

Government Structure in the New Testament Church

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Often during the forty-plus years that I've been in the Church of God a great deal of stress has been laid on teaching about government. If you've been in the Church for some years, you know from experience that under Herbert Armstrong's leadership the ministry taught that the government of God exists in the Church, and that offices within the Church are hierarchical and that the ministers bear authority.

Some came to see that authority as absolute, and have behaved as though the teachings of those in the highest offices in the Church were to be accepted and followed no matter how contradictory to what the Scriptures themselves actually teach. On the other hand, some have understood that slavishly and blindly following the teachings of those in authority as they changed over the years is at conflict with a sound understanding of Scripture. In the wake of misuse of authority by some ministers over the years and ultimately a massive apostasy perpetrated by the highest leaders of the Church, respect for the ministry in the minds of many has eroded and been replaced by suspicion, distrust and perhaps even contempt. Not only that, but at least partly as a result of apostasy, schism and perhaps other problems within the Church, many have developed a suspicion and distrust of government itself. And a revulsion at the idea of authority within government has taken firm root among people who are or were at one time members of the Church of God.

Among many others of our brethren, not associated with the Living Church of God corporate body, a complete rejection of the principle of hierarchical government and ministerial authority has occurred. Some believe that the members should rule the churches through voting. Some think that no unified organization is needed in the Church, that each member should be independent of any hierarchy. Some have asserted that no one person should be in authority over the Church as a whole, but rather it should be governed by a board or a council. Among the hundreds of Church of God fellowships existing today there is a great deal of confusion about Church government.

How should the government of the Church of God be structured? How was it structured in the apostolic Church of the New Testament? That's what I want to examine in today's sermon.

What is the significance of government from the perspective of the Bible? Mr. Herbert Armstrong correctly observed and taught that government is at the core of the gospel. It is the fundamental issue in man's relation to God. The Scriptures reveal, and history teaches, that government can be mankind's worst enemy. The Scriptures also reveal that the right government, God's government, can be the most powerful force for good imaginable.

Why is the world in such a mess today? Why is history a saga of bloodshed, war, oppression, injustice, and misery for the vast bulk of mankind? The answer can be given in one word: government. What will it take to solve mankind's problems? What is required for humans to achieve their ultimate destiny? That can also be answered in one word: government.

When Satan rebelled against God and a war ensued resulting in his being cast out of heaven back down to the earth, the issue was government (Isaiah 14:12-14; Ezekiel 28:12-17). In the garden of Eden, when Adam and Eve sinned, the issue was government. When God brought the Flood upon the world in the days of Noah the issue was government. When God led Israel

out of Egypt the issue was government. When God gave Israel the law at Mount Sinai, the issue was government. When God cursed the nations of Israel and Judah, and sold them into captivity, the issue was government.

The true gospel message is a message about government. It is a message about salvation. Yes. But it's more than that. It's a message about how salvation is going to be accomplished through the government, or the Kingdom, of God. It's a message about Christ crucified. Yes. It's a message about forgiveness of sin. Yes. But it's much more besides. The true significance of Christ crucifixion, the true significance of God's forgiveness of sin, can be correctly understood only within the larger context of God's rule over mankind. The context of his Kingdom, his government.

Jesus preached the gospel of the Kingdom of God (Mt. 4:23; Mark 1:14-15). His message was preeminently a message about government. His teachings were focused on government. His acts were demonstrations of authority and of the power of government for good. He was crucified because he was seen as a threat to the government that then existed in Palestine.

Now as they heard these things, He spoke another parable, because He was near Jerusalem and because they thought the kingdom of God would appear immediately. Therefore He said: "A certain nobleman went into a far country to receive for himself a kingdom and to return. So he called ten of his servants, delivered to them ten minas, and said to them, 'Do business till I come.' But his citizens hated him, and sent a delegation after him, saying, 'We will not have this [man] to reign over us.'" (Luke 19:11-14).

Those who reject "one man rule" may not realize it, but they are in principle rejecting Christ.

The very name Jesus Christ reflects offices of government (the full meaning of the name Jesus Christ is Eternal Savior, King and High Priest). (See Matthew 26:62-65; John 18:33-37; 19:1-3, 7-8, 14-16; Mark 15:9-15; Matthew 27:37). Christ is a King waiting to assume complete and active authority over the kings of the earth (Isaiah 9:2-7; Luke 1:31-33; Daniel 7:9-14, 27; Revelation 11:15-18; 19:11-16). The saints are to rule with him, sharing some of his authority (Luke 19:12-17; Matthew 25:31-34; Revelation 2:26-27; 20:4). If we are to administer God's government in the world ahead should we not be now learning by experience how to live within that government?

