Church Politics

Perhaps you have seen the cartoons in *Leadership* magazine. Very often they depict a beleaguered pastor. The subject of his problem is any of the following: Elders, Trustees, Deacons, a secretary, staff, members or parishioners - you fill in the blank. All of the scenarios might fall under the rubric of "church politics." Some are funnier than others; all bring a chuckle of sorts.

Why are these cartoons funny? Is it because they represent the experience of so many? Is it because either we make fun of these kinds of incidents - or we weep?!

"Church politics!" That phrase ought to be an oxymoron. Tragically, it is not. Something is desperately wrong in the church if that phrase is embraced as "normal."

Have we really capitulated so easily to the distractions, diversions and divisions of the adversary? Can we not see how ruined have become both the church and her message because of "church politics?"

Let me be provocative: After the Gospel, biblically-based church governance, the order patterned, principled and predicted in Scripture, is most important in fulfilling God's eternal purpose for the Church.

Let me prove it:

1. Paul is clear about his job description, including the *priority* of proper church order, and the purpose of the church, in Ephesians 3:8-11. The character of those who govern is discussed in the same context as the cosmic purpose of the church in 1 Timothy 3 (see esp. 3:15).

2. Paul's personal *practice* is consistent with this priority. It is reflected in Paul's church planting method and sequence found in Acts 14:21-23. It is further evident in his continued concern for the church after it has begun. For instance, in 2 Corinthians 2:12-13 Paul *turns away from* an "open door for the gospel" and is restless until he hears from Titus that order has first been established in the church at Corinth.

3. The Scripture amply provides governing and relational *principles* by which any church will thrive and, if neglected, predicts obvious negative patterns and loss of blessing.

Let me elaborate:

The Priority

The Apostle Paul gives us his job description in Ephesians 3:8-9:

To me the very least of all saints, this grace was given, to preach to the Gentiles the unfathomable riches of Christ, **AND** to bring to light what is the administration of the mystery which for ages has been hidden in God who created all things. (NASB—emphasis added.)

To *preach the unfathomable riches of Christ* is clear. It is to declare the gospel in all its magnificent implications. *To bring to light what is the administration* is no less clear. The Greek word for "administration" (sometimes translated "stewardship") is *oikonomia* (from which we derive the word "economy"). Two words are here conjoined: *oikos*, literally meaning **house** and *nomos*, meaning **law**. Bringing to light *the administration of the mystery* means **establishing the *house-law* of the church**, that is, its means of stewardship, order or governance along with all of the attendant relational implications. This component is seldom recognized as important. However, among the many aspects of ministry for which the Apostle is known, *he* chooses to highlight only two: the gospel and, if you will, governance. And he connects them both in their importance as they relate to the eternal purpose of the church. Note as Ephesians 3:10-11 continues the thought:

*SO THAT the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known through the church to the rulers and the authorities in the heavenly places. This was in accordance with the **eternal purpose** which he carried out in Christ Jesus our Lord...* (NASB—emphasis added.)

Here is a key nuance. The purpose of the church is NOT to win people to Christ. Winning them is *how* the purpose is partly accomplished, but it is not the purpose in itself. The final objective of the church is to display (as on a pedestal) the wisdom, grace and glory of God. The church is the final and eternal "Exhibit A" proving to all (even grudgingly to fallen angels) that God is, indeed, good.

Let me take this idea further. Paul clearly had the central role in establishing the Gentile church. He views his instructions to the churches and her leaders as foundational, necessary rudiments for its "success" (in human terms). For instance, in 1 Timothy 3:15 Paul tells us his intent for writing the book: *"I write these things so that you will know how one is to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church, the pillar and support of the truth."* Here Paul describes the church's position in the larger cosmic scheme. The *pillar and support* are to hold up on display (as on a pedestal) that which rests on top, in this case the truth of God. In short, that His sovereign rule alone is Good. (e.g. "There is only One who is good" [Matt. 19:17].)

