

Theocracy or Monarchy?

some thoughts on the local church by

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PURPOSE

*To present some of the theoretical **bases** for arguing in favour of local church autonomy, in contrast with the growing bureaucratisation of the pentecostal movement in Australia*

METHOD

To show that the biblical bias is toward a “family” concept of the local church, with both the local church and the group of churches functioning as a “theocracy”. Therefore we should resist the constant pressure to turn the church into a copy of a secular organisation.

ARGUMENT

How should we view the local church, and also the company of churches? There are two major alternatives –

A SODALITY

Those who embrace a *sodality* model of the church, see it primarily as a fellowship, a brotherhood, or a family; that is, a group of people who are united on the basis of personal relationship, not by membership in an organisation.

This stands in contrast with the bureaucratic nature of

A MODALITY

When a church (or group of churches) embraces a *modality* model, it begins to behave more like a secular organisation than a Christian family. Structure then becomes more important than relationship, brotherhood is turned into membership, and the church becomes increasingly dependent upon secular techniques of management. A *modal* church expects its growth to come, not so much from natural generation (as in a family), but from entrepreneurial methods, promotions, strategies, and the like.

Can the two mix? Imagine a well-run, happy, and flourishing family. We know that it must have *some* structure; yet surely, any attempt to impose a predominantly modal structure upon that family would dramatically change its character, or even destroy it. Can membership in a family be reduced to adherence to a set of rules? Can a family survive the rigidity of corporate structures, the heavy hand of bureaucracy? Could such a company of people still be called, in any meaningful sense, a “*family*”?

Therefore, I argue that the local church should cling to the following principles –

(I) LIBERTY

- **Since the very beginning**, ecclesiastical leaders have been scandalised by the quality of freedom that is inherent in the gospel, and have sought, if not to eradicate, at least to restrain it. Paul fought furiously against this trend. He did recognise the potential for abuse that always resides in liberty (“*shall we sin more, so that grace may abound?*”), yet still he refused to surrender one iota of it (“*stand fast in the freedom for which Christ has made you free*”).
- **In the main, however**, church leaders do not trust, and never have trusted, the people of God, nor do denominations trust their pastors. Hence the authorities feel impelled to set their dogmas in concrete, and to regulate firmly the lives and choices both of the people and their pastors, making ever more rules to cover every imaginable contingency and every possible abuse. The end result is a stifling conformity, far removed from the sometimes chaotic but always sparkling life that marks God’s creation worldwide.
- **The gospel shows how much risk** the Lord is willing to take that his grace may be abused. He refuses to tie a ball and chain of regulation around the souls of his

children. He trusts us, in the end, to get it right, so long as we remain in fellowship with him, and are led by the Spirit. And if we fail to do so? Then the Father tolerates our follies, seldom intervenes, and calmly continues to ensure that his ultimate purpose is done - if not by us, then by another. If God is not afraid of freedom, being willing to accept its pains for the sake of its benefits, why do we fear it so?

- **It is difficult for me to see** on what *biblical* or *spiritual* grounds I should yield authority over my ministry (and even less over my life) to an *elected* executive. At least some members of most of our councils hold office simply because no one else wants the job. Seldom does the membership of our various ruling bodies embrace only the most biblically informed, the most mature, the most spiritually capable, the wisest, or the best choices from among our pastors. Further, how can I put myself without scruple under the authority of an executive whose membership (say) three years hence, is must be unknown to me? Shall I say *now* that this anonymous group will *then* hold the right to judge my morals, my doctrines, my ethics, my ministry practice? I cannot do so. I will yield to no *elected* body any more *spiritual* authority than it reasonably and/or biblically deserves (Acts 5:29).

(II) CORPORALITY

- **The church should be *corporeal* not *institutional*.** Therefore we should resist the pressures toward institutional conformity that come both from within the local church, and from denominational authorities. Those pressures can lead to two errors, which are often observed –
 - the leaders of the church become *maintainers of an institution* instead of *proclaimers of the faith*; and
 - in the scramble for statistical success the importance of sound doctrine and godly character becomes undermined.
- **Doctrinal *diversity* should be respected**; but of course doctrinal *heresy* cannot be allowed, nor ungodly *conduct*. Both faults must be disciplined, whatever that might cost in empty chairs.

