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Focus On Mission:
Transformative Christian
Leadership Series

CHURCH GOVERNANCE

KENT R. HUNTER
with **TRACEE J. SWANK**

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Scripture references in this book are from *The Message* version. Why? According to the brilliant translator, Eugene Peterson, it's not meant to be a scholarly study Bible. It's meant to be a life-learning, engaging Bible that helps you to appropriate God's teaching to everyday life. God's plan is to effectively change your life through the divine power of His Word.

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Introduction: Church Governance

“All in favor, say, ‘Why is the church so political?’” Can you imagine Jesus gathering His disciples together at the Last Supper and asking for a vote about His death on the cross? Thank God they didn’t have a complicated constitution!

What about your church? What do you know about Robert’s Rules of Order? Is politics a biblical requirement for a local congregation? Are your church’s bylaws in the Bible? Or can you make critical decisions by reading Scripture and praying for unanimous consent? Can leaders be developed to have deep knowledge about Scripture and, with that direction, lead your church?

Politics crept into the early Christian movement just once. Do you know the story from the Book of Acts? The disciples called many of the Christ-followers together to have a vote on who should replace Judas. They had a couple of candidates but only needed one. So, they decided to have a vote—of sorts. They drew straws for one of them to be the new twelfth man. Both candidates were apparently active followers of Jesus. A guy named Matthias “won,” and you never hear from him again! The resurrected Jesus added His twelfth man on the road to Damascus. His name is Paul.

For some reason, the Christian movement has often drifted toward politics. We have laws and bylaws, debates and votes. Where is that in Scripture?

There is a biblical approach to church decision-making. Identify those who are leaders, those who demonstrate a deep knowledge of Scripture: lifelong active students of the Bible. Identify their spiritual gifts. Disciple them into a lifestyle of seeking God's will for leading the church.

Don't focus on the "majority vote," involving every Christian at a large church meeting. Instead, gather a small group of spiritually *seasoned* leaders who pray through Scripture for the direction of your congregation. Ask each leader to disciple another candidate for the decision-making team. Do not have "term limits." Let leaders lead. Your pastor should gather the team together. Everyone bring a Bible—and use them in the decision-making process. Stop and pray often.

Minimize your congregation's legal document. Maximize the spiritual principles that come from the New Testament, especially as they focus on the work of the church.

Develop a philosophy of ministry that reflects the biblical approach of the apostles. Expect the pastor to continue teaching the leaders each time they meet. Focus on a biblical approach to seek God's will.

Whenever the leadership faces a challenge, stop the discussion and have a time of prayer. Expect leaders to frequently refer to Scripture as you approach decisions or challenges.

Consider calling this leadership group an "apostolic counsel." "Apostolic" reflects chosen leaders based on spiritual depth, not congregational votes. Consider it a "counsel," not a "council."

Your decision-making group is not political. It is a team of those who earnestly focus on seeking the counsel of God.

Spiritual Drift: Combating Worldly Influences in the Church

Every minute of every day, every Christian is faced with spiritual leak. It can begin as a minute trickle—so subtle, hardly obvious, easily ignored. It is a quiet, creeping infection that kills churches, whole denominations, and entire networks of churches. It becomes the ultimate destruction, the missional impotence, the death of Christianity, the loss of the power and presence of Christ in the world through His people.

This insidious disease begins oh-so-subtly as Christians incrementally and ignorantly infuse worldly ways into the sacred, unique, divine body of Christ. God's people, well intended but biblically uninformed, add popular but poisonous culture to their churches. The most common conduit can be described as church politics.

The real issue behind the issue is unintentional, subtle, and deadly drift from the culture of the Kingdom of God. Do you remember what Jesus said? "My kingdom is not of"—not like—"this world" (John 18:36 NIV).

The drift is propelled by biblical ignorance and human arrogance. It is a demonstration of what we would never want: "Our way is better than God's way." It is a form of self-idolatry: "We know better than God" and "We can lead better than Christ."

Of course, no one says it that way out loud. No, the Enemy, the “father of lies” (John 8:44), is way more subtle than that. If it was obvious and clear, we Christians would snuff it out in a heartbeat. No, the Enemy is more clever than that!

The Apostle Paul faced this with the Christians at Corinth. In 2 Corinthians 10:3-5, Paul writes this phenomenal warning: “The world is unprincipled. It’s dog-eat-dog out there! The world doesn’t fight fair. But we don’t live or fight our battles that way—never have and never will. The tools of our trade aren’t for marketing or manipulation, but they are for demolishing that entire massively corrupt culture. We use our powerful God-tools for smashing warped philosophies, tearing down barriers erected against the truth of God, fitting every loose thought and emotion and impulse into the structure of life shaped by Christ.”

These words are as relevant as today’s newsfeed. They speak to every government of every nation, every decision-maker of every company and every politician—and, most assuredly, every Christian in every church.

Look closely at the culture of your actions. Inspect diligently the operation of your church. It is not about *what* you decide, the decisions you make. It’s about *how* you make them—the approach you use. Put it up against the ultimate test: Is Christ *really* the head of your church, the body of Christ? And, personally: Is Christ *really* the Lord and Master of your life?

Breaking Free from Bureaucracy: Embracing Spirit-Led Leadership

There is a huge difference between religion and faith. Faith is a relationship with the ruler of the universe. Religion is more focused on rules and regulations about the proper way we are supposed to do stuff. When people “get religion,” one of the first things they do is use it to control others.

So human structures, like denominations, drift into regulatory systems. That leads to laws, bylaws, and procedures. Religious people practically worship at the feet of Robert’s Rules of Order, even though you won’t find it in Scripture.

In Galatians 1:1-5, Paul writes greetings to the churches of Galatia. He quickly adds that his authority as an apostle “does not come from any popular vote of the people.” He adds, “...nor does it come through the appointment of some human higher-up.” He calls himself “God-commissioned.”

In decades of work with all kinds of churches, it is clear that all the governance models are more based on *religion* than on *faith*. As such, they are more hindrance than help. What’s up with that?

Why do most churches—and denominations—have votes? The only distant connection to votes in Scripture is when the disciples chose to draw straws to pick the replacement for Judas. They chose Matthias, and in the rest of Scripture, you

never hear about him again! In fact, Jesus replaced Judas Himself on the road to Damascus—with Paul! If you take the whole tone of the New Testament, it feels like God is saying, “Don’t ever do that again.”

From a biblical, theological point of view, Christ is the Head of the Church—not a board or a bureaucrat. From a practical viewpoint, it doesn’t appear to help but hurt. Why do we have elected offices when the Holy Spirit gives us spiritual gifts? Why do we have nominations and elections? Why should anyone who is willing to serve God through their church be subject to losing an election in front of his or her faith family? It’s nuts! There is no biblical precedent. In fact, the opposite is true in the Bible!

In the opening to the letter to the Galatians, Paul declares the opposite of politics and party spirit: “So I greet you with the great words, grace and peace!” To invite a congregation of brothers and sisters of faith to vote provides the opportunity for winners and losers. Why would the body of Christ permit anything that would position Christians to be losers? Why would you invite enmity, discord, division? It makes no sense! At the denominational level, it is an invitation for implosion.