Connected to this intent and earlier in the same chapter (1 Tim. 3) Paul describes in detail the character and quality of those who are responsible for the household order. They are known variously in Scripture as overseers, elders or pastors. By concluding the section with *"I write these things so that one will know **how to conduct himself**..."* it is apparent that the order of the church, that is, her governance, is established and sustained by the leaders earlier described, and that working with the Gospel, is the key component in fulfilling her purpose, that is, to display the wisdom, grace, glory and truth of God. Together, then, governance - that is, how a church behaves and operates - and the declaration of the Gospel is the complete picture Christ intends to give the world so that "by this will all men will know."

The Practice

The life-giving importance of biblical leadership or governance in the context of the ultimate church purpose is seen in Paul's methodology in planting and establishing new churches. In Acts 14:21-23 there is an obvious "cycle" for church planting. 1] Paul preaches the good news (gospel) of Jesus Christ in strategic cities. 2] He strengthens those who believe in the doctrines of the faith. 3] Paul entrusts the work to faithful overseers/elders (leadership/governance). 4] Finally, he commends them to God and departs.

It was Paul's intention to fully establish order in the churches he planted, and he did not consider the job done until that was accomplished. First, this is evident from the Pauline cycle found in Acts 14:21-23 (described above). Unless new believers were thoroughly "strengthened" in God's Word, fully prepared and capable leaders would not emerge. Second, Paul was concerned for the continued welfare and ordering of the church. He wrote back to the leaders urging them to guard and guide the flocks of God (cf. Acts 20:28ff, Gal. 1:6-9, Phil. 1:1). Thirdly, he re-visited many of the churches he planted and sent personal emissaries back to others to bring additional instruction or (in some cases) rebuke in order to bring them to complete maturity. Fourthly, he even refused an open door for the gospel in favor of making certain the Corinthians were properly ordered *before* turning his gaze elsewhere.

To state it simply, and again: to the Apostle Paul, biblical order or governance was, after the Gospel, the most important ingredient in fulfilling the church's eternal purpose. Indeed, it was integral to the display of God's truth. Without a biblical community (church) operating in harmony with God's revealed will, both by His principles and His Spirit, the Gospel has no visible reality to which it may point. Saying it in the reverse, true, biblical community must exist so the Gospel may be "seen."

The Principles

My point is this: the establishing of biblical order in the church was paired by Paul with his preaching of the Gospel and, therefore, of significant importance. In contrast, biblical governance for the church receives scant notice in most churches and is often regarded as a "necessary evil."

But the church's purpose - that is God's personal display in and through the Community of the Forgiven - cannot survive on the words of the Gospel alone; it must be paired with operational principles for the church so that it may become reality. Remember, Paul considered church governance so vital a component that he writes at least one entire book so people will *know how to conduct oneself in the household of God*. It is my contention then, that biblically-based governance is the too oft-neglected link between the Gospel message and the picture of a true Christian community in all her reflective glory. In short, and to the world, our walk seldom matches our talk. But biblical behavior and order, especially among leadership, will reverse that view.

In reading and assessing the writings of Paul especially (though the following is taken from the entirety of Scripture) there emerge at least six key principles for biblically-based church governance. These are given not to assert a particular form of order in the church, but to give clear guidelines, to be followed in any and every form. When followed these principles will engender blessing to God's community as obedience to God's Word always anticipates. But they are mutual, each supporting the others. In short, they must all be operative simultaneously. The principles may be summarized in six key words:

- Authority
- Plurality
- Quality
- Diversity
- Unity
- Transparency

Authority

Authority in the church is vested in its Head, Jesus Christ, (Colossians 1:18). He is the Chief Shepherd, 1 Peter 5:4. He purchased the church with His own blood, (Acts 20:28). ***Jesus IS Lord.*** That fundamental, bedrock fact should never "go without saying." Yet the word "authority" can cause independent, American-bred humans to flinch. After all, we live in a Democracy! (Actually, it's a Republic, but no need to quibble here.) Under this form of civil government the leaders are "beholden" to the citizenry. It is a government "of the people, by the people and for the people." The church too, the argument goes, is the people, not buildings. Ergo, the leaders in the church should serve the desire, will and needs of the people, as the leaders in a Democracy serve the people of the Democracy. (Does this leave us at the mercy of focus groups?) In this case "church politics" would be expected, even "normal."

