

Bethel Fellowship Church, Minneota, MN
Todd Mitchell
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Introduction

What if I told you the pastor and deacons met yesterday and hired a second pastor? They hope to hire a third pastor as soon as possible. Oh, and they also decided that from now on only our pastors have the authority to hire and fire each other.

Of course, they didn't. I'm just making it up. But what if they did? Is that okay? Can they really do that? Biblically? And what are you going to do about it, Biblically?

Something like this really did happen not that long ago. Remember Mars Hill Church?

Mars Hill Church began in Seattle, Washington in 1996. Her lead pastor, Mark Driscoll, whatever else he may be, is a brilliant entrepreneur. Under his leadership, Mars Hill grew from a home Bible study to a megachurch with over a dozen campuses in multiple states with over 10,000 people attending and tens of millions of dollars in assets. But after 19 years, it all fell apart.

Not because of heresy, marital infidelity, nor financial mismanagement, but because of bad church government.

As the empire grew, Mark Driscoll consolidated power. The members of the church never had a vote, only the board of 24 elders and a small executive committee. One day Driscoll pushed for bylaw changes that would give all the power to the executive committee, who would be the only ones with authority to hire and fire other elders. When two elders objected, he fired them. This is what he said the very next morning at a conference:

“Too many guys waste too much time trying to move stiff necked, stubborn, obstinate people. I am all about blessed subtraction. There is a pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus and by God's grace it'll be a mountain by the time we're done. You either get on the bus or you get run over by the bus. Those are the options, but the bus ain't going to stop . . . we just took certain guys and rearranged the seats on the bus yesterday. We fired two elders for the first time in the history of Mars Hill last night. They're off the bus, under the bus. They were off mission so now they're unemployed. . . I've read enough of the New Testament to know that occasionally Paul puts somebody in the wood chipper.”¹

Those two elders weren't the last ones to get the boot. It gives you an idea of what Paul Tripp meant when he later said, “This is without a doubt the most abusive, coercive ministry culture I've ever been involved with.”²

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- 1 Mark Driscoll, Church Planters Boot Camp, October 2007, quoted in Mike Cospers, “State of Emergency,” ep. 7 of *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, podcast audio, Christianity Today, August 9, 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/podcasts/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/mars-hill-mark-driscoll-podcast-state-of-emergency/>.
 - 2 Paul Tripp, quoted in Mike Cospers, “Who Killed Mars Hill?” ep. 1 of *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, podcast audio, Christianity Today, December 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/podcasts/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/who-killed-mars-hill-church-mark-driscoll-rise-fall/>.

As you can imagine, the new bylaws passed. There may have been more than one elder at Mars Hill, but there was really just one man ruling that church — the lead pastor, and with a heavy hand. The pile of dead bodies behind the Mars Hill bus continued to grow.

When the church eventually had had enough, the elders finally stood up to him and asked him to step down temporarily for a time of restoration. Mark Driscoll abruptly resigned, and that was the end of Mars Hill. The empire sold off its assets, and the campuses became individual local churches. A good thing, I hope. But as a former staffer at Mars Hill says, “Yeah, we can tell some positive stories, but let’s deal with the . . . fact that there’s a wolf loose in the pen.”³

Could stuff like this happen here? Yes, it could. And worse.

This sermon is on the topic of local church polity. In other words, local church government — who governs the local church and how they govern it. This is just an introduction to the topic, really.

Now, I am not an attorney, and nothing I say should be construed as legal advice on how to govern a church. To understand our legal obligations, we must consult an attorney. And we should consult such advisers, in my opinion. What I bring to you this morning is more important than that. What does God tell us in the Bible — specifically the New Testament — about church polity?

You might say, “What does it matter? This is all just a distraction from what really matters. We ought to be focused on winning souls to Christ, not on dusty stuff like church government. After all, we’re doing pretty well, aren’t we?” If you are thinking like that, you are in good company. As Dr. Jonathan Leeman says, “Nobody cares about church polity until things go south.”⁴

Good thing airline pilots don’t think that way! Airline pilots have emergency checklists for everything: engine failure, stuck landing gear, and a hundred other things that can go wrong. The time to write those checklists is before the airplane ever leaves the ground, not after an engine has already failed. Even after hours of smooth flying, things can go very wrong in an instant. If the pilots respond incorrectly, they can make things even worse.

