

Foreword

CHURCHES MUST BE ORGANIZED in order to exist as churches. They are not simply random aggregations of people. One does not form a church whenever one selects ten names promiscuously from the phone book. For a church to exist, it must have some boundary that distinguishes those who are in the church from those who are not. It must also have some way of designating who is in charge and who is accountable to whom. However rudimentary its form, without organization no church exists.

While all churches recognize the need for organization, they are far from agreed about the form that the organization should take. More fundamentally, they do not even agree about the way of deciding. Some believe that a church is free to adopt whatever order seems most useful, while others believe that a particular form of order is divinely ordained. Those who believe that church order is a matter of revelation disagree further about the locus of that revelation. Among those who restrict revelation to the written Scriptures, further disagreements occur over the actual form of order that is revealed.

Debates over church organization involve a complex of questions. What role do members play in the government of the church? What are the offices of the church, and what authority do they exercise? What does leadership look like? How are decisions made and enforced?

The last question is sure to provoke disagreement among Christians. For example, some American evangelical leaders have publicly stated that group decision-making on the part of the whole church is unbiblical. The pastor of one evangelical megachurch even blogged that congregational decision-making is “from Satan,” charging that it neither honors Scripture nor advances the gospel.

Jeff Brown has written this book in order to move beyond opinion and to discover what the New Testament actually depicts in terms of congregational decision-making. He examines in detail the personal and organizational processes that the apostolic churches employed in reaching corporate

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decisions. He is interested to identify the agents in decision making, the parameters under which decisions were made, the sorts of circumstances that led to these decisions, and the resulting outcomes. Furthermore, he sets these processes against the backdrop of the social world of the New Testament, looking for both similarities and differences that will shed light on corporate decision-making in first-century churches.

This volume is not the final word on all questions of church order and polity. Rather, it focuses upon only one, rather narrow issue. It is an issue that affects several other questions, however, and needs to be taken into account in many debates about church organization.

The book that you hold in your hand is a patient, careful examination of the evidence concerning corporate decision-making in the New Testament. It is charitable in tone, but definite in its conclusions. I know of no other work that treats this topic in such detail, and I believe that Jeff Brown's book will be of significant help to any church leader or anyone who wants to be a church leader.

Kevin Bauder, Plymouth, Minnesota