But the church is not a Democracy. It is a Monarchy! There is but one Sovereign, one Ruler, one King. The authority to govern and order the church is vested in the King, the Head of the church. What He wills is all that matters. The temporal issue is how is His will determined and applied to His body so that it might behave seemly and in complete harmony with His will? Clearly, the Bible and the Holy Spirit will be the authoritative objective and subjective sources transmitting His will. But who is responsible for shepherding the Lord's flock in time and space? Who is held accountable to represent Him and His will to His body?

It is apparent that biblical authority for temporal leadership has been placed into the hands of "overseers" (elders and/or pastors in other settings, cf. Acts 20, Ephesians 4, 1 Thessalonians 5, 1 Timothy 3 & 5, Titus 1, Hebrews 13, and 1 Peter 5). In operation biblical leadership or church governance is similar in kind to the activity and responsibilities found in a corporate boardroom. (Don't dismiss the analogy too quickly.) The board of a corporation, which has ultimate statutory authority, is accountable to the stockholders. The board members represent the owners and their interests. But in the church there is only One Stockholder. Leadership - in most cases a church board - is accountable to Him - the One Stockholder - and seeks to know and transmit His intent for the corporation (the church).

Properly then, the ultimate human authority for the church (or even para-church) resides in the "board of directors" (or trustees) of the corporation both by state statute (assuming it has been formed under state corporation laws) and by biblical mandate. This changes the view and role of the congregation. Leaders are to oversee, feed, lead, and protect, the congregation. But a church board acting in harmony with the Holy Spirit and the Word of God is *not* obliged to the congregation's idea of church or its members' presumed prerogatives, but to Him - Whose church it is - and to *His* Will. Since the objective of biblical leadership/governance will be (or should be) to know and do the will of the "Owner" or "Chief Shepherd," most of the labor of governing ought to be devoted to discovering and articulating the mind of Christ. This was certainly the Apostolic priority. (See Acts 6:4. "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word," rather than administering the distribution of food.)

Surprisingly, the notion that the Will of Jesus could be or should be delivered through a contingent of overseers is often dismissed by even biblically astute and well-meaning people. In response to such a dismissal let me say this: Either the enterprise is His or it belongs to someone else. Since it belongs to Him, the leaders - overseers, elders, pastors - have responsibility as stewards to exercise what is essentially delegated authority as the Master/Owner directs. If Christ is truly Lord, the Head of the church, its mission, and its purpose, then church overseers represent Him and exercise His authority over His enterprise in harmony with His will. That's biblical authority.

Plurality

The church cannot and must not be ruled by one man. In every case noted in the New Testament leadership is in the plural. Paul appointed elders in every city (Acts 14:23). Paul submitted his gospel to the Apostles and elders for verification (Acts 15:22). He called the elders to himself in Acts 20. "Including the overseers and deacons," he writes to the Philippians (Phil. 1:1). He left Titus in Crete in order to appoint elders (Titus 1:5).

