

THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHING ON
ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNMENT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH

1 - 41

B. J. Braun

Introduction

Statement of Problem

1. What is Church Polity? Church polity has been defined as "the science of Church government. It is the aggregate of the recognized principles fundamental to the organic life of a church or body of churches. In other words, the extensive system by which a church or a denomination governs itself, or is governed, is called church polity."¹

Church government and church polity are generally considered synonymous terms. Technically, however, church polity emphasizes the written form and system of church organization, whereas the latter implies the practical implementation of the organizational principles.²

2. Is Church Polity Necessary? When individuals unite for any purpose, there must of necessity be some kind of organization and government. A study of the Bible, histories of nations, and even nature itself substantiate this claim. We agree with Schaver that

Where there is society, there must be government; where there is government, there must be law; where there is law, there must be penalty for its violation; where the law is violated and the penalty incurred, the law must be enforced and the penalty inflicted; otherwise the law cannot be enforced, the government cannot be maintained, and society cannot be preserved and protected. These are fundamental and well established principles of government and constitute the basis of all forms of government, parental, political, scholastical, and ecclesiastical.³

Man seems to be so constituted that order and standards become necessary for his existence. Any spiritual movement, to function effectively in society, is bound to assume certain forms, to embody itself in a definite concrete organization.⁴ "The house of God must have orders for the government of it, such as not any of the household but God himself hath appointed."⁵

3. Is Church Polity Valuable? Church polity, however, is not an end itself. It is of value only as it secures sound doctrine; and doctrine is of value only as it issues in life.

¹William E. Barton, The Law of Congregational Usage, p. 4.

²J. L. Schaver, The Polity of Churches, p. 60.

³Ibid., pp. 66-67.

⁴Arthur Wilford Nagler, The Church in History, p. 267.

⁵Barton, op. cit., p. 4, quotes Richard Hooker, Ecclesiastical Polity, Vol. III, p. 11.

Polity and creed are two separate entities. One deals with organization, the other with precepts. Functionally, both are of primary importance; practically, both are inseparably linked together. History shows that maintenance of polity is essential to the maintenance of creeds. Decadence in church polity goes before corruption of church creeds.⁶ To some extent, the form of polity will determine the creedal position.⁷

4. Which is the Biblical Church Polity? In the course of the history of the church, three basic types of church polity have emerged: (1) A government by one man; (2) A government by more than one man and less than the entire body of the people; (3) A government by all the people of the church congregation. In technical terms they are expressed as Episcopal (monarchical), Presbyterian (oligarchical), and Congregational (democratic).

The wide divergence between the three polities has its origin in an initial difference of interpretation of particular passages, in varied inferences drawn from these passages and in the pursuing of these varied inferences.⁸ All trace the origin of their particular form to the apostolic church and apostolic officers. It is obvious they could not all be right. With these conflicting views and without any hope in sight to resolving the conflicts, and with a divergence of views on church polity represented in our own brotherhood, where and how will we find the answer?

I. Biblical Data

A. The New Testament Bishop and Elder.

In the days of the apostles, the words "elder" and "bishop" were used for the same office. The name "elder" had its origin among the Jews. "Bishop" was a Greek word and in the New Testament is applied only to Gentile churches. In one and the same passage they who at one time are called elders are later called bishops, or overseers (cf. Acts 20:17 with 20:28, and cf. Titus 1:5 with Titus 1:7). Since the office bearers of churches are sometimes addressed as bishops and deacons, without the mention of elders, and since we know that it was apostolic custom to place elders over every church, the inference is clear that the terms were used interchangeably (Phil. 1:2, I Tim. 3:1-2). The identity of elders and bishops follows also from the identity of specified qualifications (cf. I Tim. 3:27 with Titus 1:5-9). We may reason also from the identity of their duties that elders and bishops in the apostolic church were the same persons. That there was a plurality of bishops in the church at Philippi also shows that they were elders (Phil. 1:1).

The name elder indicated his office while the name bishop (and also pastor) described his work as an overseer or one who had charge over the flock.