A basic question in a discussion of the structure of Church government in the New Testament is as follows: Was the government administered by individuals selected to an office of authority by God, or was the government administered through appointed or elected councils or boards making decisions and overruling individual leaders that God had commissioned to preach the gospel? It will be useful to consider a number of Scriptures, which taken together will reveal a clear answer.

Luke 22:24-30. Here Jesus taught that his ministers are to have an attitude of service, not lording it over people in an oppressive way as Gentile rulers often do. But the proper exercise of authority is implicit in Jesus' words. Verse 26, "...let...he [among you] who governs [Greek:

hegeomai, lead, rule, command, have authority over] [be] as he who serves.” This statement of Jesus shows clearly that there were to be government and individuals bearing rule in God’s Church. He speaks of giving his disciples later a kingdom, thrones and the power to judge or govern the twelve tribes of Israel (verses 29-30). Jesus, though he came as a servant, wielded authority (Mark 1:22, 27; Matthew 28:18; John 5:27). He gives authority to those he appoints to preach the gospel (Luke 9:1-2; Mark 13:34).

Luke 20:9-14. Note that it is God who sends the servants. He sends “a servant,” not a board. The “vinedressers,” who had organized themselves into a council in Jesus’ day, beat the servant, and then another, and finally they killed the heir. It was the council of the Jews’ ecclesiastical leaders who sought false testimony against Jesus and condemned him to death (Matthew 26:59-66). This wasn’t written just for historical interest. The lesson is for us, too. In general, Israel, and the world, continue to reject the servant God sends at any given time and place. Will we also?

Jesus said, “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me. He who receives a prophet in the name of a prophet shall receive a prophet’s reward. And he who receives a righteous man in the name of a righteous man shall receive a righteous man’s reward” (Matthew 10:40-41). Could those who reject the principle of a single leader being set over a work be rejecting one God is using, and hence perhaps rejecting Christ himself (Luke 10:16)? Jesus said, “Most assuredly, I say to you, he who receives whomever I send receives Me; and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me” (John 13:20).

Jesus warned his apostles, “But beware of men, for they will deliver you up to councils and scourge you in their synagogues. You will be brought before governors and kings for My sake, as a testimony to them and to the Gentiles” (Matthew 10:17-18). But we are warned, “And whoever will not receive you nor hear your words, when you depart from that house or city, shake off the dust from your feet. Assuredly, I say to you, it will be more tolerable for the land of Sodom and Gomorrah in the day of judgment than for that city!” (Matthew 10:14-15).

Acts 1:15-26. Peter immediately assumes leadership of the Church after Jesus ascended into heaven, and proposes to the assembled disciples that the apostolic office of Judas Iscariot be filled, “for he was numbered with us and obtained a part in this ministry” (Acts 1:17). Peter went on to explain how certain Psalms applied prophetically to the circumstances at hand. Then he delineated the qualifications required of the one who would replace Judas among the twelve: (1) It must be someone who had been among Jesus’ disciples from the beginning of his ministry (Acts 1:21-22; John 15:27). (2) It must be also one who had witnessed the resurrection, as had the eleven (Acts 1:22; 2:32).

Two men meeting these qualifications were identified and stood before the group. As Homer Kent, Jr. remarks in his commentary on Acts, “If the group felt qualified to narrow the choice to two, why not the final one? In all probability, therefore, they were the only ones who qualified, and thus the congregation did not really do any choosing at all” (*Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 28). Then prayer was made that God would make known “which of these two You [God] have chosen” (Acts 1:24). Then lots were cast after Old Testament example (Leviticus 16:8; Numbers 33:54; 1 Samuel 14:41-42; 1 Chronicles 24:5, 31; 25:8; 26:13; Proverbs 16:33; 18:18). The procedure is

described as follows: “It was not a vote. Usually stones were used, either a white and a black one, or stones on which the names of the candidates were written” (*Jerusalem to Rome*, p. 28).

After the Holy Spirit was given, there’s no evidence that lots were cast to make similar decisions in the Church. Why didn’t Jesus simply choose whom he wanted to replace Judas before he ascended to heaven? Perhaps in order to allow Peter to begin exercising his leadership role in just such a way (see below for more about Peter).