The witness of the Book of Acts notes that there were *apostolic teams* leading and teaching, guiding and guarding collectively (cf. Acts 13:1-3). This does not mean, however, a plurality of godly men leads only or always as a whole. There is clearly the need for specialized leaders (Eph. 4:11, 1 Tim. 5:17). These are often given various (and confusing) titles: Senior Pastors, Pastor-Teachers, Teaching Elders, etc. But the presence of visible individual leaders in a church does not negate the need for plurality. The godly leader

knows the principle of "over, equal, under." A genuine, biblically oriented pastor-teacher or senior pastor will be able to move seamlessly and easily between his roles as leader of a group of leaders, as a peer with the same group for decision making, and as a subordinate to them for accountability or employment purposes. The visionary, teacher, pastor or prophet leads, consults, or submits equally well. Thus, within plurality leaders may still lead, but always leading consistent with the will of the whole.

This makes perfect sense. Jeremiah 17:9 states: "The heart is deceitful above all things and desperately wicked" (KJV). It is simple human nature. One person can easily be fooled by his own heart. Others are needed for mutual accountability in leadership either to counter and/or affirm. Biblically, ultimate human authority is always vested in more than one person. Always plural. Always under the Lordship of Christ.

Quality

The overseers' authority is real, delegated and moral. It is built and exercised primarily from the strength of their character - "an elder, then, must be..." (1 Timothy 3:2, emphasis added). Leaders are to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:1-4). For the church, godly character is expected for leaders (cf. Acts 6, 1 Timothy 3, Titus 1). This is fundamental. In Acts 6:3 for instance, general admonitions state that even those set apart to serve tables are to be "men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom." In the Timothy and Titus passages just cited, over 15 characteristics of godliness are described, including relationships in one's family, business practices, personal habits, Bible knowledge, and spiritual wisdom and experience. Paul essentially draws a composite portrait for the church of what mature spirituality looks like in person.

Sadly the biblical criteria for overseers are infrequently applied. In their place are substituted such human criteria as length of service, formal education, prominence in the society, professional success, significant giving or simply "he's a good guy." We do well to take a lesson from Acts 5. Ananias and Sapphaira sought prominence in the church on the basis of their giving, lied in promoting themselves, and were executed by the Holy Spirit.

As an example, in 1 Timothy 3:7 it is explicit that an overseer "must have a good reputation with those outside the church." Despite that admonition, I know personally of only three instances in over 20 years of ministry where a church or Christian organization has called a prospective board member's employer to check on the work habits and character of a nominee.

These criteria cannot be given lip service or a passing nod. The imperative is to elevate to church leadership only those who have proven themselves people of godliness as described by Scripture. Social or positional prominence is not included as biblical criterion; neither is education or income. Biblical character is.

In one of my first ministry responsibilities I found a beautiful example of correct application of this principle. As assistant administrator of a large church, I gave oversight to buildings and grounds among

other responsibilities. Below me on the organizational "chart" were superintendents of maintenance and custodial. Further down the "chart" were the custodians themselves. Over me stood the principal church administrator, then the administrative committee to whom he was responsible, and finally the board of the church, which acted with ultimate human authority for the organization. On this board sat one of the church custodians who had been appointed as an elder, not because of his social standing, employment, income, or education, but because of his godly lifestyle and personal example.

The character of those who govern in church is of paramount importance. It is axiomatic: as "examples to the flock," the virtues and vices of the shepherds will inevitably be inculcated into the rest of the organization. And trustworthy men are easy to follow.

Diversity

Paul's most memorable and useful picture of the church is that of a human body with all of its interconnected parts. By using this illustration, Paul emphasizes the uniqueness, mutuality and interdependence of the members of a church. There is an inherent and vital diversity among the body members. This is also true in the make up of leadership. It seems most obvious in three ways:

1. *Varied leaders OF the body:* In 1 Timothy 3 Paul describes the character of two kinds of leaders, overseers (elders, pastors in other contexts) and deacons. This demonstrates a division of labor. Some in leadership give oversight to the entire enterprise. They are global in viewpoint and responsibility. Some give themselves to specific tasks, often tied to spiritual giftedness.
2. *Varied gifts TO the body:* In Ephesians 4:11 Paul describes at least four individuals whom Christ gives to the church for her edification and maturity. These lead especially through teaching and preaching.
3. V*aried gifts FOR the body:* The Holy Spirit gifts all members of the church for service in the body of Christ, (Romans 12, 1 Corinthians 12). Wise governing recognizes the need to have a variety of spiritual gifts represented among leadership. Those who discern or teach are vital companions for those who give, lead, or exercise faith. Appreciation for the different aptitudes, experiences and spiritual gifting with which Christ has endowed the church leadership will provide full-orbed consideration for decisions and directions.