Even so with the church. Things can go very wrong very quickly, and we can make things even worse if we respond incorrectly. The time to care about church polity is now, not after things have already gone south!

Not that the local church necessarily needs a hundred emergency checklists! But we do need to respect the local church enough to care about church polity.

If you forget everything else this morning, remember that. Respect the local church, because Jesus bought her with his blood. Respect the local church by taking seriously what the New Testament says about church polity.

So what does the New Testament say? Who does govern the church, and how do they govern it? But before answering those questions, we need to answer the most important one. Just what is the church?

3 Jesse Bryan, quoted in Mike Cosper, “Aftermath,” ep. 12 of *The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill*, podcast audio, Christianity Today, December 2021, <https://www.christianitytoday.com/podcasts/the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/mars-hill-podcast-driscoll-finale-aftermath/>.

4 Jonathan Leeman, “An Ecclesiological Take on ‘The Rise and Fall of Mars Hill,’” 9Marks, March 14, 2022, <https://www.9marks.org/article/an-ecclesiological-take-on-the-rise-and-fall-of-mars-hill/>.

I. What is the church?

The word “church” in the New Testament is translated from the Greek word *ekklesia*. The word can mean any assembly of people who gather in response to a call, e.g. in Acts 19 it refers to the crowd rioting against Paul and his men.

But over and over in the New Testament, that word is used to describe the church. The church is THE assembly, the assembly called together by our Lord.

What is the church? The church is Christ’s. The church is exclusive. And the church is orderly.

A. The church is Christ’s

Jesus told Peter, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Mat 16:18b).⁵ Jesus was talking about the whole church, the church universal throughout the age.

Then came the Day of Pentecost. The Bible says, “So then, those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls” (Act 2:41). And as the gospel of Christ spread like wildfire, local churches were planted from Jerusalem to Rome.

The church is Christ’s bride, and a great wedding feast is coming one day. You can read about it in Revelation 19.

Paul told the local church in Corinth, “I betrothed you to one husband, so that to Christ I might present you as a pure virgin” (2Co 11:2b). And when Paul wrote to the church in Ephesus, he compared the marriage of a man and a woman to the marriage of Christ and the church, in Ephesians 5. The church is Christ’s bride, Paul wrote, and he loves her as his own body, for we are members of his body.

So make no mistake, the church is Christ’s. Not yours. Not mine. The church belongs to Christ.

B. The church is exclusive

And that makes the church exclusive. In other words, the church does not include everyone. The church does not include just anyone. The church includes only those who are members of the body of Christ.

When the church was born, “those who had received his word were baptized; and that day there were added about three thousand souls” (Act 2:41). That’s a lot of baptisms. Can you imagine the public spectacle of 3,000 people getting baptized? But that’s what baptism was. It was a public declaration of repentance from sin to Christ. And it still is.

Not everyone there was added to the church in Jerusalem that day. Only those who 1) believed in the gospel of Jesus Christ and 2) were baptized.

The church has a clear boundary between those who are inside and those who are outside. It is exclusive. But exclusive doesn’t mean snobby! All are welcome to come here to hear the

⁵ Scripture quotations taken from the (NASB®) New American Standard Bible®, Copyright © 1960, 1971, 1977, 1995 by The Lockman Foundation. Used by permission. All rights reserved. www.Lockman.org

preaching of God’s Word, members or not. May God bring more visitors, and new members, too.

But the church does have an inside, and an outside. Nowhere is this more clear than in 1 Corinthians 5, where the apostle Paul rebukes the church for tolerating an unrepentant adulterer in the membership:

1 Corinthians 5:4–5, 13b 4 In the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 5 I have decided to deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus 13b REMOVE THE WICKED MAN FROM AMONG YOURSELVES.