⁶Schaver, op. cit., p. 68

⁷Barton, op. cit., p. 8.

⁸Schaver, op. cit., p. 72

Because of the respect in which the office was held, his title was elder; because of his work as an overseer, he was called bishop; and as a spiritual caretaker of the flock, he was called pastor. According to Dr. D. Edmond Hiebert, professor of Greek at the Mennonite Brethren Biblical Seminary, the name elder (presbuteros) signified the dignity, while the name bishop or overseer (episcopos) signified the function of the office.

B. Beginnings of Distinction of Rank.

The work of an elder was both teaching and governing. Very early already a distinction arose between such as both taught and governed and those who governed almost exclusively (I Tim. 5:17). Such a distinction came about by no design of arrogant men but by the very nature of things since some would just naturally be better suited to pastoral instruction than others. But the names elder and bishop continued to be used interchangeably until well into the second century. This is evident, says Schaver, "from the letter of Clement of Rome and the Didache or 'The Teaching of the Twelve Apostles.' To some extent that interchange of names continued to the close of the second century and even later."

C. The Emergence of the Bishop Above the Elder. (Parochial Episcopacy)

After the death of the apostles, "when special gifts had ceased, and when errors multiplied, the leader of the early church had to be able to refute as well as to teach and thus had to give himself more fully to the ministry--by which increased application he became the more an outstanding elder." (Schaver). It was also natural when the elders met that the teaching elder presided and that, by the nature of his gifts, he soon came to preside at every meeting. This was, however, the only preeminence the teaching elder had for many a decade after the apostles. Though of the same rank with the rest, he became recognized as the president or chairman of the board of elders.

In time the importance of this chairmanship increased. He, of course, would preside at ordinations. In times of persecutions, because of his position, he was in greater danger and, therefore, his fellow elders or bishops, would naturally have great regard for the one who placed his life in special jeopardy in order to serve the Church. "In this gradually increased honor, prestige, and authority of the presiding officer of the early council of elders, we may discern the first step from the New Testament board of elders to the papacy." (Schaver)

With the beginning of the second century, and from then onward, the office of the elder (presbuteros) and bishop (episcopos) came to be distinguished, the bishop being regarded as the head of the congregation and the elders as assistants to him as his council. His bishopric, however, was only over the one local congregation, only parochial, not diocesan as yet.

D. The Emergence of Some Bishops Above Others. (Diocesan Episcopacy)

With the growth of city churches, one common meeting place proved inadequate. So, new preaching centers, new churches were organized. Very naturally, they continued to look to the principal bishop for direction, and he assured authority over the daughter groups (mission churches). In the same way, daughter groups would spring up in outlying villages, and thus the

same subordinating process was still further extended. In this way there was laid a foundation for the authority of one bishop over several congregations, which authority came to be claimed and was also acknowledged.

By the end of the third century, there were no longer but two orders in the church, as originally, but three, the bishop having emerged above the elder and the deacon.

The bishop came to be viewed more and more as the custodian of the apostles' teaching. This view by degrees led to the acceptance that he also took the apostles' place. At first all questions of discipline had to have the approval of the bishop. By and by he came to be viewed as the only one authoritative in all matters of discipline in all the churches of his diocese or district.

E. The Natural Ascendency to the Papal System.

It was only a matter of time until from among the bishops the archbishops emerged, and when they multiplied in numbers with the spread and growth of the Church, their superior was called Patriarch. Then came the Pope.

II. Historical Background.

A. The Influence of the Reformation and Anabaptist Movement Upon Church Polity.

In the main, the Protestant changes in church organization went in the direction of decentralization, away from papal absolutism and universalism. Nagler, in The Church History, attributes the emergence of three major church polities to the Reformation. He lists: (1) Lutheran and Anglican (Episcopalian); (2) Calvinistic (Presbyterian); (3) Congregational.⁹ Schaver contends: "Congregational polity is strictly not an outgrowth of the Reformation. The early leaders of the Congregational denomination were influenced in their church polity by the Anabaptists of post-Reformation times."¹⁰

B. Major Types of Church Polity.

Concerning the origin of church government, as stated before, all three major types trace their particular form to the apostolic church and apostolic officers.

