

# What Does the Bible Say?

## Biblical reflections & Discussion Starters

For most Christians, the Bible is the supreme authority in matters of faith and practice and so a key reference point when developing and implementing a governance framework. However, those who hold this view may end up organising the local church differently. Baptists, Anglicans, and Presbyterians can all have a high view of the Bible and yet approach the appointment of leaders and decision-making each in their own way.

Baptists read the Bible and conclude that they should practice congregational government. According to Don McLellan, “Congregational government is a form of church government in which the local church is autonomous and at which the major decisions affecting the church are made by the members. It is a form of government which while demanding the separation of church and state stresses the priesthood of all believers and operates on the assumption that the Holy Spirit will guide the decision-making process to conclusions commensurate with the will of God.” (Leadership and Baptist Church Governance, Graeme Chatfield. Ed. (Eastwood, NSW: Morling Press, 2005)

Congregational government is a long-held Baptist distinctive, and the BA requires all affiliated churches to adopt practices in keeping with it. However, Brian Winslade acknowledges “There’s a kind of groaning or wrestling over whether congregational government as we have come to know it is the best fit in a post-modern 21<sup>st</sup> century”. (Understanding Congregational Government in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century) Winslade goes on to affirm his personal conviction regarding the efficacy of congregational polity for the 21<sup>st</sup> century but also recognises that there can be a difference between principles and practices saying, “no longer do we simply accept the patterns and models that have been handed down to us from our forebears; we need to wrestle with them and understand their relevance for ourselves.”

Each Baptist church is autonomous and so at liberty to develop and implement its own governance framework. However, any Baptist Church that recognises the Bible as its authority in all matters of faith and practice will respect its teaching. To this end the following reflections may be helpful:

### 1. Jesus is Lord

Colossians 1:15-20 says, “The Son is the image of the invisible God, the firstborn over all creation. For in him all things were created: things in heaven and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or powers or rulers or authorities; all things have been created through him and for him. He is before all things, and in him all things hold together. And he is the head of the body, the

church; he is the beginning and the firstborn from among the dead, so that in everything he might have the supremacy. For God was pleased to have all his fullness dwell in him, and through him to reconcile to himself all things, whether things on earth or things in heaven, by making peace through his blood, shed on the cross.”

Jesus is Lord. He is head of the church. The local church is His creation; it exists by Him and for Him. Therefore, any governance framework must serve Him by supporting unity and encouraging fruitfulness in life and mission. Also, those who serve in the governance team must be sincere in submitting to His leadership and seeking first His kingdom.

#### *Discussion Starters*

*How does your Church’s approach to governance champion the Lordship of Christ?*

*Is there anything in your Church’s governance policies, processes, or practices, that risks compromising the Lordship of Christ? If so, then how will you respond?*

## **2. All Christians are ministers – the priesthood of all believers**

1 Peter 2:4-5 say, “As you come to Him, the living Stone – rejected by humans but chosen by God and precious to Him – you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.”

Congregational government is based on the belief that every member of the local church is a priest before God. While in Old Testament times people relied on human mediators to represent them before God, the Lord Jesus Christ brought that to an end. By His once-for-all atoning sacrifice the Lord Jesus opened the way to God for all who will repent of their sins and confess Him Lord. The moment a person does that God sows the Holy Spirit deep within their nature. Consequently, they share Christ’s priestly status and have no need for a human mediator. Together with all other believers they have the right and authority to read, interpret and apply the Bible. They can hear God’s voice and share the insights He gives them. God does not only speak through pastors and church leaders but also through every believer.

#### *Discussion Starter*

*How does your Church’s approach to governance champion the priesthood of all believers?*

*Is there anything in your church’s governance policies, processes, or practices, that risks compromising the priesthood of all believers? If so, then how will you*

*respond?*

### 3. God calls and gifts some for leadership

Ephesians 4:11-12 say, “So Christ Himself gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip His people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up”.

While every Christian is a minister not all are called to, or gifted for, leadership. Ephesians 4, along with 1 Corinthians 12, Romans 12, and 1 Timothy 3, all indicate that God calls some to leadership and gifts them accordingly.

1 Timothy 3 describes leadership as a noble task signalling that it should only be undertaken by those who are spiritually and morally qualified. Character is of paramount importance when appointing leaders in the local church.

Ephesians chapter 4 shows that God designed leadership to bring the best out of others, equipping the whole church for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up.

Any governance framework should include appropriate measures to ensure that those appointed to leadership are of suitable character, called and gifted.

Recognising that leadership is a spiritual gift, any governance framework should support and empower those who are appointed to exercise it. Leaders must be allowed to lead within clearly defined parameters.