Guided by God: Rethinking Decision-Making in the Church

The way most churches are organized to make decisions is one of the greatest roadblocks to their Great Commission effectiveness. Throughout history, Christians have drifted from the Church as living organism to church as political organization. In this process, well-meaning Christ-followers have turned a divine movement into a human program.

Christians have built bureaucracies as a mechanism to translate God's will into mission action. It takes many forms, yet it is characterized by several traits foreign to Scripture. They include votes, elections, boards, committees, laws and bylaws, parliamentary procedures, and volunteerism. The whole decision-making system and deployment approach to ministry is a major, manmade, unbiblical roadblock to the effectiveness of the Church of Jesus Christ.

A local church is handcuffed in ministry by bureaucratic approaches that are completely foreign to the New Testament. As groups of churches gather together to accomplish ministry no single congregation could do on their own, they have developed political organizations on steroids.

This raises the question, "Why do churches or groups of churches develop these infrastructures of church governance in the first place?" Most would agree: It is to make decisions and deploy ministry activities in some way that is not chaotic, at least

in theory: to do everything “decently and in order” (1 Corinthians 14:40 NKJV).

At the heart of this effort is the proper motive, to do the will of God. We pray in the Lord’s Prayer: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10 NIV). We want what God wants. So far, so good! Like Jesus, we want to do the will of the Father. It’s the right biblical motive. Most Christians, however, have adapted delivery systems foreign to the basic ethos of Scripture. Admittedly, there is no one chapter in the New Testament that lays out what many Christians would call—in nonbiblical terminology—a “constitution.” This is likely because, in shape, it may take a variety of forms in different cultures at different times. Yet, in theological perspective, Scripture is very clear about the dynamic approach of how Christians make decisions when they work together.

In 1 John 2:15-17, there is a clear description of the focus for making decisions. It reflects the teaching of the Lord’s Prayer: “Your will be done.” 1 John 2 says, “Practically everything that goes on in the world—wanting your own way, wanting everything for yourself, wanting to appear important—has nothing to do with the Father. It just isolates you from him. The world and all its wanting, wanting, wanting is on the way out—but whoever does what God wants is set for eternity.”

Your church needs leaders who are *discipled*, not elected. Leaders are those who are chosen based on their relentless commitment to God’s will and their depth in Scripture for all decisions. They don’t vote. They study Scripture, pray, and direct the body of Christ by unanimous consensus. When they don’t get unanimous consensus, they pray, study Scripture, and wait on the Lord for direction. They disciple the next generation of leaders in the process. Why does this sound so foreign to

many Christians? Those who try it are liberated and blessed with significant Kingdom effectiveness.

From Votes to Vision: Aligning Church Leadership with Scripture

Decisions are all about who has the authority and how they get it. In a church, how do we determine who has authority? How do those in a church get that authority? For many churches, those who are key leaders go through a process of nominations and votes. Many churches utilize Robert's Rules of Order as if it's in the Bible. Churches develop constitutions and somehow get the idea that the majority rules. Really? What many have discovered in churches everywhere is that nothing about this approach works very well.

You know what people say who have left a church? When you ask them, "Why did you leave this church and go to another church?" the most common answer has something to do with bad behavior of otherwise nice Christians at some sort of meeting when an important vote was taken. In the heat of a debate, Christians often lose their Christian identity and display the worst. This is one of the most common reasons people say they left their former church. It is also the number one reason people say they do not attend congregational meetings. None of this works very well.

Pilate told Jesus, "Don't you know that I have the authority to pardon you, and the authority to—crucify you?" Jesus had an interesting reply: "You haven't a shred of authority over me except what has been given you from heaven" (John 19:10-11). I wonder what Pilate thought about that! I wonder what people

in churches think about that, especially when they have developed a mechanism—called governance—to make decisions.

Who gives authority in a church? A denomination? A board? A political process of election?

According to the New Testament, Jesus is the head of the Church. Those who know Jesus know what Jesus teaches. They are usually those who have spent much of their life as Bible students. It is, after all, the only book that gives us input about the Church. It is also a book that claims authority.

What would happen if those who, on behalf of the larger group in a church, made decisions based on their knowledge of the Bible? Wouldn't it make sense that they should be the ones who make decisions?

If your wisest Bible students, who demonstrate a lifelong commitment to understanding God's Word, were those who made decisions in the Church, the next question would be: *How?* What would be their procedure?

According to Scripture, there is only one approach, and it isn't taking a majority vote. Those who know Scripture best are responsible for seeking God's will—what God wants. How do you know God's will, what God wants? The only source for that is Scripture.

Does Scripture tell you what color the carpet should be in the nursery? How many bushes to put around the entryway? Not really! So, these are decisions of no consequence. If they are decisions of no consequence, then anybody can make them and no one should care what is chosen. They are simply matters of taste. There may be those in a church that have

expertise in one area or another, and they might make some choices. But since it doesn't involve a major element of God's will, most people should consider those decisions as inconsequential.

For decisions that matter, every decision should be weighed on Scripture by those immersed in the Word of God. The will of God, what God wants, is the operational decision-making mechanism in a church. By definition, the operational decision-making mechanism in church is not (and is never) the will of the people.

The will of God is sometimes the hardest to discern. It often takes the longest. It is frequently, in the human context of life, the messiest. It is always the right thing to do. It takes deep understanding of Scripture to determine God's will about anything.

For example, let's say a person is weighing the option of retirement. Let's say it is a pastor wondering whether he or she should retire. Nowhere in the Bible does it say, "Retire on December 3 of next year." However, the Bible does have cultural issues (values, beliefs, attitudes, priorities, and worldviews) that inform a serious decision. They include: (1) There is no concept of retirement in the Bible. No Christian should quit serving God until they die or until they can't due to illness. (2) What is best for the church (or, in the business world, what is best for the company)? (3) In your present state of health, are you "pulling your weight," reflecting good stewardship of the resources being spent? (4) Are you maximizing your spiritual gifts in your present role? (5) Is there fruit? Or, if there is not fruit, is it just a seasonal lull of productivity? (6) Is your spiritual fulfillment still there or moving

elsewhere? (7) Are you an asset or a liability in the work that you do?

This is how those who are deep in the will of God seek the mind of Christ.

In a Christian congregation, it is ludicrous and unbiblical to think that the will of the majority is somehow “holy.” It is ridiculous that young and immature Christians (even at the age of sixty) have an equal vote to those who have spent their lives studying Scripture. It is counterproductive to bring Christians together and pit them against each other about decisions when they come from their own personal perspectives. So why would a church have a governance system that operates the way it does?

What Is God Blessing?

A Guide to Spirit-Led Church Governance

How do you make decisions? Life is complex and complicated. You probably make hundreds of decisions every week. *How* do you make them?

In the prayer Jesus taught His disciples, there is a short phrase that is huge for making decisions: “Your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven” (Matthew 6:10 NIV).

In heaven, Jesus is the Lord of the universe. His perfect will—what He wants—is a 100 percent reality. Here on earth, even among Christians: not so much! And, if we are honest, not so much in our churches.