- **We need a strong proclamation of Christ**, matched by a humble recognition that our knowledge of the gospel is less than perfect (1 C0 13:9,12); *therefore we need organisational openness*, so that we may learn from others more of the beauty of Christ
 - yet institutions are innately blind; they have too much privilege and status to defend to allow any admission of error; they prefer organisational tightness rather than openness.

(III) AUTONOMY

Here we come to a matter upon which sincere people have diverse opinions: should the local church be autonomous, and if so, how far does that autonomy extend?

- Some argue that each local church is a complete unit and should function with complete autonomy, even to the point of ordaining its own pastors, and that no authority outside the local church has any right to interfere with it. Others argue that each local church must be in communion with other churches of like mind, and that the company of churches must be under the authority of a “bishop” or some organisational equivalent to a bishop.
- Another way to express the argument, is to ask whether each congregation possesses complete authority within itself, or should there be other levels of authority, at regional, state, and even national levels. That is, how much central control should there be over the group of churches within a particular fellowship or denomination?
- Still another way to approach the matter is to ask, “Which model should the church follow: one that is bureaucratic; or theocratic?”

This study is not the place to open up a wide-ranging discussion of the issue; instead, I want to express the problem in a special way, as something to think about further, using Israel as an example –

- Under the judges, culminating in Samuel, Israel functioned as a theocracy, that is, a people whose ruler was Yahweh. Samuel represents a *theocratic, de-centralised, and minimalist* approach to authority –
 - for more than 20 years the nation flourished under Samuel's guidance (1 Sa 7), enjoying a great spiritual renewal, and prospering politically and commercially; it was a fine demonstration of how well the theocracy could work.
- However, the people became discontented, and they began to demand a king (1 Sa 8:1-5). The ostensible reason was the failure of Samuel's sons to follow their father's example, but the real reason was their desire “*to be like all the other nations*” - which was a pathway to inevitable ruin (Ex 23:23-24; Le 18:1-4; De 4:5-8; 18:9-14; etc)
 - after being instructed by God to do so, Samuel yielded to their demands, but warned that they were changing one set of problems for another far worse (1 Sa 8:10-18; and cp. De 17:14-20)
 - for his part, the Lord agreed to delegate his authority to a king and to work through that monarch
 - this partnership with God enabled some of the kings to achieve such great things that they became worthy types of the King of kings (e.g. David)
 - but the earthly monarchy still remained less than God's ideal, which was always toward a true theocracy in which he himself was the sole monarch.
- From that time on there remained a tension in Israel between (*a*) a prophetic, vocational leadership, and (*b*) a civil authority linked with a dynastic monarchy.
- That tension was never resolved; the question was asked but never finally answered: which is better, *a pure theocracy expressed through a prophetic voice, or a modified theocracy expressed through a king?* (Note

the last verse of *Judges*, but also note the corrupt lives of many of the kings.) Plainly, both systems had their *benefits*.

- Yet one of the main perils that has beset all human authority across the centuries, is the corrupting influence of power, which leads ruler(s) to usurp the governance of God, so that the people of God are no longer free to obey him, even if his voice can still be heard.
- In the end, there was never any doubt that the *divine* preference lay with a full theocracy, but at the national level there remained a constant ambivalence, which sometimes descended into fierce conflict between prophetic and dynastic authority
 - thus even the story of Samuel veers between disapproval and approval of the monarchy: *disapproval* (1 Sa 8); *approval* (1 Sa 9; 10:1-16); *disapproval* (1 Sa 10:17-27); and so on.
- Even the story of the ideal theocratic king, David, displays the gradual abandonment of a minimalist, prophetic quality in the monarchy
 - increasingly it took on the character of a sedentary bureaucracy (with its sorry aftermath in the seduction of Bathsheba and the murder of her husband, 2 Sa 12:10)
 - note that, significantly, it was the *prophet* Nathan who was sent by God to expose the king's sin and to pronounce judgment upon him; note also Joab's protest against the census (2 Sa 24:3), which was a sign of the growing complexity of the civil administration.
- This ongoing tension between the prophet and the prince is exemplified in the writings of the prophets, who often rebuked the prince along with his allies in the priesthood. The oracles of the prophets kept before the people the divine ideal of an absolute theocracy, where God himself is the sole King