#### *Discussion Starters*

*How does your Church’s approach to governance champion God’s gift of leadership?*

*Is there anything in your Church’s governance policies, processes, or practices, that risks compromising God’s gift of leadership? If so, then how will you respond?*

### 4. In the Bible, some leaders govern well and others badly

1 Kings chapter 12 is an example of bad leadership. It tells the story of Rehoboam, who succeeded Solomon as king of Israel. It shows him to be arrogant and dumb. When the people asked him to work them a little less hard than his father had, promising to serve him if he did, Rehoboam ignored the counsel of the elders who had served his father well preferring to take the advice of his equally arrogant peers. The result was catastrophic with ten of twelve tribes rebelling and establishing a separate kingdom. Be warned!

Acts chapter 6 is an example of good leadership. When confronted by a significant operational need the Apostles recognised the importance of delegating authority to others so that they could continue to focus on the

responsibilities which God had given to them. Also, they invited the “whole group” (v5) into the process of appointing those who would serve. The results were quite spectacular. Not only was the operational need met but also “the word of God spread. The number of disciples in Jerusalem increased rapidly, and a large number of priests became obedient to the faith.” (v7) Good governance is great!

Any governance framework should ensure that a church allows its leaders to lead but with healthy measures for accountability. It will also ensure that those who lead engage with the church over major decisions.

#### *Discussion Starters*

*How do the two different, yet complementary, roles of governance and operational leadership function in your church?*

*What signals that a Governance Team is leading badly?*

*How do your Church's governance policies, procedures, and practices ensure transparency and accountability?*

### **5. In the Bible there are distinct types of leadership**

Acts 6:2-4 tells how “the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, ‘It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.’”

Governance concerns the oversight of a church's affairs, in keeping with its mission, values, vision, direction and rules. It delegates the day-to-day leadership and management of the church to the Senior Pastor/Pastor who works with others to implement the policies, processes, and strategic plan of the church and is accountable to the Governance Team.

In a smaller church it is usually the case that the same people are involved in both governance and operations. When this is the case such people must be clear about which “hat” they are wearing at any moment. In other words, when they meet as part of the Governance Team then it is oversight they must provide. However, when they participate in the day-to-day running of the church then the “hat they wear” is one of operations.

Any governance framework should clearly delineate between governance and operations.

#### *Discussion Starters*

*How do the two different, yet complementary, roles of governance and leadership function in your Church?*

*Do the people in your Church understand who is responsible for decision-making?*

*Do the people in your Church understand how decisions are made?*

## **6. In the Bible, the character of a leader is of paramount important**

By listing the spiritual and moral qualifications of elders and deacons 1 Timothy 3 shows that the character of any leader is of paramount important.

Leadership is a noble task to be undertaken by appropriately qualified people. Indeed, when Acts chapter 6 says that “the Twelve” invited “the whole group” to “choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” the inference is that those selected had been tested and affirmed.

The way in which a leader manages their spiritual and moral life will impact their effectiveness. When the Apostle Paul wrote to his young friend Timothy he urged him to watch his life and doctrine closely (1 Timothy 4:16). In other words, Timothy was to hold himself accountable, living a transparent life and making appropriate choices. Also, he was to hold tenaciously to the truth of the gospel remaining faithful to its life-giving message.

Any governance framework should include appropriate measures for appointing leaders that include testing and affirming their character, as well as their capacity and sense of call.

### *Discussion Starters*

*How does your Church assess the character, call, and capacity, of its leaders?*

*How does your Church induct its leaders?*

*How does your Church support, review, and develop its leaders?*

## **7. In the New Testament leadership is always collective**

Mark 3:13-14 say, “Jesus went up on a mountainside and called to Him those He wanted, and they came to Him. He appointed twelve”.

Acts 6:5 tells how the church appointed seven to be deacons.

Acts chapter 14:23 tells how Paul and Barnabas appointed a plurality of elders in each church.

In the New Testament leadership is always collective This is important because there is wisdom in the counsel of many. Also, a plurality of leaders helps to

ensure transparency and accountability. However, it also appears that one of the leadership team takes on a primary leadership role – a sort of “first among equals” – in the way that the Apostle James did at the Council of Jerusalem. (Acts 15:13)

Any governance framework should ensure that there is a plurality of leadership. It would be inappropriate for the Senior Pastor/Pastor of a church to dominate, just as it would for a member of the congregation to dominate. Someone once said, “The Senior Pastor/Pastor’s job is never to be a despot; but it is to prevent anyone else from being a despot!”

At the same time, a Governance Team needs a leader, a “first among equals” who can steer it where it needs to go. Often this will be the Senior Pastor/Pastor but in some instances will be another Team member.

#### *Discussion Starters*

*How does your Church ensure that leadership is collective?*

*How does your Governance Team set about appointing its team leader? Is this the best approach? Are there other approaches the team could take?*