Reflecting on procedures in thousands of churches, it’s amazing what bonehead decisions churches, Christians, and whole denominations sometimes make. These are decisions that reflect millions of dollars and hours of misguided effort—discussions that cause the holy movement of God to self-destruct.

What is the issue? Most churches and denominations have a complex form of church governance—decision-making. They have laws and bylaws, rules and regulations. They use “parliamentary procedures.” Where is that in Scripture? This mess is a quagmire of politics.

What is the challenge? Many have abandoned the spirit of decision-making in Scripture and replaced it with human, corporate structures. They have made the simple difficult!

If you look at the tone of the New Testament, decision-making could be summed up in two words: “apostolic theocracy.” The “theocracy” concept is allowing God to rule every decision. God’s will is first and last in everything. “Apostolic” reflects the relational style for seeking God’s will—what God wants—about everything. They didn’t vote. They sought guidance from Scripture, prayed a lot, worked toward consensus, and moved forward.

In Acts 15:28, Scripture reflects on the challenge of new Christians eating meat sacrificed to idols. Scripture says, “It seemed to the Holy Spirit and to us....”

Most Christians and churches seem to make big decisions in this order: majority vote, then pray like crazy for God to bless it. They have it backwards! In Ephesians 5:1, Paul says, “Watch what God does, and then you do it.” This would be a great reversal for many churches. Watch for what God is blessing and join Him there. Yet so many Christians are politically tempted to go with the “majority vote” and then pray hard for God to bless it. From Scripture, it seems so clear: Put God first and follow what He is doing—go where He is blessing.

Apostolic Theocracy: Aligning Church Leadership with God's Will

It's amazing how churches make decisions. Decision-making is summarized under the category of "church government." In this area, most churches have followed secular government patterns—to their peril!

Think about it. In much of Europe, the church decision-making process was patterned after royal leadership: kings and queens, courts, rules and regulations. In North America, most church decision-making processes follow a secular corporate model. Most churches treat Robert's Rules of Order at a level of biblical authority!

It is time to liberate your church from the tyranny of governmental systems that bring out the worst in people. The biblical model is called an apostolic theocracy.

"Apostolic" means that decisions should be made by relational influence. Consider the approach of Jesus in contrast to the scribes and Pharisees and all their politics. A "theocracy" is the concept that "we want what God wants." It is all about doing God's will. People who make church decisions should be those who are most knowledgeable about Scripture and who will do whatever it takes to use the Bible as the guide for making decisions. Their decisions are by consensus, not votes, and must be unanimous—or they table it. God's will is important! Relationships guide people, not decrees or votes.

One of many biblical examples about how apostolic theocracy works is in the fourth chapter of Paul's letter to the Philippians. He begins this chapter relationally: "My dear, dear friends!" He says, "I do want the very best for you. You make me feel such joy, fill me with such pride" (verse 1). He speaks like a father—relationally.

Paul then writes about a dispute between two women, Euodia and Syntyche. Apparently, they were at odds with each other in a dispute that had become open to the congregation. Paul says, "God doesn't want His children holding grudges" (verse 2). Paul reminds them about their *relationship* with God, who is the Father of His children.

Paul cements the relational theme, pointing out a third relationship approach: "Syzygus, since you're right there to help them work things out, do your best with them" (verse 3). Everything is relational! No boards, no votes, no meetings.

Paul then focuses on the theocracy concept: the desire to do God's will, as Jesus reminds us in the Lord's Prayer. He says, "Celebrate God all day.... Help them [the two women] see that the Master is about to arrive. He could show up any minute!" (verses 4-5).

Tying them to God's will, Paul writes, "Instead of worrying, pray ... letting God know your concerns. God's wholeness ... will come and settle you down" (verses 6-7).

Many churches subtly drift from prayer and Scripture to meetings and votes for direction and decision-making. And, at denominational levels, the approach is often ten times worse. A *smooth and healthy decision-making process requires Christians to get back to the Bible*. It's not rocket science. Relational influence plus God's will. You can't beat it!

The Spirit Unchained: Balancing Freedom and Accountability in the Church

How should you make decisions in church?

“...it is worth noting that we are all clearly becoming less hierarchical and more ad hoc in much of what we do. Bottom up, non-hierarchical movements are thriving. Traditional hierarchies are in danger of becoming passé” (Frank Newport, *God Is Alive and Well: The Future of Religion in America*, New York: Gallup Press, 2012, page 40).

The structure of most churches is top down, hierarchical. The extreme version of this is a denomination. People have all sorts of theories as to why non-denominational churches are growing. Some of those theories are caustic: “They are growing because they are preaching what people want to hear; they preach heresy.” In most cases, nothing could be further from the truth. What ignorance!

One of the many reasons some of these groups are growing is that they have recaptured the form of a movement. Christianity is built as a movement, not an organization. The shape is low control with high accountability.

The New Testament Church is low control. This movement grew so fast it was literally out of *human* control. It was, of course, a movement under the control of the Holy Spirit. It was just out of human control. The more we try to control what God

does, the more we leave God out of the formula. That does not work!

You can see this in modern times: in Africa, the Philippines, and the former Soviet Union, soon after the unraveling of communism. It is occurring in South Korea and the “underground” household movement in China. It is rapid, exponential growth, beyond human explanation and way beyond human reason. It is the powerful movement of the Holy Spirit, and it can happen anytime, anywhere. However, it is unlikely where Christians have so hyper-organized Christianity and unintentionally put the Holy Spirit in chains. Sometimes believers have roadblocked the movement of God.

Low control, by itself, leads to chaos. High accountability is the balance, and it was practiced in the New Testament Church. Ironically, this is almost never practiced in many churches. Gossip is rampant. The truth is, if no one would listen to gossip, no one could gossip. If you ask someone who has been offended by another person to follow Jesus’ teaching in Matthew 18 (a lesson on high accountability) they say, “I can’t talk to that person face-to-face because I am not good at conflict. I don’t like conflict.” No one likes conflict! If you like conflict, you need to see a therapist!

It is not about what you like; it is what the Spirit of God disciplines you to do. The Scripture says, “Instead, by speaking the truth in a spirit of love, we must grow up in every way to Christ, who is the head” (Ephesians 4:15 GNT). How often does speaking the truth in love happen? We are often good at speaking the truth but not so good at doing it in a spirit of love. Yet, Paul starts every one of his letters this way. He begins by boasting about what God has done in the lives of the people. Then, he speaks the truth in love and straightens them out.

Finally, he ends his letters by praising God for what wonderful Christians they are. He puts “bookends of love” on the truth of accountability in the middle of his letters.

This is not rocket science. However, the way it is practiced in most churches, you would think it is beyond our grasp. Yet, this is the fiber of the New Testament approach. *It is low control but high accountability.* High control leads to hierarchies that simply do not attract people today. The truth? It never did!

Acts of Leadership: Apostolic Principles for Modern Church Governance

Whenever there is a group of people, it is necessary to have some sort of structure to make decisions. This reality applies to churches and to groups of churches.

