

Lutheran Church Polity in America

By
Kristofer Carlson
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What form of church polity is biblical? What form should the church take, who has authority, and what form does that authority take? These are very interesting questions, and the Christian Church has answered that question in three basic ways: Congregationalist polity, Presbyterian polity, and Episcopal polity.

Congregationalist polity, often known as congregationalism, is a system of church governance in which every local congregation is independent. The Anabaptist movement, Baptists and others besides the Congregational churches are organized according to it.

Presbyterian polity is a method of church governance typified by the rule of Assemblies of presbyters, or elders. Elders make decisions for the local church in a body called the Kirk Session or Church Session. Groups of local churches are governed by higher assemblies of elders, called church courts, known as Presbyteries, Synods, and General Assemblies. Specific roles in church services are reserved for an ordained minister or pastor known as a teaching elder, or a minister of the word and sacrament.

Episcopal polity is a form of church governance which is hierarchical in structure with the chief authority over a local Christian church resting in a bishop (Greek: episcopos). This Episcopal structure is found most often in the various churches of either Orthodox or Catholic lineage. Some churches founded independently of these lineages also employ this form of church governance.

Church bodies with an Episcopal polity often proclaim an article of doctrine called apostolic succession. This means that the bishops are part of an unbroken, personal line of bishops all the way back to the Twelve Apostles of Jesus. Bishops with such authority are part of what is known as the historic Episcopate.

It is important to note that each of these forms of church governance claims scriptural authority. One reason for this is that the scriptures are not a textbook on church government, but a proclamation of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, who is the head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fulness of him that filleth all in all. The New Testament scriptures use terms like bishop, overseer, servants, guardians, ministers for the leaders of the church. Sometimes these terms are seemingly synonymous, and sometimes they are differentiated from each other.

What are we to make of this? Interestingly, hermeneutics is not much help. There are no clear passages concerning church governance. Everything is tangential, touching on the subject in passing. Because the scriptures lack clear teaching concerning the proper form of church governance, people's preconceptions play a large part in how they interpret the scriptures in this

area. The American Lutheran has an antipathy towards the Episcopate, and tends toward the Congregational and Presbyterian form of governance. But the Lutherans from Europe, Africa, and elsewhere have no such antipathy, and have an Episcopal form of government. In fact, Lutherans coming from a Nordic background share in the historic episcopate, while Lutherans from a Germanic background do not. This is a historic anomaly based on the fact that Lutheranism in Germany was a peasant religion and the German bishops remained Roman Catholic, while in the Nordic countries the regent declared the region to be Lutheran, including the bishops.

For most of the history of Christianity, episcopal government has been the only form known to Christianity. Including the independent churches, the majority of Protestant churches are organized by either congregational or presbyterian church polities, both descended from the writings of John Calvin, a Protestant reformer working and writing independently following Martin Luther's break with the Roman Catholic Church. However, the majority of Christians are members of the historic Christian churches having an episcopal governance.

The church fathers appeared to favor the Episcopal form of governance. For example, St. Ignatius, disciple of the Apostle John and Bishop of Syria, seems to describe a distinctly Episcopal church polity. For example, see St Ignatius *Epistle to the Ephesians*, Chapter VI, entitled "Have respect to the bishop as to Christ Himself":

The more, therefore, you see the bishop silent, the more do you reverence him. For we ought to receive every one whom the Master of the house sends to be over His household, as we would do Him that sent him. It is manifest, therefore, that we should look upon the bishop even as we would look upon the Lord Himself, standing, as he does, before the Lord.

One could also look to St Ignatius *Epistle to the Magnesians*, Chapter IV, entitled "Some wickedly act independently of the bishop":

It is fitting, then, not only to be called Christians, but to be so in reality. For it is not the being called so, but the being really so, that renders a man blessed. To those who indeed talk of the bishop, but do all things without him, will He who is the true and first Bishop, and the only High Priest by nature, declare, "Why call ye Me Lord, and do not the things which I say?" For such persons seem to me not possessed of a good conscience, but to be simply dissemblers and hypocrites.