The fact that Peter involved others in the church in the procedure, without voting and politics, didn’t make him less of a leader. Notice, “Moreover David and the captains of the army separated for the service [some] of the sons of Asaph, of Heman, and of Jeduthun...” (1 Chronicles 25:1). Because David involved others in this sort of decision at times didn’t mean he wasn’t the king. Nor did it give his captains the right to overthrow him if his decisions didn’t please them.

Acts 13:1-4. This example is about as close as any in the New Testament comes to decision making in the Church of God by a council or collegial group. What we find here is God, through the Holy Spirit, apparently revealed jointly to a group of leaders at Antioch that it was time for Barnabas and Saul to be sent out to proclaim the gospel among the Gentiles. But the selection of Saul (or Paul) to this calling had long since been made by God and revealed to the Church (Acts 9:15). Barnabas had been sent from Jerusalem to pastor the church at Antioch and had become a companion of Paul (Acts 11:22-26). So what we have in Acts 13:1-4 appears to be nothing more than a common realization, prompted by the Holy Spirit, among leaders in the church at Antioch that it was time to move forward with the work of preaching the gospel to the Gentiles, under the leadership of Barnabas, who at that time was the senior and more experienced of the two, and Paul, as God had appointed. Later on Paul took over the leadership role in this phase of the work, and retained it until his death (Galatians 2:7). Subsequent Scriptures show indubitably that the group of leaders at Antioch was not a formal decision making body. They clearly did not interfere with the work of Paul and Barnabas after they were sent out, and exercised no authority over their decisions.

Acts 14:23. Paul and Barnabas, having raised up churches in Asia Minor, “appointed elders in every church.” They did the appointing, not a council or board.

Acts 15:36-40. Having themselves decided (no council or board involved) to again leave Antioch and take another trip through Asia minor, Barnabas wanted to take Mark, but Paul was opposed. Note that while they clearly discussed this matter between themselves, no council or board was involved in the decision. Each of the apostles chose his companion worker unilaterally, not through a vote of a board.

Acts 16:1-3. Paul chose Timothy to add to his company. Paul evidently considered the fact that Timothy was “well spoken of” by the brethren who knew him, but it’s clear Paul made the decision.

Acts 17:15. Having been separated from his assistants because of life threatening circumstances, Paul gave a command (Greek: *entole*, order, command) for Silas and Timothy to come to him. The command was transmitted to the two, who had remained in Berea, by the brethren who had

conducted Paul to Athens for his safety. But there was no voting on the matter. The fact that Paul issued such a command indicates that he had full authority over personnel and administrative decisions affecting the work which he led.

Acts 21:4, 12-14. Brethren warned Paul and pleaded for him not to go to Jerusalem, but he made the decision to go anyway. Had a board been involved, it seems likely they would have voted to forbid Paul to go to Jerusalem at that time. Instead, when Paul “would not be persuaded, we ceased, saying, ‘The will of the Lord be done’” (Acts 21:14).

Romans 1:5. Paul received his apostleship through Jesus Christ, not men. Compare Acts 9:15; Galatians 1:1; Ephesians 3:7-8; 1 Timothy 1:1, 12.

1 Corinthians 4:1-2. It is required of stewards that they be found faithful, and will be judged of the Lord. Nevertheless, we must make sure that the ministers we support are faithful to God and to His Word. We will not find perfect ministers. But we must find an overall fidelity to God and to his Word. We are given many warnings in Scripture to avoid following false ministers (for example, Deuteronomy 13:1-4; Isaiah 8:20; Matthew 7:15-16; 24:4-5; Acts 20:29-32; 2 Corinthians 11:1-15; 2 Thessalonians 2; 1 Timothy 4:1-2; 2 Timothy 3; 2 Peter 2; 1 John 4:1-3; 2 John 7-11; Revelation 14:8-10).

Paul, however, like virtually every leader God has used, like Jesus Christ himself, was judged unjustly, being accused and vilified by detractors full of contentiousness, wrath, envy, covetousness, self-will, and vanity (compare 1 Corinthians 4:18-19; 2 Corinthians 12:20; 2 Peter 2; Jude 8, 12-19). His authority was questioned, with the suggestion that a real apostle would have used the tithes from the Corinthian church (2 Corinthians 11:7-8; 13:3). He was judged unfit and disqualified by his detractors (2 Corinthians 13:7). He was subjected to personal insults, much like Jesus was and Dr. Meredith has been, as his detractors said, “...his letters...are weighty and powerful, but his bodily presence is weak, and his speech contemptible” (2 Corinthians 10:10). Yes, they were suggesting, he is not really as he appears. And, they said, he lied, saying he would come to them (1 Corinthians 4:19), but he didn’t keep his word. He had to explain he had delayed his coming out of concern for them, giving them space to repent so as to avoid having to deal with them in severity (2 Corinthians 1:15-23).