Throughout history, congregations and groups of churches have developed approaches for church governance. The objective is to provide some way of making decisions. The Roman Catholic Church has a pope and bishops. Protestant churches have boards, church councils, congregational voters' meetings, Robert's Rules of Order, bylaws, majority rule, and many similar systems related to the corporate world and *foreign* to Scripture. When large denominations make decisions, many of these systems are corporate structures on steroids!

None of these systems reflect the ethos of leadership and decision-making reflected in the New Testament Church. The origins of these secular approaches are based in legalism, not in the spirit of the Gospel. They follow secular, corporate models with little reflection of the spiritual model in the Christian movement, birthed at Pentecost.

In Acts 15, a huge decision had to be made. The issue? Gentiles were becoming Christians, including adult males. The challenge: Should they be required to be circumcised? This was a big deal, considering the limited medical procedures of the first century! So, the apostles met. No votes. No parliamentary

procedure. They reported in Acts 15:28 (NIV), “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” that the Gentile men could be Christians without following this Jewish custom of circumcision. In other words, circumcision was understood as nonessential and a hindrance to the spread of the Gospel to people who were not Jewish.

Look at how Paul interacted with the young churches through his letters in the New Testament. The tone and approach were so different than most congregational and denominational decision-making structures!

For example, in Colossians 2:1-5, Paul writes from prison: “I want you to realize that I continue to work as hard as I know how for you.” This is the posture of a *servant* leader. He continues, “Know that I’m on your side, right alongside you. You’re not in this alone.” Paul shows empathy and connection. He repeats, in verse 5, “I’m on your side, right beside you. I am delighted to hear of the careful and orderly way you conduct your affairs.” Paul shows loving support. He continues, saying he’s “impressed with the solid substance of your faith in Christ.”

The governance approach throughout the New Testament could be described as an “apostolic theocracy.” A “theocracy” means: “We want what God wants; we want to do God’s will, like Jesus taught us to pray in the Lord’s Prayer.” What this means for churches is that the only guide for decisions is the Bible, not a constitution or bylaws, even though the secular government might require a minimal constitution to be “legal.” “Apostolic” means relational interaction. No politics, no votes, but consensus, prayer, and study from Scripture. Those who make decisions are not elected but chosen on the basis of their biblical knowledge and their lifestyle of searching Scripture to make decisions. They are disciplined into a decision-making

apostolic *counsel*. The Church is not a corporation. It is a group of Christ-followers who want what God wants.

Apostolic Influence: Motivating Through Faith and Encouragement

How does God motivate believers? How should Christian parents lead their children? What is the spiritual formula for motivating a church? Is it the carrot or the stick? Is it positive reinforcement or negative demands: rules, regulations, and the like? Is it law that motivates Christian behavior, or is it Gospel? How should leaders of denominations, networks of churches, or movements influence those they lead?

Did you ever wonder why so many groups of Christians are ruled by bureaucratic rules much more often than positive reinforcement? It is clear in Scripture that leadership didn't turn a blind eye to inappropriate behavior. Yet, it is also crystal clear that apostolic influence focused on positive reinforcement as an entry point to church governance.

Paul begins his second letter to the Christians at Thessalonica with a powerful decree: "Our God gives you everything you need, makes you everything you are to be" (2 Thessalonians 1:2). These words represent a theocracy: God is in charge, and Christ is the *real* Head of the Church, always and in all ways.

The apostolic approach to leadership is influence by positive reinforcement. For example, in 2 Thessalonians 1:3-4, Paul says, "You need to know, friends, that thanking God over and over for you is not only a pleasure; it's a must. We *have* to do it." You see, in the Kingdom approach, there is no option:

Positive, relational reinforcement is the only way to lead, to influence.

Paul continues, “Your faith is growing phenomenally; your love for each other is developing wonderfully.... We’re so proud of you; you’re so steady and determined in your faith despite all the hard times....”

Then Paul brags on them: “We tell everyone we meet in the churches all about you.”

In many churches today, the only time you get a visit from a denominational representative is if you are in a crisis. Could it be that most Christian groups have drifted away from the New Testament approach?

Servant Leadership in the Church: Embracing a Spirit-Led Governance Model

Most churches are organized based on secular, political, and business models rather than biblical teaching. Catholicism is based on feudalism, with kings and queens, popes and monarchs. Other denominational systems, especially in the United States, follow the patterns of corporations. Most local churches are permeated by non-biblical procedures, including boards, votes, meetings, etc.

None of these forms follow the New Testament pattern. So, what is the issue behind the issue? Most well-intentioned Christians begin their approach to organizing church by looking at it from the wrong perspective. The Church is **NOT** an organization. It is a living organism. Every metaphor used in the Scripture to reflect the Church follows this understanding: body, family, sheep, priesthood, vine/branches, living building of living stones, etc.

In Paul's first letter to Timothy, he calls the Church a household (3:14) in the context of sharing operational procedures for church. In these paragraphs, chapter 3:1-15, there is a significantly detailed presentation of staff leadership that sounds dramatically foreign to most church staffing structures today. All of this biblical wisdom is yet another dimension of significant drift from scriptural direction. Most church governance hinders the productivity—the effectiveness—of the mission that God has given to the Church. The apostle begins

his direction about church governance to young Timothy in chapter 3, verse 1. He says, “If anyone wants to provide leadership in the church, good!” While there is no mention of seminary or Bible college, degrees, or titles, he does list preconditions: The leader should be one who is respected by the group.

Leadership is birthed from within—a person raised up, disciplined, and already known to the congregation. The leader is one who is “cool and collected, accessible, and hospitable”—all references to people skills. Paul expands further: The church leader is to “know what he’s talking about, not be overfond of wine, not pushy but gentle, not thin-skinned, not money-hungry.” The leader is one who has a reputation of doing well at handling “his own affairs, attentive to his own children and having their respect.” The leader should “not be a new believer” (1 Timothy 3:1-7).

Starting with verse 8, Paul changes terminology from the “leader” to another category: “servant.” The tone of this description is clearly not about everyone in church but “those who want to be servants in the church.” Could this be what we call “staff” today, another drift into corporate, organizational language?

“Servants” are to be “serious, not deceitful, not too free with the bottle, not in it for what they can get out of it, ... not using their position to try to run things,” which likely means they are to respect the leader. “Servants” must prove themselves— “earn their position.” This implies they are raised up from within the congregation. Paul then includes women in this category, repeating some of the same integrity issues listed earlier for leaders. He ends by saying, “Those who do this servant work

will come to be highly respected, a real credit to this Jesus-faith” (3:8-13).

In verse 14, Paul wraps up this topic by saying, “I’m writing this letter so you’ll know how things ought to go in *God’s household*, this *God-alive* church, bastion of truth” (emphasis mine).

The study of the Church, based on the New Testament, is called “ecclesiology.” The more you learn, the more you will wonder: “Would the Church be dramatically more effective if we removed the politics, votes, and corporate structure, had fewer meetings, and abandoned the bureaucratic approach?”

From Nitpicking to Ministry: Building a Spirit-Led Church Community

Many congregations have meetings where reports are given and decisions are made. In some churches, anyone who is a “member” is invited to those meetings. This is a foolish mistake.