I’ll say more about this later. For now, I just want to point out that this would make no sense if the church had no boundary between those who were in and who were out.

Did they have a membership list? Well, we know they didn’t mind keeping a list when it came to needy widows. In 1Ti 5:9, Paul told Timothy who should and should not be put on the list — the word he uses means, “to enroll, to put on a list.” So they certainly could have kept a list of members.

They probably destroyed them when persecution hit the church, but they still knew who was in and who was out. You can’t obey Paul’s command in 1Co 11 to wait for the rest of the members to show up for communion if you don’t know who they are.

What is the church? The church is Christ’s. The church is exclusive. And the church is orderly.

C. The church is orderly

Paul told the Corinthian church that when they worship, “all things must be done properly and in an orderly manner” (1Co 14:40). Disorderly worship is forbidden.

Orderliness extends to church polity, too. He wrote to Titus, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Tit 1:5). Churches without elders are *not* properly ordered. Titus was to go to those churches and help them appoint elders *so they would be* properly ordered.

I take it seriously when the Bible tells me that the church must be orderly. Don’t forget what we’re dealing with here. When Jesus said, “I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it” (Mat 16:18b), he wasn’t kidding. And if the gates of Hades won’t overpower the church, do you want to try? I don’t.

What is the church? The church is Christ’s. The church is exclusive. And the church is orderly. But exactly what does that mean? How is it ordered? Just who does govern the local church?

II. Who governs the local church?

I believe the New Testament shows that a properly ordered church is governed by our head, Jesus, by our officers — our pastors and deacons — and by ourselves, we who are in the membership.

A. Our head: Jesus

First, our head: Jesus, as revealed in the Bible. The Bible alone is the final authority for faith and practice. And the Bible says Jesus is the head of the church. God “gave Him as head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph 1:22b–23). And Jesus is an active head. He chooses who is in the membership, and he chastises those whom he loves.

God “chose us in Him [Jesus] before the foundation of the world,” Paul writes in Eph 1:4b. Before the world began, the members of his church were chosen in Jesus. He prayed for us lovingly in the garden before he was crucified to bring us into the church. And Jesus has been bringing us in ever since. “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me” he told his disciples in Jhn 10:27. He is the one who calls us to the *ekklesia*.

And Jesus does not leave us to go astray. He chastises us as a loving shepherd. In 1 Corinthians 11, Paul explains to the church in Corinth why some of them have been getting sick and some have even died — because they were not waiting for the rest of the membership to arrive before celebrating the Lord’s supper.

We are governed first and foremost by Jesus, our head. And as a properly ordered church, we are governed in different areas by our officers — our pastors and deacons.

B. Our officers: elders & deacons

In the New Testament, there are two titles for pastors that are used interchangeably. One is *presbyteros*, which is translated “elder,” and the other is *episkopos*, translated “overseer,” or, if you have the KJV, “bishop.”

Episcopal polity (Roman Catholic, Orthodox, Anglican) believe the *episkopos* is a separate office of “bishop.” But these terms — *presbyteros* and *episkopos* — are used in the same breath to describe the very same people in Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5,7. So it seems both are terms for the same office: elder. Or as we like to call him, Pastor.

Does a properly ordered local church have just one elder, or more than one? There are several places in the New Testament where it seems clear there were more than one in each church, like in:

Acts 14:23 When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Elders (plural) in every church (singular). So you’re certainly on safe ground to have more than one. And it might be safer ground than having only one, depending on how they rule. But I’ll come back to that in a few minutes.

The other office of the church in the New Testament is the office of deacon. We are told less about this office, but we do have clear instructions for who should be picked as deacons in 1 Timothy 3, where Paul lists the qualifications for both elders and deacons.

In 1 Timothy 3 Paul writes that to be an elder, you must be “able to teach” (v. 2). Not so for deacons. They might be great teachers, but it’s not required. To require deacons be able to teach would disqualify capable men of God who could do a great job as a deacon.

