

Church Polity and Organization

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Seventh Day Baptists are congregational in church polity and organization rather than “episcopal”. This means that we believe the New Testament church model shows churches organized and controlled at the local level, rather than to be controlled by an all-powerful authoritarian church model that dictates and commands from the top down. We support this truth as shown by the apostle Peter’s words to the believers of his day:

“Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ...But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should show forth the praises of Him who hath called you out of darkness into His marvelous light: Which in time past were not a people, but are now the people of God: which had not obtained mercy, but now have obtained mercy.” 1 Peter 2: 5, 9

From the above scripture passage it is clear that Peter is addressing each individual believer in Christ, and as such he addresses each one as part of a “royal priesthood” and “peculiar people”. Nowhere in the New Testament do we see a differentiation of a so-called “clergy” and “laity”; but all believers are counted equal in Christ. This is called “the priesthood of all believers”. This agrees also with Paul’s words to the Galatians:

“For as many of you as have been baptized into Christ have put on Christ. There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free, there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.” Galatians 3:28.

It is clear, therefore, that there is equality in the eyes of God among believers. No man is to exalt himself above their brethren, or to claim a more exalted position as a minister over the people. We ought always to remember Jesus’ words to the disciples:

“But Jesus called them unto Him and said, Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion over them, and they that are great exercise authority upon them. But it shall not be so among you: but *whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister*; And whosoever will be chief among you, *let him be your servant*: Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give His life a ransom for many.” Matthew 20:25-28.

From these words, we see that to be a “*minister*” is to be a “*servant*”. Those who attempt to exercise authority and power over others are not following the example and teachings of Jesus or the apostles, but are rather acting like “the princes of the Gentiles”; that is, acting like unbelievers. We also read the words of Peter regarding oversight of the flock of God:

“The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: *Feed the flock of God* which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; *Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock*. And when the chief Shepherd shall appear, ye shall receive a crown of glory that fadeth not away.” 1 Peter 5:1-4.

Again, the clear example and counsel from the New Testament is to feed and care for the flock of God, and not to rule over them as a “lord”. In the church we have but one Lord, the Lord Jesus Christ.

This principle is vital to understand, for as Baptists, we follow a long and storied history of believing and practicing the New Testament congregational form of worship and organization. We reject authoritarian forms of church government which seek to lord and rule over the consciences of men, and we declare to the world that the worst form of Satanic oppression is when that form of church and state unites in a united ecclesiastical government which can only end in tyranny over the body and souls of men. Thus our rejection of and continual protest against any form of union between church and state.

Selection of church leaders

While the Bible is clear that the apostles were directly chosen by our Lord, it is also clear that the early church itself had a role to play in the selection of leaders. Before the day of Pentecost in the upper room, the disciples chose two men to replace Judas Iscariot as an apostle, upon whom lots were cast in their selection. The book of Acts records that there were about one hundred and twenty disciples on that day assembled (Acts 1:15); Peter then addresses the disciples gathered: “men and brethren” (verse 16); and requests them to make a selection from among themselves of one of the men “which have accompanied with us all the time the Lord Jesus went in and out among us, beginning from the baptism of John, unto that same day that He was taken up from us” (verses 21-22). The chapter goes on to say, “and they (the disciples) appointed two, Joseph called Barsabas...and Matthias.” (verse 23); and after prayer and the casting of lots, Matthias was selected to join the apostleship.

There are several important things we can learn from this: first, that the church leaders were selected from among the congregation to the most important roles in ministry; they were not appointed and sent from afar by some disconnected episcopal church government. Second, the congregation made the selection of the men who would be leaders. Third, they were set before the ordained leadership to be prayed over. Fourth, God made the ultimate decision in their selection.

This same process can also be seen for the selection of elders and deacons in the church. The apostle Paul sets forth specific requirements for the selection of elders and deacons in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapters 1 and 2. Most importantly, these elders were local church leaders. “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting,

and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee.” Titus 1:5. From these words of Paul to Titus we can gather the following facts: these elders were inhabitants of the cities in which there were established churches; as Titus traveled to the different cities where Paul had preached and established churches, Titus was to ordain local elders to shepherd those churches. Titus and Timothy were young pastors who followed the apostle Paul and labored with him in establishing churches among the Gentiles. We can assume based on other places in the New Testament scriptures that Titus and Timothy ordained elders and deacons that the church had selected and placed before them, and that were living lives in accordance with the gospel principles which Paul had laid down and delivered to the churches through his epistles and personal labor among them. These elders were then charged with “feeding the flock of God” (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2), “taking oversight” (1 Peter 5:2), defending the faith and guarding the church against heresy (Titus 1:7-10), teaching “sound doctrine” (Titus 2:1; 1 Timothy 3:2); and to “care for the church of God” (1 Timothy 3:4-5).

Likewise, deacons were also selected from among the people and set forth before the apostles and elders for prayer and ordination. See Acts 6:1-7.

From the aforementioned Bible examples, we learn several important truths and points of order (or church polity) which must be followed in the Christian Church:

1. The church must be “congregational” in government and organization, and not “episcopal”. That is, there must be no difference between the minister and the people, but the leadership must come from among the people. This was also the example of our Lord Jesus who came from among the common people of His day.
2. Church leaders must be selected from among the people, by the people themselves, and not forced upon them from the outside by any other government or church organization.
3. These selected men are then set forth before the currently ordained church leadership who then pray over them and consecrate (“ordain”) them to ministry.

These principles must be followed by the Christian Church in order to follow the New Testament examples laid down clearly in the scriptures which we are commanded to follow by our Lord Jesus Christ and the apostles in the Early Church. If these Bible principles are followed, never can there be the terrible corruption and tyranny which cursed Christendom in the formation of the Papal church during the Middle Ages, nor the persecution by both Roman Catholics and Protestants alike of our Baptist forefathers who protested against the abuses by clergy and the corruptions of ecclesiastical rule. Nay, but God’s blessings will fall upon the church ruled by the spirit of Him who is the “Prince of Peace” and the One “altogether lovely” (Isaiah 9:6; Songs 5:16); and His Spirit will fall upon His people who are ruled and led, not by the king’s scepter, but by the shepherd’s staff. Then shall the Church of Christ stand forth in her beauty, as described by the Song of Songs and the Seer of Patmos:

“Who is she that looketh forth as the morning, fair as the moon, clear as the sun, and terrible as an army with banners?” “To her was granted that she should be arrayed in fine linen, clean and white: for the fine linen is the righteousness of saints.” “These are they which came out of great tribulation, and have washed their robes, and made them white in the blood of the Lamb. Therefore, are they before the throne of God, and serve Him day and night in His temple: and He that sitteth on the throne shall dwell among them. They shall hunger no more, neither thirst anymore...For the Lamb which is in the midst of the throne shall feed them, and shall lead them unto living fountains of waters: and God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes.” Song of Songs 6:10; Revelation 19:8; 7:14-17.

Even so, come, Lord Jesus! The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be with you.

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