Yet through it all, Paul, though plainly labeling his enemies “false apostles” and “deceitful workers” (2 Corinthians 11:13), and sins for what they are, remained gentle. “Being reviled,” he said, “we bless; being persecuted, we endure it; being defamed, we entreat. We have been made the offscouring of all things until now” (1 Corinthians 4:12-13).

And Paul, though vilified, was not fearful of exercising his authority, even forcefully to the extent necessary. Paul, not a board, sent Timothy to help correct the problems in Corinth (1 Corinthians 4:17). And he warned the Corinthians that if necessary he would come and deal with the problems with all the power he could exercise in his office (1 Corinthians 4:19; 2 Corinthians 10:8-11; 12:20-21; 13:1-2, 10).

1 Corinthians 5:1-5, 12-13. Paul, having received reliable information about an open sin being committed by a member of the Church, made the decision regarding the offender and instructed

the church to disfellowship him. It was not done by vote of a board or council. Later Paul instructed the members to receive the man, who had repented, back into their fellowship (2 Corinthians 2:5-9).

1 Corinthians 7:17. Paul issues a command applying to all the churches. The verse begins with “*ei me,*” meaning if not, or except that. As a qualification to what he said in verse 15 allowing divorce in a specific circumstance, he issues a general principle to be followed in the churches. Its immediate application is to marriage, the subject of the chapter, illustrated in its application in the matters of circumcision and of slavery. The general idea is to accept certain circumstances of life relating to birth and social condition as God has called you and make the best of them. Keep your priorities straight. Put first things first. What really matters, Paul is emphasizing, is not being married or unmarried, circumcised or uncircumcised, slave or free, but obedience to God’s commandments.

The important point for us in the present discussion is that Paul had the authority to state the principle he is illustrating as a command. “I ordain” is *diatasso*, meaning to order, direct, command or to arrange. A. T. Robertson remarks in commenting on Paul’s use of this term, “Paul is conscious of authoritative leadership as the apostle of Christ to the Gentiles” (*Word Pictures in the New Testament*).

1 Corinthians 10:10. Paul warns the Church not to murmur (Greek: *gonguzo*, grumble, confer secretly, complain — implies rebellious complaining and/or conspiring against one in authority). Notice that the experiences of the “Church [*ekklesia*] in the wilderness” (Acts 7:38, KJV) — Israel in the wilderness — became our examples [Greek: *tupoi emon*, our types] (1 Corinthians 10:6). Let no one tell you any differently.

In Exodus 16 we find an example of what Paul warns us to avoid. “Then the whole congregation of the children of Israel complained [murmured, KJV] against Moses and Aaron in the wilderness” (Exodus 16:2). Israel lacked faith in God’s leadership, and hence in the faithful human leaders God had placed in positions of authority to serve them. They could not look beyond fallible humans to see God’s hand in what was being done. While their accusations were ostensibly aimed at Moses and Aaron, their rebellion was really against God (compare Psalm 78:17-19). “And in the morning you shall see the glory of the Lord; for He hears your complaints against the Lord. But what [are] we, that you complain against us?’ Also Moses said, ‘[This] [shall] [be] [seen] when the Lord gives you meat to eat in the evening, and in the morning bread to the full; for the Lord hears your complaints which you make against Him. And what [are] we? Your complaints [are] not against us but against the Lord’” (Exodus 16:7-8).

This is a lesson in government that applies to the New Testament Church. It’s a warning to avoid blindly following the faithless, especially in rebellion against faithful men in authority under God. It teaches us to have faith that God will lead his faithful *in accordance with his word and promises*.

1 Corinthians 16:1. Paul gave orders (Greek: *diatasso*, command, order, arrange, ordain, etc.) to the churches directing how the collection for the saints was to be administered. Again, this clearly shows that Paul — not a board — had full administrative authority over the Gentile

churches which was his responsibility to exercise faithfully before God. In verse 3, Paul sought the counsel of the church in selecting someone to send with the offering, but he would do the sending. This is how the principle of a “multitude of counselors” (Proverbs 11:14) was applied in this situation. It did not mean that everyone was equal in authority to Paul. By seeking counsel, Paul did not surrender his decision making authority. Paul later comments that he had sent Titus, along with the brother approved by the Macedonian churches, and another unnamed brother to receive the Corinthian contribution to the offering being sent by the churches to Jerusalem (compare 2 Corinthians 8:6, 16-24; 12:17-18). Paul’s reason for having someone whom the local churches had jointly recommended to accompany him with the gift to Jerusalem was to avoid any accusation of misappropriation that may be aimed against him by his detractors (2 Corinthians 8:19-20).