If your family had to make a serious decision, would you invite the four-year-old and the ten-year-old to weigh in? The challenge with most church meetings is that they invite young Christians to participate. “Baby Christians” often come disguised as forty-year-old men and women, who are one or two years old in biblical depth. The result? The experience allows those who are not “ready,” spiritually, to deal with big decisions—which should require a clarity of God’s will. The other result? These young Christians see other Christians speaking emotionally, and sometimes disrespectfully, with one another.

Worse yet, we form congregations into political entities, called denominations. These groups are often more politically charged than spiritually directed. These meetings are a dangerous platform for Christians to misbehave. Why? There are “apostolic” leaders, and there are “political” leaders. The latter are usually attracted to leadership of large bodies of Christians. The challenge? They all look the same—yet behave very differently!

In 2 Timothy 2:14-26, Paul has advice that every Christian should memorize—and repeat to themselves often. Paul says to young Timothy, “Repeat these basic essentials over and over to God’s people. Warn them before God against pious nitpicking....” Why? It “chips away at the faith. It just wears everyone out.”

Paul adds, “Stay clear of pious talk that is only talk ... mere words.” He continues, “If they’re not backed by a godly life, they accumulate as poison in the soul.”

This poison kills believers, churches, and whole spiritual movements—like denominations. It crucifies Jesus, the Son of God, who gave His life for so much better: mission and ministry.

Paul uses the metaphor of a kitchen in 2 Timothy 2:20-21. He says, “...some containers” in a kitchen are “used serve fine meals; others to take out the garbage.”

So, what kind of a spiritual container are you? What about the leaders of your church? What about the leaders of your denomination or movement? What kind of spiritual container are you as a father, mother, son, daughter—as a Christian?

And, working with younger Christians: How should you operate? Paul says we should be “a gentle listener and a teacher who keeps cool.” Why? That “God might sober them up with a change of heart” (2:22-26).

Behavior reflects spiritual depth. It is the responsibility of every Christian. How is that working for you?

Breaking the Corporate Mold: Biblical Leadership in Church Governance

How is your church operated? How is it set up? What are the internal mechanics for making decisions, selecting leaders, and distributing work? How is it *organized*? Therein lies the issue behind the issue. Nowhere in Scripture is a church identified as an *organization*. The Church is described by many metaphors that describe what it really is. Every one of them is a *living* organism.

Every living organism is organized—but not an organization. Organisms operate by symbiotic relationships. Like an orchestra, an organism works by defined relationships. No one votes on who should play which instrument. There aren't elections to see who will win the right to play violin. However, there is a leader, a conductor.

The human body has a head, too. So do mosquitoes, crocodiles, elephants, and fish. The head provides impulses for the body to operate in concert. There are no laws, codes, or bylaws. There are no elections to see who gets to be a foot for a two-year term. Yes, such an approach is absolutely ridiculous and impossible. It is simply *not* the Creator's plan.

So, how does the Creator, who breathes inspired wisdom into Scripture, define the incredible creation and unique organism we call church? The Holy Spirit exclusively uses metaphors that anyone should be able to understand. Every metaphor is alive:

the body of Christ, the sheep and the Shepherd, the living temple of living stones—Christ the cornerstone, the flock of God, the royal priesthood, etc.

So, who is the Head? Jesus. Who is the Head's head? The local leader?

In Paul's letter to Titus, how does the apostle describe his leadership to the young protégé: "I, Paul, am God's slave and Christ's agent" (Titus 1:1). Agent for what? "Promoting the faith."

How does Paul instruct Titus about multiplying churches—living organisms—and providing leaders? Votes? Advanced degrees? No! He says in verses 5-9, "*Appoint* leaders...*select* them" (emphasis mine). They should have certain qualifications: a good reputation, a believing family, responsible in church leadership (experience), and not pushy, short-tempered, a drunk, a bully, or in it for money.

Those appointed should be people-friendly, wise, fair, reverent, and *know the Gospel well*.

Note: In Scripture, there is nothing about nominations, elections, votes, Robert's Rules of Order, constitutional laws, or bylaws. So, ask yourself: "How did so many churches get where they are? And how smoothly does this superimposed, man-made, legalistic approach fit a living organism dominated by the impulses of the Head?"

From Fights to Fellowship: Building Civility in Church Leadership

This is a true story about a midsize church in the upper Midwest of the United States. They had a congregational meeting one night. Members of the congregation were so strongly divided about some issue that the meeting erupted into a fistfight. The police were called, and the story was later printed on the front page of the local newspaper. How could that promote the image of Jesus in your community?

Why do church people sometimes misbehave at such unspiritual levels? There are a couple of reasons. First, most church governance structures—the way congregations make decisions—are not even close to a biblical pattern. In fact, most structures are patterned after feudal, European models of past centuries or corporate models adopted from recent business approaches. Second, faith issues are, by definition, close to the seat of emotions for most people. It is easy for disagreeing Christians to move to a place of emotional and irrational behavior where they move from disagreeing to being disagreeable.

There is nothing in the New Testament about votes, boards, quorums, bylaws, or Robert's Rules of Order—not even about constitutions or church-wide meetings. These secular models do not work well for the body of Christ, the Church. The only primary document that God gives to the Church for making all decisions is Scripture.

In Paul's letter to Titus, the third chapter, he addresses political behavior in general. It seems surprising that Paul would write about respect for the "government" since the people in these churches were under the occupied rule of the Romans, who superimposed their pagan government upon God's people.

Nevertheless, Paul says, "Remind the people to respect the government and be law-abiding, always ready to lend a helping hand." He adds, "No insults, no fights. God's people should be bighearted and courteous" (verses 1-2).

Later in 3:8-11, Paul adds, "Stay away from mindless, pointless quarreling." He continues, "Warn a quarrelsome person once or twice, but then be done with him." Paul says the quarrelsome person is "out of line" and "rebellious against God." He adds, "By persisting in divisiveness he cuts himself off" (verse 11).

Low Control, High Accountability: A Model for Church Governance

Jesus says in Luke 17:3-4, “If you see your friend going wrong, correct him. If he responds, forgive him. Even if it’s personal against you and repeated seven times through the day, and seven times he says, ‘I’m sorry, I won’t do it again,’ forgive him.”

Jesus is a *friend* of sinners. Anyone who has Jesus inside them is a *friend* of sinners. And other people can tell it immediately.

When “outsiders” come in contact with Christians they should immediately feel accepted. They will feel like they belong before they will ever believe. And they will *believe* for a long time before they *behave* in ways that Christians do. It takes time for an immature Christian to grow up and act “right.”

So, the approach is belong → believe → become → behave. This is God’s relational approach.

Yet, many churches operate out of an institutional approach: believe → behave → belong. In other words, if you confess Jesus, then if you behave right, we’ll treat you like you belong. Even though that is often practiced by some Christians, it is not the way of Jesus.

God's Way of Leadership: Servants, Not Bosses

How does God want church leaders to operate? Or does He care? Does it really matter?

