Introduction

FOR CENTURIES, CHURCH ORDER has been a recurrent topic of discussion and debate among Christian theologians. About the time of John the apostle's death, Clement of Rome wrote a letter to the church in Corinth, in which he devoted significant space to the subject of polity. A generation later, church government was a persistent topic in the letters of Ignatius of Antioch. Voicing differences about church order never really stopped throughout church history. At times, writing about and acting out one's views could be costly. Henry Barrow, a devout and orthodox Christian in the sixteenth century, ended his days in an English dungeon for this very reason. But the debate about church order has itself been a factor in the emergence of religious freedom, so widely enjoyed in many parts of the world.

Despite the increased activity and affirmation of ecumenical efforts, the church order debate shows no signs of diminishing. From the Protestant side, books such as C. K. Barrett's *Church, Ministry, and Sacraments in the New Testament*, Kevin Giles's *Patterns of Ministry among the First Christians*, Alastair Campbell's *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, and Andrew Clarke's *Serve the Community of the Church* are fresh approaches to an investigation of church order as it appears in the New Testament. From the Roman Catholic perspective, the subject of church order has been variously debated by Hans Küng in *Die Kirche* and Edward Schillebeeckx in *Church: The Human Story of God*, as well as by James Tunstead Burtchaell in *From Synagogue to Church,* Avery Dulles in *Models of the Church*, and Joseph Ratzinger and Hans Maier in *Demokratie in der Kirche*. Among Evangelicals, there is no lack of interest in the subject, evidenced by the publications of *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch, *Who Rules the Church?* by Gerald P. Cowen, *Elders and Leaders* by Gene Getz, *Perspectives on Church Government* by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, and *Who Runs the Church?* by Paul Engle and Steven Cowan. Most of these studies are not restatements of a particular theological position on church

order; rather, they are investigations with the Bible in hand and can be read without the impression that one has heard it all before.[1]

Why then another book on church order? For this reason: recent discussions of the subject have dealt primarily with defining the role of church leaders. In addition to the works mentioned above, note the following dissertations: Leonard Hillstrom's "The New Testament Teaching on the Office, Qualifications, Appointment, and Work of the Elders," John Andrewartha's "The New Testament Teaching of Church Elders," Ronald Minton's "Biblical Perspectives on Elders," Alastair Campbell's *The Elders: Seniority within Earliest Christianity*, David A. Mappes' "Expositional Problems Related to the Eldership in 1 Timothy 5:17–25," and Benjamin L. Merkle's *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*.[2] An exploration of the American Theological Library Association's search engine yields at least two hundred journal or magazine articles or M.A. theses written on the subject of elders during the last half-century.[3] Although the topic of church order is a popular one, an investigation of the specific interaction between congregations and their leaders is rarely done. A new investigation of the New Testament passages that relate strictly to group decision-making is overdue.[4]

Purpose

This study will deal with one aspect of church order: namely, how the church of the New Testament practiced corporate decision-making. Many

1. Complete information about the books listed here, including dates, are found in the Bibliography. In each section of the text, they are listed in in their chronological order.

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3. One should not conclude that the subject has been over-researched. Journals which address church order represent various theological viewpoints and confessions, all of which have a stake in what the investigation of various Bible passages on the subject yields.

4. One dissertation deals extensively with passages portraying congregational decision-making: Vernon Doerksen's Th.D. dissertation, "An Inductive Study of the Development of Church Organization in the New Testament." The work, however, examines the entire concept of church order, and does not focus on the specific issue of group decision-making. Furthermore, it does not deal significantly with the social world of the New Testament, including concepts of the house church, voluntary associations in the Hellenistic world, the relation of the order of the synagogue to church order, or the understanding of group decision-making in the Jewish culture during the first century CE.

instances of group decisions in the New Testament exist, particularly in the book of Acts. The aim of the study will be to demonstrate the phenomenon of corporate decision-making exegetically, helped by the examination of common practices of decision-making in the culture of those times, commonly referred to as "the social world of the New Testament." The investigation will also attempt to understand how corporate decisions were made and the parameters they set, as well as the types of things church groups decided upon and those they did not. This study will also interact with the viewpoints of most major confessions of modern western Christianity on the subject of church order.

Limitations

As decision-making by church groups as found in the New Testament is examined, of necessity, the study will need to include the scriptural identity of apostles, elders, deacons and other church leaders, since the subject of group decision-making intersects with the activity and authority of church leaders. The work will, however, only give enough attention to these identifications so that analysis and discussion of the specific passages is understandable. In other words, although some discussion of authority of leaders is also necessary in order to understand how groups and leaders in the early church interacted, there will be no sections arguing for a particular view of what constitutes an apostle, an elder, or a deacon. In addition, confessional viewpoints about hierarchy, synodal structure, councils, and so forth will be brought into the discussion, since this is unavoidable in the historical argument; however, the book will not argue extensively about which of these confessional structures is biblical. Instead, it will seek to define from the New Testament itself the church's decision-making structures and discover how they functioned.

Method

After a survey of the history of the church order debate, the book will deal with the historical and cultural background for the writing of the New Testament passages that portray corporate decision-making. In particular, it will examine political, economic, and religious institutions that formed the background for the phenomenon of corporate decision-making. New

Testament churches used practices similar or identical to surrounding societies to arrive at their decisions. But their church order was also highly influenced by the statements of their Lord Jesus and the teachings of his apostles. The entire exercise of studying group decision-making in the early church is of necessity embedded in the theology of the New Testament. With this background, the book will examine the New Testament passages. Finally, the exegetical conclusions will be evaluated in light of how Christian writers in the first centuries after the apostles viewed church decision-making.

In the church order debate, many writers have called into question the historical accuracy of the book of Acts. Likewise the pastoral epistles have been ascribed to someone other than Paul, who supposedly wrote after the time of Paul's death. Furthermore, Christianity is portrayed by some writers as a conglomerate of multiple Christianities (for example, Matthean, Johannine, Pauline). The effect this has on the church order debate is to make many things indeterminate, since the New Testament statements bearing on them are taken to be inaccurate, non-historical, or non-authoritative. The weaknesses in these arguments are not hard to identify and will be mentioned in chapters 3 and 4. This study will take the approach of the composite picture of church order in the New Testament (that is, all that the New Testament has to say about the chosen portion of church order). This comprehensive approach will give the most accurate picture of what the New Testament has to say regarding corporate decision-making.

This book has been written as a theological work, not as a work of social history. Thus, theological terminology will appear frequently. The reader will notice that the longest chapter of this work is the exegetical examination of passages related to group decision-making. Any freshman theology student knows that good theology is based on good exegesis. That has been the aim of this treatise: theology based on serious examination of the relevant texts.

Positions of the Writer

The author does not aim to restate or to defend any particular theory of church order. Rather, the work will be limited to determining what the New Testament establishes about corporate decision-making.

Current views on church order can be narrowed down to three. The first view holds that there is no clear definition of church order in the New

Testament; it was developed at a later date and is subject to change. The second asserts that there is a basic and incomplete church order in the New Testament, resulting in the later development of the authoritative Christian church order. The third maintains that the full concept of church order from Christ and his apostles is contained in the New Testament. This view holds that, although other organization is allowed, it may never eliminate, restrict, or redefine the original New Testament church order. The final view is assumed throughout this study.

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