1 Corinthians 16:15-16. Paul instructed the brethren to submit to the ministry working with him.

2 Corinthians 10:8. Paul’s “boasting” or “glorying” in his authority (possibly referring to an accusation by his detractors) would not leave him ashamed. The idea is that his authority was genuine, and he possessed the power to back up with action his words asserting his authority. He pointed out, however, that the purpose for which Christ empowered him with authority was for their edification. A faithful minister will seek to exercise his authority accordingly. Yet, Paul warned them that if necessary he would use his authority to discipline (1 Corinthians 4:21; 2 Corinthians 10:2, 6, 11; 13:10). We do not find in the discussion any suggestion that the problems would be submitted to a board or council for resolution. Paul himself clearly had the authority to act as necessary in the best interests of the Church.

Titus 1:5. Titus was given a command to set things in order and appoint elders in every city over which he had jurisdiction in the Church. He was exercising an office comparable to that of an evangelist or regional pastor. Titus was to teach, exhort, rebuke with all authority (2:15). It’s clear that he, not a board or council, exercised the authority necessary to administer (under Paul’s supervision) the churches he had been given charge over.

Hebrews 13:7-9. Members are instructed to follow the lead of their ministers, not blindly, but considering the outcome of their conduct. This requires an assessment of where your leaders are leading you. Members are warned not to be taken in by diverse and alien doctrines, i.e., doctrines which are not Biblically sound. No one and no device — including boards or councils — can relieve individual members of their responsibility to assess their leaders, and reject those who are not genuine. No member of God’s Church is obligated to follow unfaithful leaders, and must not if the member aims to remain on track spiritually. But if a minister is judged faithful, members are instructed to “obey those who have rule over you, and be submissive” (verse 17). Ministers have the authority within the Church to do their jobs. No more and no less. They do not have the authority to teach false doctrine, steal the members’ belongings, or violate their trust and God’s law in other ways. But members are obligated to respect the authority of a minister’s office, and through their submission to that authority, allow the faithful minister to do his job.

2 Peter 2:10-11. When we hear people in the Church, or who claim to be in the Church, reject Biblical concepts of government and the proper exercise of authority, we ought to remember that

Scripture says that it's a characteristic of false teachers to despise authority and speak evil of dignitaries. Jude also warns of those who "reject authority, and speak evil of dignitaries" (verse 8), and of "murmurers, complainers, walking according to their own lusts" and "mockers in the last time" who "cause divisions" (16, 18-19). It's been reported to me by reliable witnesses that a member of the Global Church of God Council of Elders, a leading instigator of hostility and rebellion against Dr. Meredith's leadership, openly mocked him while the Council was in session.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-14. The brethren are called upon to "recognize" those who are "over you in the Lord." The authority of the ministry is implied in the words chosen. The Greek word translated "recognize," *eido*, includes the idea of observing, evaluating, as well as having regard for. The responsibility of the members to evaluate the nature of their leadership is also expressed in the instruction to "esteem them highly in love for their works sake" (verse 13). Again, if the works of ministers reflect faithfulness, they are to be respected and esteemed. Note that the words imply not a super-critical approach but one based on love, fairness and graciousness, but nonetheless vigilant.

These principles apply also to ministers with respect to those who are over them, as God has established a line of authority within the body of Christ. Following these precepts results in peace in the Church. And, we may conclude, violating them will produce the opposite effect. Those who are "unruly" are to be warned (verse 14). The Greek word, *ataktos*, includes the idea of being insubordinate or disorderly. Thus, implied is the requirement to be submissive to the authority within the Church within the framework of God's Word.