Oh, it matters all right! Look, it's a normal tendency for well-meaning Christians to drift from biblical truth. Why? Two reasons:

Many Christians are just above the line of biblically illiterate. I mean no offense about this! But understand: Most know the basics about God, salvation in Christ, and other key Christian life issues. But how to do church? Not so much. Why is that? You have to dig for it in the Scripture! The world is where Christians live 24-7—or at least, 24-6.5—if they go to church!

The world of the world—especially a nation that has greatly moved toward secularism—*does* subtly influence believers 24-7. Many are experts at salvation for themselves but ignorant about further details. So, it's true: Many Christians are going to heaven, but their churches are falling apart—declining. They are failing to reach others for Christ. This ignorance about how to do church is true for some pastors, staff, and denominational leaders as well.

In 1 Thessalonians 2:6-13, there is an outstanding message about how to lead in the world of the church. It's very different than most worldly leadership. Paul describes God's way of

leadership: “We never threw our weight around or tried to come across as important ... never patronizing, never condescending” (verses 6-7). Paul continues, “...but we cared for you the way a mother cares for her children. We loved you dearly.”

There is more: “Not content to just pass on the Message, we wanted to give you our hearts. And we *did*.” He continues, reminding us that church leaders are “discreet and courteous ... like a father with his child, holding your hand, whispering encouragement, showing you step-by-step how to live well before God” (verses 9-12). This biblical model is called *apostolic leadership*. It is *leadership by relationships*: (1) the leader’s relationship to the heart of God and (2) the leader’s relationship with other Christ-followers. *Spiritual leadership is influence by God’s Word through sincere relationships.*

Notice this: No boards. No votes. No debates. No politics. No heavy-handed bossing around. No Robert’s Rules of Order. No high-powered, stressful meetings. Instead, biblical wisdom on the platform of relationships. Leaders are literally understood as spiritual moms and dads relating to kids, with God the heavenly Father over everyone.

So, how would that change *your* church?

Discipling, Not Volunteering: Equipping the Church for Ministry

In Ephesians 2:1-6, Paul writes about life B.C.—Before Christ. He says that before you became a Christian, a Christ-follower, you let the world tell you how to live. But, through God’s mercy, we are alive in Christ. It is an ultimate act of grace—God’s free gift. Then, God invites us, through Christ, to join Him in the work He does (Ephesians 2:7-10).

So, we take our “marching orders” for Kingdom work from the head of the Church—Jesus, right? Not so fast! There is more! Jesus said, clearly, “My kingdom is not of”—not like—“this world” (John 18:36 NIV).

While there are many reasons why some churches flounder and lose their effectiveness, did you ever wonder about the worldly ways we use to operate churches?

For example, Jesus taught and modeled the way to equip people for ministry. It’s called “discipling”—a process of on-the-job apprenticing for multiplication. In truth, most churches don’t *disciple* Kingdom workers. They beg for volunteers.

Scripture says that every Christ-follower has divine supernatural gifts. And we’re all different. Yet, most churches don’t help people discover, develop, and use their spiritual gifts.

Most churches have a corporation-style form of church governance. There are different variations in denominations

and traditions, but few are patterned after Scripture. Instead, there are laws and bylaws, boards and committees, politics and votes, and a party spirit that divides more than it empowers.

All this is worldly drift. Churches are staffed by professional ministers. They are often seen as “hired hands”—no matter how “biblicized” by ordination and titles. These pastors do most of the ministry. Others are called to be “volunteers.” Others are pew-sitters who give money to pay the ministers’ salaries.

Has anyone read—and believed—Ephesians 4:7-13? It says, “He [Christ] handed out gifts of apostle, prophet, evangelist, and pastor-teacher.” Their role? “To train Christ’s followers in skilled servant work, working within Christ’s body, the church.” It doesn’t say that members are consumers who are never involved in ministry. Christians serve according to *their* gifts.

No wonder the body of Christ is crippled and less effective. It makes you wonder: Who or what is *really* the head of those churches? If it is Christ who leads your church, every Christian will discover, develop, and use their gifts. And you will see God’s Kingdom explode with growth!

Shooting the Wounded: How Churches Fail Their Fallen Leaders

Why do so many churches operate by law, not Gospel? Every church has “bylaws”—rules. Worse yet, look at most denominations. They act like corporate businesses. Where did this legalistic approach come from? According to Paul’s letter to the Romans, the origin is sin. This is the opposite of grace and forgiveness.

There are a number of churches where the pastor has been caught in sin. Churches tend to have favorite sins and sins that aren’t even noticed. Pastors who commit adultery or get caught using pornography often get the axe—their career is ruined.

By way of contrast, I have met numerous pastors who are notorious gossips—sharing judgmental conclusions behind the backs of others. Slander also seems to be a forgotten sin.

When pastors fall into the sinful pit of one of the “selected” sins, they are usually removed. There are pastors whose whole careers have been scrapped by the political acts of denominations. Their lives are ruined. There is little or no help for restoration, and they are barred for life from their calling. This is sick! It very likely makes Jesus sick. Surely, Paul, who wrote Romans chapter 7, would have a fit!

This is a systemic, unbiblical challenge. In Romans 7:4-5, Paul clearly says, “When Christ died he took that entire rule-

dominated way of life down with him and left it in the tomb.” Paul writes further that the law enslaves us, shackles us to sin. In verse 14 he says, “I know that all God’s commands are spiritual, but I’m not.”

However, forgiveness from Jesus sets everything right (verse 25). Many Christians and most denominations shoot their wounded. We’re the only army that does that. And we profess forgiveness! How does this square with forgiveness? Where is the effort toward restoration? Where is the power of grace that should rule denominational leadership? It is, instead, the fear of lawsuits. Many non-Christians treat those who have fallen more graciously than those who lead denominations treat troubled pastors. Instead of healing the sick, most religious bureaucrats shoot the wounded. Grace is ignored in this double standard.

Ask the best question: “What would Jesus do?”

Discipleship over Duty: The Pastor's Focus on Equipping Others

It is really easy for pastors to lose focus, forget priorities, and become a “jack of all trades, master of none.” Why? First, because most who enter ministry are nice people who like others. Second, many pastors reflect the approach of being a servant-leader. A pastor is a servant of God. Yet, many allow that servanthood to shape their pastoral role to be a “doer of ministry.” They lose sight of the biblical concept of discipling others to do ministry according to their spiritual gifts (Ephesians 4:7-13). Third, following the corporate, secular model of organizations, churches are governed by political systems that are foreign to the pastoral leadership and ministry in Scripture.

In Paul's letter to Titus, he opens by calling Titus a “legitimate son in the faith” (Titus 1:4). Titus was not a biological son of Paul. However, this is clear: The approach to becoming a pastoral leader followed Jesus' example of discipling. The primary focus was not Bible college or seminary or an academic approach alone. The discipling approach *births* leaders through on-the-job equipping.

In chapter 2 of this letter, Paul begins, “Your job....” (This is a job description for pastoral leaders in verses 1-14). Here is the focus: Teach solid doctrine; guide people toward healthy faith, love, and endurance; be reverent—avoid gossip and drunkenness; be a good example to your children; don't behave in a way that brings disrespect to God's Message.

