — matters. Otherwise, you lose the new wine. The structure of making decisions can carry the new wine of the gospel effectively — or lose it.

Death by Meetings

So many pastors have told me about leaving church meetings, returning home, and losing sleep — tossing and turning all night. Many seasoned church leaders report similar effects. Unbiblical, political systems put well-meaning Christians into destructive decision-making approaches that are foreign to the ethos of the Bible.

So many decisions are subject to votes. Jesus’ new wineskin is not sacred because it requires a two-thirds majority vote. Those on church decision-making groups are usually not chosen on the basis of their spiritual depth, but by popular vote. They are rarely disciplined into the challenge of discerning God’s will. Often, no one has considered their depth or lifestyle in Scripture reading and Bible study. Most churches ignore biblical spiritual gifts like wisdom, discernment, leadership, and knowledge as they seek to identify those who will serve in the area of decision making.

Elections are treated as sacred. Few of those who make critical decisions for a church or denomination are disciplined and developed to seek the wisdom of Scripture and the will of God. There are requirements that two candidates be put up for election for each position. Why? So a Christian willing to serve God and their church can lose, in front of their Christian family? What is biblical about that? How does an election sync up with discipleship?

While some will call it blasphemy, *Robert’s Rules of Order* are not found in Scripture. In fact, the whole concept of parliamentary procedure is foreign to the scriptural approach. Have we not learned about the “Matthias mistake”? When the Christian movement was in its infancy, Peter suggested the 11 disciples “draw straws” to choose between two candidates to fill the vacancy left by Judas. Matthias was chosen — and you never hear from him again. Jesus selected an unlikely candidate — Paul, who would have *never* received a vote!

Councils and Counsels

Many congregations have moved away from the harsh and political nuances of a board of directors. Most of these churches have sought to diminish the political overtones of the corporate world. They have used names like “elders” or “deacons,” “consistories” or “church councils.” The names of these decision-making groups may vary. However, it is the *approach* that makes a difference. The somewhat oversimplified “bottom line” is this: How does your church reach a decision?

Some decision-making groups operate by majority vote. These votes are preceded by discussions. The real issue is the source or basis for decision. Is it based on Scripture? Are Bibles present? Is there time for prayer? Does the group seek total consensus?

At the foundation of a spiritual decision-making group is this: Are those chosen and disciplined into the group selected on the basis of their lifestyle of regular Bible study, knowledge of Scripture, and commitment to God’s will? As they serve, do they see this as their *ministry* with no term limits? Are they in the process of discipling someone else to one day take their

place?

If the group can't reach consensus, are they willing to table a decision, wait on God, study Scripture, pray for clarity, and take up the discussion later? Are they willing to reach consensus? The only approach that remotely resembles a vote should be when the leader says, "Does anyone object?" "Does everyone believe this is what God wants?" What about this question: "Is there anyone who is not convinced this is God's will?" If there is someone, all discussions continue with the operating procedure: seek God's will, through reference to Scripture.

At this point, most Christians respond: "That will never work! We will never get anything accomplished." There are a growing group of churches where the leaders have discovered: This biblical approach actually works! God's ways are not our ways. It is His church.

In the book of Acts, if you look closely, there are councils and counsels. When the Pharisees and religious leaders met in opposition to the Christian movement, the word "council" is used. It implies politics, votes, control. When the Christian followers met, the word used is "counsel." In Acts 20:27, Paul says, "...I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole *counsel* of God." This approach for counsel from God reflects Isaiah 9:6: "For to us a child is born, to us a son is given; and the government [governance] will be upon his shoulders, and his name will be called 'Wonderful *Counselor*, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.'"

In Ephesians 1:11, Paul writes: "In Him [Christ], according to the purpose of Him who accomplishes all things according to the *counsel* of His will..." The purpose of church leadership is to discern God's will. That approach is not a political vote of a council but a process by which leaders search Scripture and, in prayer, seek the counsel of Christ, the head of His body, the church.

While councils operate in politics, counsels seek the wisdom of God. Sadly, most church leadership groups — by any name or structure — are gathered without Bibles. They rarely pause for earnest prayer. They vote. The majority wins. Rarely would they seek biblical basis for consensus. Most operate by constitutional rules. They are elected by votes with little attention to God's calling on their lives or the gifts given to them by the Holy Spirit.

Organization or Organism?

Many churches — and denominations — have drifted into leadership structures influenced by corporate, political structures. In doing so, they have lost the power of the Christian movement. The local church has taken on the mantle of an organization. Organizations are top-down structures that become a bottleneck of inward protection. Rules and regulations stifle vision and outreach. Mission moves toward maintenance. Growth gives way to stagnation.