These are unambiguous Scriptures that show clearly government emanating from God's authority as Supreme Ruler entrusted to *individual leaders* placed over a ministry, who in turn appoint other individual leaders to administer smaller units of the ministry. There is no evidence that God has placed administrative authority in the Church in the hands of boards or councils, or similar bodies where voting and political maneuvering are accepted practices. The testimony of Scripture in its entirety confirms this general pattern. (What prophet of God answered to a "board"?) God holds accountable individual ministers for how each conducts his job, junior ministers being also accountable to those placed over them in authority (1 Corinthians 4:1-4; 9:27; James 3:1; 1 Timothy 5:19-20). Each individual member, however, must answer for himself to God (Roman 14:11-12), and is required to "test the spirits, whether they are of God" (1 John 4:1). If a member is satisfied that the servant placed over him is meeting the standard of faithfulness according to God's Word, he is obligated to submit to the authority of the leadership God is using.

Objections. Those who wish to escape the clear teaching of the Bible in this matter, revealed in dozens of Scriptures — only a sample of which we have specifically reviewed here — commonly turn to a few Scriptural examples which can be twisted to seem to contradict what we have learned. Primary among these are as follows:

Acts 6:1-6. This is used as proof of congregational rule since the brethren had a hand in selecting deacons to serve the church (Acts 6:3). A closer examination, however, reveals that the apostles were firmly in control. The apostles summoned the church to discuss the matter (Acts 6:2). The church members selected certain men and recommended them to the apostles, but the

apostles did the appointing (Acts 6:3). Once again, there is a difference between seeking counsel and input from those governed, and abdicating complete control to them.

Acts 8:14. “Now when the apostles who were at Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent Peter and John to them....” This verse has been used as proof that the apostles exercised a collective leadership after Christ’s death and no one person was in charge. The book of Acts reveals that a remarkable unity existed among the apostles and the whole Church for a period of time following Christ’s ascension into heaven (Acts 1:14; 2:1, 46; 4:24). It’s not surprising that the apostles, who had remained in Jerusalem while church members were scattered throughout Judea and Samaria due to persecution (Acts 8:1), would mutually agree to send a delegation from among themselves to Samaria upon hearing of a substantial number of new converts there. But to read into this that they were all equal in authority, and there was no individual leader among them, is making more of the statement than is actually there.

First of all, it doesn’t say that no one apostle was in a leadership position over the others. And it doesn’t tell us exactly how the decision to send Peter and John was made. It only implies that they were all in agreement to send them. We see similar language used in Joshua 22:13, “Then the children of Israel sent Phinehas the son of Eleazar the priest....” Does this mean the children of Israel were all equal in authority, and there was no hierarchy of government among them? Of course not! Not only was Joshua in command over the entire twelve tribes (Joshua 1:5, 16-18), but there was an appointed leader over each individual tribe (Numbers 1:16; 3:6-9). Ten of these leaders were sent by the children of Israel with Phinehas (Joshua 22:14). They were heads of their tribes. The language means they went as representing the nation, not that there was no government among the Israelites. As the government was structured under Moses there were also seventy elders who served under him, and rulers of thousands, hundreds, fifties and tens, along with the priesthood with its hierarchy (Numbers 11:16; Exodus 18:21; 24:1, 9).

We must look to other Scriptures to learn how the leadership among the twelve was structured. It becomes very clear from a careful reading of Scripture, that among the original twelve apostles, Peter was the overall leader. This was true both before and after the death of Jesus.

In the gospel accounts, Peter is mentioned far more often than any other of the apostles. He is mentioned first in all four lists of the twelve in the New Testament (Matthew 10:2-4; Mark 3:13-19; Luke 6:13-16; Acts 1:13, Judas Iscariot omitted in the latter as he was dead). In Matthew 10:2, Peter is referred to as “first” among the twelve, from *protos*, which can mean first in time order and also first in rank, influence or honor. That both applied to Peter is evident from the Scriptural account.

Though he was never a “Pope,” there are many indications that Peter was first among the twelve, more than I care to cover here. But some are, besides what’s already been mentioned, the fact that he often spoke for the entire group (Matthew 15:15; 16:16; 19:27; Luke 12:41; John 6:67-68; Acts 2:37-18). Sometimes, in addressing the disciples, Jesus spoke specifically to Peter (Matthew 26:40). On occasion Peter is mentioned by name while at the same time the rest are mentioned only as a group (Mark 16:7; Luke 9:32; Acts 2:14; 5:29; 1 Corinthians 9:5). He was the first of the eleven to whom Christ appeared after his resurrection (Luke 24:34; 1 Corinthians 15:5).