Then Paul tells Titus the mechanism for influence: *Show* the people by doing those things yourself; be ready to give and forgive; reflect a God-honoring life (verses 11-14).

Paul ends this chapter the way he started it. He says to Titus: “You’re in charge. Don’t let anyone put you down” (Titus 2:15). Sadly, the way most churches are structured in governance, the pastor is a caretaker, often described in “churchy” language as a “caregiver.”

Many churches have adopted political systems that include nominations, votes, and boards. The pastor’s leadership role in many congregations is to attend board meetings, pray, provide a devotion, and pray at the end. How does that reflect Paul’s guidance to young Titus: “You’re in charge”?

Many Christians will rebel at this notion. Why? Abuse by pastoral leaders. While those abuses are wrong and out of the leadership character of Scripture, the default to a political system foreign to Scripture is not the answer.

Beyond Arguments: Seeking God's Wisdom in Church Leadership

When Paul returned to Jerusalem (Acts 23:1-9) after being accused of murder, he was put in prison. When the Roman guards found out he was a Roman citizen, they made a decision not to transfer him. As a citizen of Rome, he was entitled to a fair trial.

So, the Romans put him before the religious council at Jerusalem. Paul knew the Pharisees and Sadducees hated each other. He was clever and used this to take the spotlight off himself. He said he was a Pharisee, and he said he was convinced to believe in the resurrection. The point? The Sadducees would not even consider the resurrection from the dead. So, the religious council got divided, and they started yelling at each other, the Pharisees and the Sadducees. Finally, the religious scholars of the Pharisees stopped the argument.

The religious scholars said, "We don't see anything wrong with Paul's convictions." Then they said, "What if a spirit did speak to him? Or maybe an angel?"

At that point, they got to a place so many Christians, churches, and denominations need to be in—to consider: "What if it turns out we are fighting against God?" Now, there's a scary thought!

Too many church fights run good but offended people out of the church. So many pastors have said to me, "I don't go to

denominational meetings. They just do politics and argue. They spend too much time debating and voting. And nothing ever changes. Not much ever happens. I don't need more discouragement!"

No, you won't ever hear this in a sermon. Most pastors are wise enough not to make it public. But what kind of commentary is that about the hyper-organized level of churches? At the end of the day, does it help or hurt? Congregational meetings, which leave a lot of people upset: Do they help, or do they hurt?

This raises the question: Is the way Christians have organized, at every level, healthy? Biblically accurate? At the end of the day, are they useful?

In our work with churches, we developed—for those who request it—a Church Governance Consultation. It's not complicated. In fact, the process is "decomplicating." It simplifies. From the biblical perspective, we call it an apostolic theocracy. Though the words freak out a lot of people, they are loaded with good meaning. The concept of a "theocracy" makes people think about who rules the country of Iran. Well, that's not a biblical theocracy. It gives the word "theocracy" a bad rap. The word simply means "God rules." That means that the driving force for making decisions in a church is always—ALWAYS!—God's will. So, when a group of leaders in a church get together, they'd better well be people who know their Bible. They should be chosen, never elected. There is nothing about popular votes in the Scripture. God is looking for people who have biblical wisdom. Those are the believers who have a visible lifestyle committed to Bible study. They are always in church and always in a Bible class or small group Bible study. Often, they are those teaching a Bible study. They know Scripture well and will never stop learning.

When these Christians meet to make decisions, their number one priority—the only agenda item they need—is to seek the will of God. If they collectively can't agree on any issue, they table it and dig deeper into Scripture. They know: We have no other manual! The other part of that description is the word "apostolic." This word means "to be sent." It is the mission side of the Church. It is the mission of every Christian to do what Jesus called us to do: Go, make disciples. That is the platform on which the will of God rests. Together, these Christ-followers form the environment for good church leadership.

How often do you see this form of church governance? Almost never! More often, church governance is more like the Pharisees and the Sadducees. And the dysfunction of the local church simply escalates! Think about it: How would your church change if you followed the biblical approach to decision-making?

Humility in Leadership: A Biblical Model for Decision-Making

It is a great privilege to consult churches. Frequently, people at the church ask a consultant, “How should we address you? Reverend? Doctor? Pastor?” The consultant responds, “Just call me by my first name.” This is not an exercise in false humility. In the Christian family, we are brothers and sisters in Christ.

There should be no hierarchy in the Church. That means no focus on government, positional privilege, special dress codes, or titles. And no elections.

Does that sound radical? For many churches today, unfortunately, yes! However, in Acts 15, the early leaders of the Christian movement gathered in Jerusalem to deal with a significant challenge faced by the new Gentile believers. Should they be required to follow the Jewish rituals—like circumcision? The apostles gathered together. They didn’t argue. There was no vote to get a majority rule. There was no parliamentary procedure. There is no evidence of major debate.

How did they work out this thorny issue? According to Scripture, this is what it says: “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us...” (Acts 15:28 NIV). Are those the words you hear when issues are decided at your church?

So, what is the cultural tone for Christians, based on Scripture? Look at Philippians 2:1-11. Paul begins with the qualifier, “If you’ve gotten anything at all out of following Christ, if his love has made any difference in your life, ... if you *care*....”

Then comes the description of the spiritual culture for believers: “Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don’t push your way to the front; don’t sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don’t be obsessed with getting your own advantage.”

Paul continues this portrait of decision-making in verses 5-8: “Think of yourselves the way Christ Jesus thought of himself.” Paul says the focus should be on humility, not privileges. Christians are to be selfless and obedient.

So, how should a group of Christians come to decisions? (This applies also to husbands and wives, families and congregations.) Believe it or not, the approach is to come to consensus in the Spirit of Christ, the Holy Spirit.

So, how should you lead a church? If you follow Scripture, it should be something that looks like an “apostolic counsel.” No votes, but consensus. Consensus based on biblical teaching and prayer. If you can’t reach consensus, you table the matter and seek God’s further direction. How? Scripture and prayer.

Who should be on an apostolic counsel? Those who demonstrate a lifestyle of being in Scripture. Where else would you seek the will of God?

How do people get on this counsel? Not by popular vote, that’s for sure. They should be chosen on the basis of their spiritual depth and disciplined by those who are already on the counsel.

What kind of posture should people have who lead a church?
Humility! Humility in Christ.

It sounds like heresy to some “world-oriented” churches, but there is no place for Robert’s Rules of Order. As for the church constitution? No bylaws—and only what the civil government requires for a constitution. The more “human-oriented” rules and regulations you add, the more likely you’re going to get stuck in a rut with debates and arguments. Identify believers for ministry through spiritual gifts. Identify ministries by meeting needs and reaching people for Christ.

Is that your church? Is that your denomination? If not, honestly, how is that working for you? How is it working for God?

Divided We Fall: How Church Conflicts Fuel the Enemy's Work

As Church Doctors, the main objective is to help churches become more effective in reaching unbelievers and discipling them. However, we have been called into some churches that suffer from internal disputes.