Every metaphor for the church in the New Testament is reflective of a movement of growth. The body of Christ is not a stagnant corporation. The priesthood of believers has no room for a board of control. The vine and the branches bear fruit. The sheep follow the Shepherd, not a rule book or constitution. The Holy Spirit provides supernatural gifts, not bylaws of control. The household of God is a family that produces offspring. The manifesto for life is Scripture, not a document of political origin. We are organized for action, not organization.

The church is not a country, democracy, republic, organization, or corporation. It is a spiritual family, with a variety of gifts, on a singular mission. If you must call this approach something, it is an apostolic theocracy.

The word “theocracy” means that, ultimately, God rules. He is the Lord; He is the head of His body, the Shepherd of the sheep, the Ruler of the universe. His Word is the supreme guide. The Scripture is our manual of operation.

The word “apostolic” is all about relationships. Apostles aren't elected. They aren't rulers. If anything, they are servant influencers. They don't influence by laws, rules, or regulations. They influence by their God-given gifts. They influence by relationships. Their relationship is to Christ — and to those who make up the supernatural body of Christ. Apostles disciple others into action, into ministry, as Jesus modeled. Every believer is a minister, empowered by the Holy Spirit. Your baptism is your ordination into ministry. The church is a royal priesthood.

Churches that reshape governance as an apostolic theocracy are freed from bureaucratic humanism. They are released to be the most unusual and powerful organism in the world: the supernatural church.

KEY RESOURCES

Church Doctor Ministries. *Church Government Principles* (whitepaper). www.churchdoctor.org.

Church Doctor Ministries. *Congregational Meetings* (whitepaper). www.churchdoctor.org.

Church Doctor Ministries. *Membership Issues* (whitepaper). www.churchdoctor.org.

Church Doctor Ministries. *Restructuring the Church* (whitepaper). www.churchdoctor.org.

Church Doctor Ministries. *Structural Issues* (whitepaper). www.churchdoctor.org.

Church Doctor Ministries. *Who is in Control* (whitepaper). www.churchdoctor.org.

Church Government Consultation. Church Doctor Ministries, www.churchdoctor.org

Hunter, Kent R. (new book written on church government, coming soon).

Stark, Rodney. *The Triumph of Christianity: How the Jesus Movement Became the World's Largest Religion*. New York, NY: HarperOne, an Imprint of HarperCollins, 2012.

Snyder, Howard A., and Christine Pohl. *The Problem of Wineskins: Church Structure in a Technological Age*. Franklin, TN: Seedbed Publishing, 2017.

Woodward, J.R. *The Church as Movement: Starting and Sustaining Missional-Incarnational Communities*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Books, an Imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016.

TEN CHALLENGING QUESTIONS FOR DISCUSSION ABOUT HOW YOUR CHURCH OPERATES

1. When you read the life of the New Testament church (book of Acts and letters of the apostles), why does the decision-making approach look and feel so dramatically different from human organizations?
2. When Jesus clashed with the religious establishment, He said that new wine requires new wineskins. What structural differences move the gospel from politics to healthy outreach?
3. Why does church leadership development focus on votes and elections and not so much on spiritual gifts and “callings”?
4. When your decision-making group meets, do they come to conclusions based on scriptural truth or majority rule?
5. Why should leaders be chosen by a vote that requires at least two candidates? Why should a Christian, who wants to serve God, ever lose a public “election” in front of their friends at church?
6. Why would a Christian church be led by a group that is politically organized to vote and seek majority rule? Does that reflect what you pray in the Lord’s Prayer, “Your will be done”?
7. What is the difference between a political “council” (a reference to the way the Pharisees operated) and the biblical approach of seeking God’s will by discerning the “counsel” of God through the guidance of Scripture and prayer?
8. The apostles made a big decision advising the Christian movement—among Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia—about whether they should eat meat from animals sacrificed to idols. In Acts 15:28, it says **how** they made this decision: “...it seemed right to the Holy Spirit and to us...that you abstain from what has been sacrificed....” What does this tell you about a New Testament approach to making decisions?
9. *Robert’s Rules of Order* and *Parliamentary Procedures* became popular long after the Scripture was written. In the New Testament, decisions were made by the wisdom of those influenced by Jesus and the apostles. The phrase that is often used in the New Testament is: “...it seemed good to the apostles and the elders....” How does that inform a church today about **who** should make decisions and **how** decisions should be made?
10. In the early stages of the Christian movement, recorded in Acts, chapter 1, the 12 disciples had been reduced to 11, due to the defection and death of Judas. Peter decided that Judas should be replaced by someone who was close to Jesus and His ministry when He was alive. Like many churches today, they selected two candidates to fill one slot. They were Justus and Matthias. Then, the group prayed—a good idea! However, then, they cast lots—a form of voting (Acts 1:26) and Matthias “won.” Is this an approach that God blessed? In truth, we never hear anything about Matthias again. In fact, it seems clear that Jesus picked His own “12th man”: Paul, on the Damascus Road. What message does that imply about how most churches choose those who make decisions?