This difference between elders and deacons makes sense when you read Acts 6. There we read about the first recorded argument in the church. Turn to Acts 6 with me:

Acts 6:1–6 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. 2 So 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. 3 Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” 5 The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

The twelve apostles, the elders of the church in Jerusalem, devoted themselves “to prayer and to the ministry of the word,” while these prototypical deacons managed the church’s food offerings for the widows on the widows list. The elder’s job requires teaching the word, while the deacon’s job does not require it.

I’ll come back to this difference in a few minutes when I get to *how* these officers govern the church, but not until we understand who else governs the church — the membership.

C. Ourselves: the membership

Now, there are some who say the congregation should not have a say. That’s how Mars Hill Church was set up. The elders controlled everything.

But the members of the local church are not second-class citizens. Don’t forget what Peter said about Christians in 1Pe 2:9. He called us, “a royal priesthood.” Martin Luther referred to this as the “priesthood of the believer.” All of us are priests who are members of Christ’s body.

The congregation definitely had a say in Acts 6. They were the ones who picked those seven deacons, not the elders. The elders just confirmed their choices.

The congregation was also responsible for casting people out of the church when necessary. I promised you I would come back to this in 1Co 5. Who did Paul command to cast out the unrepentant adulterer? The elders? No. The command was to the whole church. Paul told them, do it “when you are assembled.” And they did. The congregation held him accountable.

They didn’t just watch the elders do it. They took an active part. Later in 2Co 2:6, when Paul tells them it was time to let that man back into the church, he wrote, “Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority [KJV: inflicted of many].” Did you catch that? The majority. So back when they assembled, when they collectively cast him out, it was the majority who did it. That sounds like a vote to me.

And if the membership has the authority over who is a member, then they have the authority to remove an elder from office, too — assuming the elder is a member of the church. If he

isn't, then where is he a member? What church is holding him accountable? It would make no sense. The New Testament knows nothing of the "Lone Ranger" Christian who is not a member of a local church.

This authority of the congregation — and the responsibility that comes with it — is sobering. As Dr. Leeman at 9Marks Journal wrote, "As with nations and their governments, the most crucial piece of church polity is who possesses the power of accountability and discipline."⁶

Let's review. What is the church? The church is Christ's, the church is exclusive, and the church is ordered. And who governs the church? Our head, Jesus, our officers — pastors and deacons — and ourselves, the membership. But *how* do they govern the local church?

III. How do they govern the local church?

I've already talked about how Jesus governs by choosing and chastising the membership. But how do elders and deacons govern the church? And how do we, as the membership, govern the church?

A. How elders govern

This is a much bigger question than I can answer in one sermon, much less in five minutes! But I'll try to hit the high points.

The main thing is the plain thing. Elders govern by teaching and preaching. Remember that difference between the qualifications for elder and deacon, in 1Ti 3? The elder is the one who must be able to teach. And for good reason.

How could an elder govern by anything *but* teaching? He can't kick you out himself, not Biblically. He can't cut your pay if you're not making anything. He has no authority to tax you or fine you or imprison you. No, an elder governs the local church "simply" by teaching and preaching.

Please turn to Titus 1. Here in Titus 1, Paul teaches Titus the qualifications for elder, and they tell us a lot about how an elder should lead:

Titus 1:5–9 5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you, 6 namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. 7 For the overseer 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, 8 but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled, 9 holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.

All those things he should be *before* he is a pastor are the things he should be *while* he is a pastor. That's how he should govern. Not a quick-tempered tyrant, not a pugnacious bully, not a wishy-washy man who only teaches the people what their itching ears want to hear, but a man who holds "fast the faithful word," teaches sound doctrine, and patiently refutes

6 Leeman, "Ecclesiological Take."

those who contradict it. “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition” (2Ti 2:24–25).

But make no mistake, Elders have authority. “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account” (Heb 13:17a). But that authority is bounded by the Word of God. For instance, if an elder commands you to do something immoral, you must obey God, not him. “We must obey God rather than men” (Act 5:29).

And if an elder goes beyond the authority of scripture and commands me to homeschool my kids or to send my kids to public school or drink only soy milk, I’ll politely encourage him to stay in his lane. That’s another sermon for another day.