For the purposes of this paper, it is sufficient simply to list the basic principles of each form of church government without a critical evaluation of them point by point. The purpose of listing them is fourfold: (1) to present the basic philosophy of each; (2) to have them for reference; (3) to show what influence they have had upon Mennonite Brethren Church polity and that our brethren were true biblicists in that they refused to adopt any one form in totality but selected from all the simple guiding principles which were to them obviously in uncontested harmony with the Bible; (4) to show that some principles adopted in theory have not worked out in Mennonite Brethren practice.

⁹Nagler, op. cit., p. 281.

¹⁰Schaver, op. cit., p.

1. Principles Governing Episcopal Polity.

- a. Apostolic succession.
- b. Gradation of rank and office.
- c. Authority vested in the clergy. The body of believers has no share in governmental matters.
- d. Distinction between laity and clergy is emphasized strongly.
- e. The Church maintains a diocesan episcopate. This is the apportionment of the churches into areas over which a bishop has control.¹¹

2. Principles Governing Presbyterian (Calvinistic) Polity.

The first reformer after Calvin to draw up a Presbyterian polity in 1551 was John a'Lasco.¹² He and others in Scotland favored a church government resembling that of the Church of England, but the appearance of John Knox turned the scale in favor of strict Calvinism. The following tenets were consequently set up as basic to Presbyterian church polity and were transplanted to America:

- a. Consistory or Session. Each church has a Presbytery, a Board of Elders. Part of the Bishop's power or responsibility is delegated to the Presbytery. These men, together with the pastor, have authority over the spiritual affairs of the church and the responsibility for the continuous furtherance thereof.¹³ Presbyterianism has a plurality of elders distinguishing between the elder who teaches (Bishop-pastor) and the elders who govern. The deacons' work concerns temporalities. "Presbyterian polity," says Schaver, "agrees with the polity of the primitive church."¹⁴

- b. Equality of ministers.

- c. Recognition of people's rights. The choice of office bearers and decisions in matters of the congregation rest with the whole church.

- d. Centralized authoritative control in matters spiritual and doctrinal.

The fact that the Church is essentially one must be expressed also in its visible organization. The Church as one must have an interest in every part of itself, must show this interest, and must make this interest effectual for the good of the whole. To achieve this end and to express the oneness of the church outwardly, there is need therefore to authoritative classes or Presbyteries, and Synods or General Assemblies.¹⁵

¹¹Schaver, op. cit., p. 22-23.

¹²D. Johnston Martin, The Reformation and the Presbyterian Church, p. 17.

¹³Ibid., p. 94.

¹⁴Schaver, op. cit., p. 56.

¹⁵Ibid., p. 57.

3. Principles Governing Congregational Polity.

a. The autonomy of the local church. Self-government of the local church is the most pronounced principle of this polity. It means that each local congregation governs itself in all matters relating to its own internal administration, in a spirit of Christian love and fellowship.¹⁶

The polity is called congregational because final authority rests with the members of the local church. Without their authoritative concurrence no governmental authority is to be exercised. It is the most democratic of all polities . . . In congregational polity, each group of believers forming a congregation is sovereign within the limits of the congregation, and they have the right to manage their own affairs without any outside interference whatsoever.¹⁷

b. The priesthood of all believers. The idea of the priesthood of believers enthrones Christ as the only Lord of the Church, and carries with it a corollary of the spiritual equality of brethren in Christ. The fundamental law of congregationalism is the supreme authority of Christ.¹⁸

c. Freedom of choice of ministers by the body of the local church.

d. Mutual fellowship and unity of believers. Congregationalism holds that the only unity that has lasting value for Christianity, for a local church, is the unity of a common experience in Christ Jesus, and the unity of spirit and service--not that of creed or organization.