Jesus said to Peter, "And I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven" (Matthew 16:19). The personal pronoun "you" and the verbs for binding and loosing are in the second person singular in the Greek original in this verse. Keys are a symbol of authority and power, as well as opening and closing (Isaiah 22:21-23; Luke 11:52; Revelation 1:17, compare John 5:25-29; Revelation 3:7; 20:1-3). Peter was used to introduce (open the knowledge of) the gospel to the circumcision upon the giving of the Holy Spirit on the day of Pentecost after Christ's ascension (Acts 2:14). And he was used at a later time to introduce (open knowledge of) the gospel to the Gentiles (Acts 10:5; 15:7). It may be that the apostles mutually agreed that Peter ought to be sent to the Samaritans first because he was the primary one to whom had been given, at that time, the "keys of the kingdom of heaven." John was clearly second in influence to Peter at that time, so the two top leaders went to Samaria. *Unger's Bible Handbook* comments, "Peter was the chosen instrument (Mt 16:16-18) to open gospel opportunity to the Samaritans (Acts 8:14-25), and later to the Gentiles (Acts 10--11)" (p. 797).

The power of "binding and loosing," implying the authority to make administrative decisions in the Church, was shared by the other apostles in their own spheres of responsibility (Matthew 18:18; John 20:23). Yet, the first few chapters of Acts show clearly that Peter was the leader among the twelve in the early stages of the Church's existence. In discussing his activities at that time *Easton's Bible Dictionary* refers to him as the "trusted guide and director of the fellowship of believers." In commenting on Acts 5:1-11, *Unger's Bible Handbook* comments, "As the leader of the church at Jerusalem [the only church there was at the time] the responsibility of dealing with Ananias and Sapphira fell on his shoulders..." (p. 796). *Halley's Bible Handbook* comments, "Up to ch 12 [of Acts], Peter is the leading figure" (p. 527).

The eleven received the commission from Christ to the Church to "make disciples of all nations" (Matthew 28:19). Nevertheless, the twelve were themselves specifically commissioned to take the gospel to "the lost sheep of the house of Israel" (Matthew 10:5-7). Eventually the twelve original apostles dispersed to far-flung areas where the peoples of Israel had been scattered (*Halley's Bible Handbook* has a summary of where tradition says each of the twelve went to preach the gospel, p. 427). But Scripture tells us plainly that oversight of the overall effort to take the gospel to Israel was committed to Peter. "...they saw that the gospel for the uncircumcised had been committed to me, as [the] [gospel] for the circumcised [was] to Peter (for He who worked effectively in Peter for the apostleship to the circumcised also worked effectively in me toward the Gentiles)..." (Galatians 2:7-8). Thus we see that even among the twelve apostles, there was structure and someone had decision making authority.

It's been said that there was no "Moses figure" or "Pope Peter" figure "who towered over the other apostles and elders, giving them orders and threatening to 'fire' them." As we've seen, Paul did give orders to the elders who served under his authority. Peter also, clearly exercising superior authority, albeit gently, gave instructions to the elders who served under him (1 Peter 5:1-4). And we are told to reject those who teach falsely (Romans 16:17-18; Ephesians 5:6-11; 1 Timothy 6:3-5; Titus 3:10-11). Does anyone think that Judas Iscariot, who betrayed Jesus Christ, would not have been kicked out of his office ("fired") had he not chosen to commit suicide? Actually there was a "Moses figure," namely Jesus Christ, the "Apostle and High Priest

of our profession” (Hebrews 3:1-2), of whom Moses was a type. But to say that Peter was not a “Pope” or “Moses figure” begs the question. Scripture reveals plainly that Peter was the overall leader of the Church during its earliest years of existence, and that he remained the overseer of the work of preaching the gospel to the circumcision.

Certainly others had important leadership roles to play in the effort to preach the gospel, as Scripture illustrates. It was a collective effort. But the faithful fulfilled their responsibilities in submission to, not in opposition to, the government structure God had established. Peter, Paul, and the other leaders, for their part, exercised patience when there were questions and disputes, but they did not surrender the Church to renegades who sought to supplant them.

Acts 15. The conference in Acts 15 is often misused to assert that the Church was governed democratically, or by will of the majority expressed through politics and voting. Different commentators have expressed widely divergent views about certain details of what actually happened. However, the facts are not that difficult to ascertain.