You could say, when church people get sideways with one another, “all Hell breaks loose.” That is literally accurate because the Enemy from Hell works to divide and conquer. This is not a new or recent phenomenon. In the New Testament church at Corinth, that congregation was in need of a “Church Doctor” (1 Corinthians 6:1-11).

Paul begins by acknowledging that their division had escalated to the level of the court system. His reaction? He says that their reliance on the court is evidence that they have abandoned Scripture.

Consider what happens in congregations connected to a denomination, network, or fellowship of churches. Let's say the dispute involves the pastor. The denominational (or other structural) official is called in to address the dispute. Inevitably, no matter the guilt or innocence of the pastor, the official will sacrifice the career of the pastor (and the family of the pastor) on the altar of “protection.” Protection! Yes!

Here's how it works: Most denominations, networks, fellowships, or other connectional systems have endowments—sometimes worth hundreds of millions of dollars. They use these endowment funds for good causes, missions, disaster relief, etc. But they know if one of their member churches has a dispute and an angry member hires an energetic attorney, that attorney will follow the money trail right to the “deep pockets” of the denomination, network, or fellowship structure.

What is the real issue? It's twofold. (1) Many Christians in churches have organized by corporate formulas and not by biblical forms of church governance. So, most people don't even know how to follow biblical procedures to settle disputes early, before they escalate. (2) Denominations and other connected structures are organized as ecclesiastical corporations as well.

Paul, in 1 Corinthians 6, says it all: Stay out of court. Learn the biblical approach. Most churches don't want to gain a bad reputation in their communities, suffer pain, or lose pastors. You just can't improve on God's plan. Get into Scripture and work it out!

Drowning in Bylaws: How Churches Lose Their Effectiveness

The natural tendency of human beings is to over organize. We like structure for two reasons: (1) It feels safe, and (2) we don't have to think for ourselves. We have speed limit signs, presumably so we don't kill ourselves and others.

We have rules, even in grade school, so we don't do something stupid. We have articles of incorporation and bylaws to keep us on the same page—except, usually, it's page after page after page after page. And over time, the “written rules” build layers of bureaucracy. And what happens? They bog down progress and reduce the human mind to a state in which thinking and creativity are, well, greatly abandoned. We don't have to think in moral terms. We just follow rules.

Christian people live by faith. The relationship with Jesus dictates life. In a perfect world, a relationship with Jesus and a lifelong study of Scripture actually abolish the need for rules. Christians who willfully depart from their relationship with Jesus break from relationship as much as break the rules.

When you get a bunch of Christians together, their fleshly side likes to organize around rules and regulations, laws and bylaws. The faith becomes a religion. Religious behavior is faithfully following the rules, whether your relationship with Jesus is tight or not.

In Galatians 3:21-22, Paul says, speaking of the commandments: "...is the law, then, an anti-promise, a negation of God's will for us? Not at all. Its purpose was to make obvious to everyone that we are, in ourselves, out of right relationship with God...." He continues, "And therefore to show us the futility of devising some religious system for getting by our own efforts what we can only get by waiting in faith for God to complete his promise." Paul later says the wait is over because of faith in Jesus Christ.

So why do churches and denominations drown effectiveness in layers of laws, bylaws, rules, and regulations? You would think Robert's Rules of Order were somewhere in Scripture!

Just the opposite. They are a human invention—and, in the Church, a distraction that undermines the power and presence of Christ to move the Christian movement forward. You want to vote on that?

Conclusion: Small Group Study

As your group reflects on this study, the picture becomes unmistakably clear. Scripture consistently reveals a Church shaped by relationships, humility, and mission, not corporate structures. The more the Church operates like a political organization, the more it drifts from its identity as the living body of Christ. Throughout these sessions, you have seen how easily Christians become entangled in arguments, bylaws, disputes, and self-protective systems that mirror the world rather than the Kingdom. You have also seen how the New Testament offers a radically better way, centered on prayer, unity, consensus, spiritual maturity, and an unwavering desire to seek God's will above all else.

This study has challenged the default patterns so many churches have adopted. Leaders are often reduced to managers, pastors become caretakers instead of disciplers, and members are invited into debates rather than mission. Yet Scripture calls for something entirely different. In an apostolic, Spirit-led environment, leaders disciple others into ministry, Christians grow in biblical wisdom, and decisions emerge from prayer and consensus rather than votes and power struggles. When conflict arises, believers work it out through Scripture instead of letting division escalate. When leaders fall, they are restored with grace rather than discarded in fear. When disagreements surface, the question becomes, "Are we fighting against God?" instead of "Who will win this argument?"

This shift is not simply structural; it is spiritual. Moving from bylaws to Bible, from rules to relationships, and from arguments to discernment takes humility and deep dependence on Jesus. Healthy leadership begins with servant-hearted posture, where those guiding the Church listen, teach, model, and encourage. It continues with the whole Church discovering and using their spiritual gifts, not as volunteers filling roles but as disciples living out God's calling. It grows as believers learn to resolve conflict biblically, pursue unity, and focus on mission. When you embrace this way of life together, the Church becomes more agile, more creative, more entrepreneurial, and more aligned with the heart of God.

The path forward will require courage, experimentation, and prayer. Begin by identifying where corporate habits have replaced biblical ones. Clarify where bylaws, committees, political behavior, or entrenched traditions hinder the Holy Spirit. Look for places where leadership needs to shift from doing ministry to equipping others. Practice accountability with love. Choose restoration over punishment. Invite spiritually mature believers into decision-making and disciple new leaders from within. And most importantly, ask God to show you where He is already working and how your congregation can join Him. As you continue reading the *Focus On Mission* series together, let these principles shape a renewed vision for your church's culture, leadership, and missional engagement.

Study Questions

Where do you see your church operating more like a corporation than a living organism shaped by Scripture?

How might shifting from voting to Spirit-led consensus transform trust, unity, and effectiveness?

What practical steps could help your leaders disciple people into ministry rather than recruit volunteers for tasks?

Where do bylaws, committees, or political patterns hinder mission or slow down the work of the Holy Spirit?

How can your church create a culture where disagreements are handled biblically rather than emotionally or politically?

Where have past conflicts, arguments, or divisions harmed mission, and what steps could restore unity?

How might adopting a low control and high accountability posture improve relationships and increase outreach?

What would it look like for your leadership teams to model humility and servant leadership as described in the New Testament?

How could your church become more intentional about restoring fallen or wounded leaders with grace and care?

What new habits or rhythms would help your congregation discern God's will together rather than defaulting to personal preference?



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①

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②

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③

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About the Authors



Dr. Kent R. Hunter is the founder of Church Doctor Ministries. He believes that God has called him to help Christians and their churches become more effective for the Great Commission, to reach unbelievers and to make them disciples of Jesus Christ. Dr. Hunter is the author of more than 40 books. He has consulted more than 1,800 churches from 80 denominations, as well as nondenominational and independent churches. He developed the SEND Movement, which trains congregational members to become missionaries to those who are unchurched in their social networks. Kent writes the bimonthly Church Doctor Report, found on www.churchdoctor.org. Kent lives on a tree farm in northeast Indiana with his wife, Janet. Kent and Janet have two grown children, Laura and Jon.



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