Unity

In John 17 Jesus prays for our unity. The mutual love and consequent unity that ought to emerge from a Christian community is the most powerful testimony confirming its veracity.

Sanctify them in truth; Thy word is truth. As You sent Me into the world, I also have sent them into the world... that they may be one; even as You, Father, are in Me and I in You, that they also may be in Us, ***so that*** *the world may believe that You sent Me.* (John 17:17-21, emphasis added.)

By this *will all men know that you are my disciples.* (John 13:35, emphasis added.)

Genuine unity is the acid test of good governance, both its method and its outcome. It is difficult to refute the pervasive and clear theme of and preference for unity, oneness, and singleness of mind and heart running throughout Scripture: *"[T]here is **one** body of Christ, and **one** Spirit[. . .] **one** Lord, **one** faith, [. . .] **one** God and Father of all."* (Eph 4:4-6 cf. also vss 11 & 16, 1 Cor. 12:12-13). Believers in Christ are admonished multiple times to be unified, to be of one spirit, to be of the same mind (cf. Philippians 1:27, 2:2). Unity is the expected result of doing church right.

Further, the Scriptures demonstrate a clear bias for unity in decision-making among leadership. Genuine consensus (meaning, *with the consent of all*, *unanimous*, or *general agreement without dissent*, but not *uniformity*) appears in every major leadership decision in the Book of Acts, especially at the Jerusalem Council where doctrine is confirmed (Acts 15:22, 25, 28). In fact, the principles surfacing throughout chapter 15 may be followed as a good pattern for conducting business appropriately in the church.

Some may reject the notion of forging decisions by genuine consensus or unanimity. Sadly, many are unfamiliar with the blessings of genuine consensus, but no other instruction emerges from the biblical text. Where, for example, in Scripture is the case made in favor of majority rule (the accepted and common practice)? Perhaps the political climate in the United States has bred in us an assumed and accepted cultural norm that 51% equals victory. However, *the Bible* makes no such case. Simply stated, voting divides. Given the Bible's strong theme of unity, why would Christian overseers run the risks inherent in a divided vote, especially since numerous biblical warnings of the dangers of *disunity* can be found? (1 Cor. 12:25-26; Eph. 4:3, 26-27; Heb. 12:15). Make no mistake; there *are* negative consequences from split or majority votes. (And please, don't pursue the assumption that "casting lots" is other than unanimous decision making. It is fundamentally apparent that prior and unanimous agreement must exist before anyone commits to abide by the outcome of the "casting.")

In addition to Scriptural evidence, genuine consensus or unanimous decision-making has many practical benefits.

- *Unanimity helps create a sense of community.*
  The mutual respect and deference inherent in seeking unanimity cultivates an environment in which all members of leadership can be assured of being heard. (Note especially the process of the Acts 15 decision, vss. 6-7, 15-18, 28 & 31.) Conversely, majority voting can divide, resulting in a sense of "winners" and "losers." "Losers" may feel discouraged or discontent, which jeopardizes any sense of community.
- *Unanimity minimizes "political" distractions, unleashes post-decision enthusiasm and energy, and keeps any staff and the community at large focused and engaged in ministry.*
  A commitment to the process of unanimity means all members of the body will receive one clear and consistent message from the leadership and therefore remain focused on their

responsibilities. If decisions are made without unanimity, people can become distracted. They may gossip and "take sides" on issues, damaging the ministry's effectiveness. Ultimately, the greatest danger is that many are demoralized by controversy, and the organization becomes divided. (Have we ever seen that?)