First, note that “the apostles and elders came together to consider the matter” (Acts 15:6). In the assembled group the discussion began with “much dispute” (verse 7). After listening for awhile Peter arose and reminded the assembly of certain facts, including the fact that Gentile converts had received the Holy Spirit without having been circumcised, God “purifying their hearts by faith” (verse 9; cf. Acts 11:3, 15-18). Then two other apostles, Barnabas and Paul, related their experiences in working with Gentile converts to the faith (verse 12). Finally, James spoke, recounting Peter’s words, and pointing out that the Gentiles being converted had been foreseen by the prophets (verses 13-18). Then he said, “I judge...” (verse 19). The Greek word used here is *krino*, which means to judge, or in this context to make a judgment or determination. In the King James version the phrase is rendered “my sentence is,” and in the NRSV, “I have reached the decision.” James’ decision was “...that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God, but that we write to them to abstain from things polluted by idols, [from] sexual immorality, [from] things strangled, and [from] blood” (verses 19-20). The decision of James was then carried out.

There’s no hint of voting in the context of Acts 15, and it’s clear that after a thorough discussion, the final decision was made by James, who Scripture indicates had become the overall leader of the Church under Christ at that time. It’s clear, however, that all of the apostles and elders of the Church agreed with the final judgment, and that several leading apostles, in particular, had played a role in reaching the decision (cf. Acts 15:22; 16:4). James took into account their testimony in light of the Scriptures, according to the principle, “...in the multitude of counselors [there] [is] safety” (Proverbs 11:14).

2 Corinthians 8:19. The churches chose someone to travel with Paul and the others to take an offering of goods to be delivered to the Jerusalem Church. This is explained above under 1 Corinthians 16:1.

Conclusion. It’s sometimes been said that the Bible shows that “God works through one man.” If by this one means that God uses only one person at a time at a given point in history the statement is not true, as evidenced by the fact that God worked through numerous persons during

the New Testament era, and used the Church body working together with its leadership to move his work forward. Various Old Testament prophets were contemporaneous. And other examples could be presented to the same effect. Also, God is working in some sense in anyone who has his Spirit (Philippians 2:13). And through God's Spirit each of us has direct personal contact with God (1 Corinthians 2:10-12, Hebrews 4:16). Each of us is also directly accountable to him (Romans 14:12). However, if by the statement "God works through one man" is meant that God structures government in his Church to set individuals in positions of decision making authority and responsibility rather than boards, councils, or similar groups, the statement is true. But since the statement "God works through one man" may be easily misunderstood, it may be better to avoid its use.

That individual leaders are given the authority necessary to make decisions affecting the work they are overseeing and responsible for is clear from the testimony of Scripture. God does not place boards and councils between himself and leaders selected to be over a particular work, because this inevitably leads to dissension and confusion. Leaders who are wise will, of course, seek a multitude of counsel (Proverbs 24:6). But Scripture says "in a multitude of counselors [there] [is] safety," not a multitude of decision makers. Counselors advise and provide information and insights so that a sound decision can be reached, but God places decision making authority in the hands of individual leaders.

Many drew the conclusion after the apostasy following the death of Herbert W. Armstrong that the form of organization was the problem. It would make just as much sense to draw the conclusion that because there were evil kings and apostate priests in ancient Israel and Judah that the form of organization was the problem. But when God's Kingdom is established, it will have a King and High Priest, and under his authority many kings and priests. No form of government is any better than the people running it. "When the righteous are in authority, the people rejoice; But when a wicked [man] rules, the people groan" (Proverbs 29:2).

Remember that a council of ecclesiastical leaders (the Sanhedrin) condemned Jesus Christ to death (Matthew 26:57-66). The same council beat Peter and John and commanded them not to teach in the name of Jesus (Acts 4:1-22; 5:22-42). The same council of religious leaders arrested and murdered Stephen (Acts 6:8-15; 7:54-60). The same council condemned many of the early Christians to death (Acts 8:1-3; 9:1-2; 26:10).

But in the face of apostasy, if one must depart from a particular corporate organization to keep the faith, so be it (Proverbs 22:5; Ephesians 5:11; Proverbs 22:5; 2 Corinthians 6:17). However, novel and unscriptural modes of Church organization will not insure against problems in the Church. Indeed, they will ultimately only produce greater problems. The only real insurance against being deceived, for individual Christians and for the Church at large, is constant vigilance (Matthew 7:15-16). Each individual Christian has direct access to God (Hebrews 4:16). The job of the ministry is not to stand between the members of God's Church and God, but to help members develop a fruitful relationship with God. There is one mediator between God and men, Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 2:5). At the same time, however, God wants us to learn to work together as a body within his government. We should understand and appreciate how Jesus Christ structured government in his Church. And we should be willing to follow those appointed leaders who are faithfully following Christ (1 Corinthians 11:1).