And again in Chapter VII, entitled "Do nothing without the bishop and presbyters":

As therefore the Lord does nothing without the Father, for says He, "I can of mine own self do nothing," so do ye, neither presbyter, nor deacon, nor layman, do anything without the bishop. Nor let anything appear commendable to you which is destitute of his approval. For every such thing is sinful, and opposed [to the will of] God. Do ye all come together into the same place for prayer. Let there be one common supplication, one mind, one hope, with faith unblameable in Christ Jesus, than which nothing is more excellent. Do ye all, as one man, run together into the temple of God, as unto one altar, to one Jesus Christ, the High Priest of the unbegotten God.

And from St. Ignatius's *Epistle to the Philadelphians*, Chapters I & II:

Having beheld your bishop, I know that he was not selected to undertake the ministry which pertains to the common [weal], either by himself or by men, or out of vainglory, but by the love of Jesus Christ, and of God the Father, who raised Him from the dead; at whose meekness I am struck with admiration, and who by His silence is able to accomplish more than they who talk a great deal. For he is in harmony with the commandments and ordinances of the Lord, even as the strings are with the harp, and is no less blameless than was Zacharias the priest. Wherefore my soul declares his mind towards God a happy one, knowing it to be virtuous and perfect, and that his stability as well as freedom from all anger is after the example of the infinite meekness of the living God.

Wherefore, as children of light and truth, flee from division and wicked doctrines; but where the shepherd is, there do ye as sheep follow. For there are many wolves that appear worthy of credit, who, by means of a pernicious pleasure, carry captive⁸⁸⁹ those that are running towards God; but in your unity they shall have no place.

Wherefore, as children of light and truth, avoid the dividing of your unity, and the wicked doctrine of the heretics, from whom "a defiling influence has gone forth into all the earth." But where the shepherd is, there do ye as sheep follow. For there are many wolves in sheep's clothing, who, by means of a pernicious pleasure, carry captive⁸⁹² those that are running towards God; but in your unity they shall have no place.

I could, of course, quote from a great many of the early church fathers on the subject. Of particular interest is Irenæus, who in Book III, Chapter III of *Against Heresies* provides a list of the succession of bishops in various churches. Despite all this, it can be argued that some of the fathers appear to be describing slightly different forms of church governance (and of the holy ministry.) Yet many of these same church fathers bear the title of Bishop, which was bestowed upon those who bore the spiritual headship of the churches in a particular city. Therefore it would seem prudent to look not only at what the fathers wrote, but what they did as evidence of how the early church was organized.

Given all of the above information, why do we Lutherans in America bear such an antipathy to an Episcopal church polity? I could argue that it is an effect of the radical experiment in civil government. Or perhaps it is an outgrowth of the American frontier experience which of necessity required self-reliance and fostered egalitarianism. Or perhaps it is a natural bias against authority in any form. But Pr. David Petersen suggests the issue is that we in America perceive authority as a master/servant (or employer/employee) relationship, whereas in other cultures authority is seen more as a parent/child relationship.

It is certainly true that we in America see authority as a master/servant relationship. Witness our presidential politics, where candidates go out of their way to be perceived as a man of the people, as being just like us, (even while being protected from us by their Praetorian guard.) Once the supposed man of the people becomes head of state we echo the cry of the Hebrew servant to Moses: "Who made thee a ruler and a judge over us?" Thus we assume leadership to be authoritarian, like something out of the military model.

Interestingly, Lutheran bishops oversees have less power over their flock than regional presidents do here in the United States. A Lutheran bishop in Europe would never inaugurate a program on his own authority. Instead he leads by influence, through the respect owed him through his competence in the scriptures and his spiritual character. The bishop acts toward his flock like Christ does to his church. The Son of God does not demand respect and obedience, even though as Lord of all He certainly deserves it. Instead our Lord is meek and lowly of heart. Likewise the apostle Paul, who certainly had the right to have been burdensome to his flock, was nevertheless gentle among them, like as a nurse cherishing her children.

This scriptures provide us with the model of Christian servant leadership, a model we in America fail to recognize, much less emulate. And thus we reject the historic episcopate, preferring instead to elect regional, synodical, and denominational leaders who exercise far more power than a bishop ever could. Such is our heritage, to our shame before God and the world.