- *Unanimity increases the probability of reaching the "right" decision.*
  The prayer, Bible study, and thorough discussion required to achieve unanimity ensures all relevant matters are reviewed and that the mind of Christ is genuinely sought. Since the objective of church decision-making is discovering and doing the will of the Lord, the processes leading to unanimity can give confidence that the organization is actually following Him.

Transparency

For genuine unity to exist, so too must institutional transparency. By *transparency* I mean *the continual creation of complete and accurate impressions*.

One of the clear residuals of sin in human beings is the desire for concealment. Deception is our tendency. Mankind has been prone to hide in an effort to deflect the consequences of failure, falsehood, and sin since the Fall (Genesis 3:8-12). We do not want the truth to be told in all its full ugliness so we become experts in prevarication, evasion or "spin" (an interesting *political* word). Those who seek the apparent safety of concealment assume that they will be considered untrustworthy if others know about their mistakes or errors of judgment. Exactly the opposite is true. I can recover from a mistake disclosed, but it is far less likely I can recover from a mistake discovered which I sought to conceal.

Human nature being what it is, everyone makes mistakes. It is that we are prone to deny them, conceal them, or "spin" them, which is of concern. Would there not be chaos in the human body if various parts were to conspire to deceive one another? The illustration is apt. How about the spiritual Body of Christ? (1 Corinthians 12:12, 26-27; Ephesians 4:15, 25).

Advocating transparency does not exclude the need to keep personal information confidential; not all things should be shared. The objective is for leaders to be free from pretense. All of life is *coram deo* - "in the presence or under the gaze of God" (Psalm 44:21, 139:1-4; Hebrews 4:13). Regardless of what we think or say to others, regardless of whether it is true, false, or "somewhere in between," God knows the full truth of any matter (Proverbs 17:3, 21:2). The acid test is always: "What impression are we trying to give? Is it accurate?"

I once offered the following advice to a church's leadership. "Tell the truth, admit your mistakes and ask the congregation to forgive you."

The advice was rejected: "We can't do that; then they will know we have done wrong." It was the moment of "continental divide." Years of internal conflict ensued.

It will be either a Community of the Forgiven striving to know, understand and obey God, truly and openly loving one another with the forgiving love of Christ or a community of image maintenance, seeking to conceal, deflect and self-protect. (Read "disingenuous, inauthentic, masquerade.")

Transparency, then, should be a non-negotiable core value. It should be codified and inculcated into the fabric and ethos of any Christian church or group. To outsiders looking in, transparency makes the organization appear trustworthy, it's message more reliable. To those within the community, it creates an environment of trust, safety, and peace.

A Challenge to the Reader

Often when presenting this material I am asked a single and troubling question: "If we are expected to submit to leadership in the church (meaning, if the overseers have genuine authority), what *guarantees* are there that we will be led properly?" (I sigh at the inherent suspicion, wondering about the motive behind the question and whether it is even worthy of an answer. After all, who are we to challenge God's order for the church? Let me give one nonetheless.) Guarantees? None. But there are safeguards aplenty. The leaders described above, biblically qualified, acting transparently and in unity, exercising authority for which they will be held accountable by God Himself, substantially reduces the anxiety and suspicion of those required to submit & follow.

Again: Biblically based church governance is of vital importance to fulfilling the purpose of the church. Since this is so, we had better get at it, and get at it quickly...and wisely.

- **Authority** - leaders acting with the moral and delegated authority of Christ
- **Plurality** - always more than one
- **Quality** - according to the Word of God, not according to man
- **Diversity** - differences in both gifts and tasks
- **Unity** - unanimously following the mind of Christ
- **Transparency** - continually creating accurate impressions

The equation is simple. The application will take a lifetime. But be assured, these six words and the principles they represent help to eliminate "church politics," the devil's most effective tool.