But within his domain, consistent with the Word of God, the elder must be obeyed. Teaching and preaching are in his domain. Music, a critical part of teaching and preaching, is in his domain. And more. This, too, is another sermon for another day.

My knee-jerk response is to obey the Pastor if I can. As far as I am concerned, if Pastor Nomeland asks me to wear a tie when I preach in his pulpit (he hasn’t), I’m not going to get fired up like a rebellious American individualist who bristles at authority. I’m going to wear a tie. If I’m willing to listen, I might even learn something from Pastor Nomeland if he teaches me why he thinks this is a good idea in the orderly, reverent house of God. I’d probably draw the line at pajamas, though. I must obey God rather than man, and be reverent. But that’s another sermon for another day, too.

I wish I had time to answer other questions, like whether all elders are the same, or whether some elders are “ruling elders” and other elders are “teaching elders.” Or whether, if you have more than one elder, one should be the “lead pastor.” But let’s move on to how deacons govern.

B. How deacons govern

If I am right that the pattern for deacons was set in Acts 6, then deacons govern by managing the assets of the church.

In Acts 6, the proto-typical deacons were charged with managing the food collected for the widows and making sure the food was distributed equitably, because the elders didn’t have time for anything but the ministry of the Word and prayer.

But many other things must be done as well. Managing the finances of the church, paying our bills to keep the lights on, mowing the grass, you name it, there are lots of things that need done that do not directly involve the ministry of the Word or prayer. Any of these things might be managed by deacons.

And how do they manage these things? With the same integrity, the same character, that qualifies a man to be a deacon in the first place.

A word about how deacons should *not* govern. Deacons should not govern like elders. I once heard deacons referred to as “assistant pastors” in another church. No! And more than once I’ve heard of “deacon boards” that wielded so much power in the church that they

bullied the pastor and grossly interfered with his ability to lead the church. Deacons are to manage their domain, not tell an elder what to do. You won't find that kind of upside-down situation in the New Testament!

I've touched on how the elders and the deacons govern, but how does the congregation govern the local church?

C. How the congregation governs

The congregation governs by assembling and making decisions together. The congregation cannot do this by proxy. We must assemble in the same place.

By the way, that place is not your own home, not if you are pretending you and your own family is a local church. Who decides who is qualified to be pastor in your one-family church? You? How are you going to make membership decisions? You can't cast out any of your members without casting them out of the family.

When we assemble, when we are making difficult decisions, we must do so as Christians controlled by the Holy Spirit, bearing the fruit of the Spirit. Let us "be subject to one another in the fear of Christ" (Eph 5:21) without envy, rivalry, or conceit.

And when the time comes to make a difficult decision, don't forget whose church this is. This is Christ's church. So vote what is right. And if anybody tries to push you, don't take the easy way out. Vote what is right, not what others want you to vote.

But there are many questions the Bible does not answer. What is a majority? 51%? Is there a higher bar for the biggest decisions? And how many people need to show up to make it a valid vote? How many members make a quorum? And many more questions.

The Bible leaves these details up to us. Our forefathers wrestled with these questions and wrote down what they decided. One man got so frustrated at his inability to lead a church meeting that he wrote a helpful guide. You may have heard of it: *Robert's Rules of Order*.

Should we follow those rules in our meetings? What about a constitution, bylaws, and policies? We're certainly not commanded to in the Bible. But we are expected to exercise discernment. We're supposed to follow good examples. And sometimes we're supposed to at least have the common sense that God gave a pagan.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this sermon I made up a story about our pastor and deacons making a unilateral decision to alter our church polity. And I asked you, Can they really do that? Biblically?

Biblically, no. But could they do it anyway? I don't know. It's something we might want to decide.

Church polity is not easy. Better men than I disagree with me on more than point. If I am wrong, no, *where* I am wrong, I trust God to steer us away from error and into truth. Be good Bereans and search the scriptures to see if these things are true.

And respect the local church. Take the local church seriously. Take her membership, her deacons, and her pastors seriously. Take church government seriously.

Respect the local church!