- cp. for example Isaiah's denunciations of the temple rituals and sabbaths (Is 1:10-15), which would hardly have endeared him to the priests!
- and note also the differences between *Kings* and *Chronicles*, where the former reflects the prophetic viewpoint, while the latter echoes the voice of the temple, speaking for the priesthood and the royal family.
- **The point of this discussion** is that the experience of the church parallels that of Israel; we face the same choice they did, between a **theocracy** or a **bureaucracy**
 - the crossover from one to the other occurred early in church history, for by the middle of the second century rule by apostles and prophets was rapidly being replaced by a monarchical episcopacy
 - and the process continues in our time: movements that begin in revival, headed by charismatic leaders, within a few decades seem always to move toward an ever more centralised bureaucratic control
 - and they do so mostly for the same reason that motivated ancient Israel, and later, the church Fathers: they feel unsafe under the rule of an invisible Sovereign, and wish for the apparent security of a visible governor.
- **Is that a wrong choice?** Note the following:
 - In its introduction to the book of *Numbers* the NRSV says: “*These narratives do not idealise the wilderness period. Again and again the people complained, sensing the contrast between the relative security of slavery in Egypt and the precarious insecurity of freedom in the wilderness*”

- the same tension occurs (as I have already mentioned) in the writings of Paul (notably *Romans* and *Galatians*), where the apostle insists that we should “*stand fast in the liberty for which Christ has made us free*”, while the people always preferred to lapse back into the “bondage” of legalism – that is, a life based upon rules and upon established authority structures.
- It is worth repeating that the stunning freedom offered in the gospel has always been scandalous, and as frightening to the leaders of the churches as it has been to the people themselves; so from the very beginning both pulpit and pew have preferred to establish comfortable norms to protect themselves from all risk of aberrant behaviour
 - there is always the feeling that God cannot really be trusted to care of his church, and that we ourselves must provide adequate safeguards, which we do by erecting an ever more complex hierarchy of bureaucrats, rules, regulations, standards, levels of ordination, and the like.
- **Hence across the centuries** there has been a continuous quarrel between those who argue
 1. that loyalty to the gospel principle of liberty demands the full autonomy of the local church, and as little restriction as possible upon the freedom of choice enjoyed by each Christian; and those who argue
 2. that the leaders of the churches have both a divine mandate and an inescapable responsibility concerning the safety and well-being not only of each local church but also of the collection of churches.
- **Which then is the correct view:** that which tends toward a divine theocracy or that which tends toward a human monarchy?
 - there seems to be the same ambivalence in the NT as in the OT; that is, no clear guidance is provided as to who should have final authority

in a local church, or among the company of churches, whether it should be the apostle/prophet, or the bishop

- as I have mentioned, historically, within 100 years or so of the Day of Pentecost, the early church mostly opted for the bishop, and set about suppressing and banishing the kind of charismatic leadership embodied in apostles and prophets.
- **God seems to be willing to accommodate himself** to this change, just as he was willing to accept Israel's demand for a king; and he is willing to work powerfully through the new leadership, just as he worked through Israel's better kings
 - note what great things were wrought by many of Israel's kings, beginning with Saul himself (1 Sa 14:47; 2 Sa 1:19,23-24); indeed, it could be argued that such triumphs could not have been achieved without a monarch's leadership
 - nonetheless the price paid by the nation was appalling, for their kings, who had led them to splendour, also carried them down into ruin, which always seems to be the eventual outcome of an abandonment of the theocratic principle, whether in the nation or in the church.
- **In the case of the church**, then, it seems that we can say three things:

1. God has provided (or is willing to provide) the church with enough charismatic leadership to enable it to function as Israel did during Samuel's prime; that is, to flourish under a theocratic, decentralised, minimalist authority.

2. Such a regime can be sustained successfully only in an environment of genuine spiritual renewal, strong faith in God, and unwavering trust in the efficacy of the divine government.

3. Because the people of God are frequently unable to maintain such a high level of spiritual maturity they begin to demand a modified theocracy, in which the invisible rule of God from heaven is represented by a visible ruler on earth. The end result is certain: authority

becomes increasingly located in some central council or bureaucracy. Scripture seems to accept, with reluctance, that this change may be, if not desirable, at least inevitable.

- *Yet one cannot help wistfully yearning that God alone might be King!*

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