C. Polity of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

Church organization and government in the Mennonite Brethren Church has been relatively simple from the very beginning. In the main, the form of government has been congregational in type though never officially adopted as such or followed in all of its ramifications. There seems to be no evidence that they were even aware of the existence of well-defined church polities. Their governing principles were taken from the Bible and applied rather literally in all simplicity. They were biblicists. If we want to know what Mennonite Brethren Church polity is, we must trace their actions.

1. The Mennonite Brethren Church began with a few converted people. In their newly found joy in Christ, they came together for fellowship. Consciously or unconsciously, they thereby announced their faith in, and acceptance of, the fourth principle of congregational church polity, that of "Mutual fellowship and unity of believers."

2. From the very beginning, they called themselves "Brethren." As a

¹⁶William E. Barton, The Law of Congregation Usage, p. 13.

¹⁷Schaver, op. cit., p. 43.

¹⁸Barton, op. cit., p. 11.

fellowship of "brethren," they longed for the symbolic expression of their fellowship with their Lord around the communion table. Of course, traditionally communion could be administered only by an elder. In compliance with correct church polity as it had been taught them, they requested an elder to conduct this service for them. The elder refused.

As the Brethren continued to hold their prayer services in houses, they came to the conclusion that it would be in accordance with God's Work to observe communion services among themselves. One Sunday in November, 1859, when they had gathered for prayer, they commemorated the Lord's death by closing with a Communion Service.¹⁹

In so doing, they in action announced their faith in and acceptance of the second principle of congregational polity, namely: The priesthood of all believers which enthrones Christ as the only Lord of the Church and declares the spiritual equality of all believers.

3. "The roots of the Mennonite Brethren Church go back to the pietistic revival among the Mennonites in South Russia . . . The date of its organization was January 6, 1860, when eighteen family fathers gathered in Elizabethtal, studied, prayed over, signed, and presented the following document to the elders of the Mennonite Churches."²⁰

In the Document of Secession again a number of basic Anabaptist principles of congregational nature are enunciated. First, that of worshipping God according to the dictates of conscience: "We . . . see the corruption . . . and cannot for the sake of the Lord and our conscience participate in it any longer." This is in keeping with the fuller expression of the principle of the autonomy of the local church.

4. The freedom of choice of ministers by the body of the local church is unmistakably set forth in the Document of Secession.²¹ "Concerning the appointment of teachers (ministers) we confess that they are being appointed through the instrumentality of true believers as it may be read in Acts 1."

It is remarkable and striking indeed that the four fundamental governing principles of congregational church polity were already fully accepted and operative among the "Brethren" by January 6, 1860, the birthday of the Mennonite Brethren Church.

These four principles of congregational polity have continued to guide the Mennonite Brethren Church throughout its history. In this respect the Mennonite Brethren have been very closely akin to the Baptists.

¹⁹John H. Lohrenz, The Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 27.

²⁰G. W. Peters, The Growth of Foreign Missions in the Mennonite Brethren Church, p. 27.

²¹Ibid., p. 28.

D. The Relationship of the Local Church to the Brotherhood of Churches--Conference.

There is, however, one aspect of congregational polity which is worthy of note and which quite obviously has been a cause of controversy among denominations governed by this polity and among members within these denominations, including the Mennonite Brethren. It is the question of local autonomy and independence. In what sense and to what extent is a local church autonomous and independent? Are the terms autonomy and independence synonymous? Are they biblical? Are decisions of a Conference binding upon a local church?

The Congregational denomination, which gave the polity its name, aware of the inherent dangers of an extreme interpretation of the terms autonomy and independence, has gone on record as follows:

Congregationalism is the democratic form of church order and government. It derives its name from the prominence which it gives to the congregation of Christian believers. It vests all ecclesiastical power (under Christ) in the associated brotherhood of each local church, as an independent body. At the same time it recognizes a fraternal and equal fellowship between these independent churches, which invests each with the right and duty of advice and reproof, and even of the public withdrawal of that fellowship in case the course pursued by another of the sisterhood should demand such action for the preservation of its own purity and consistency. Herein Congregationalism, as a system, differs from Independency, which affirms the seat of ecclesiastical power to reside in the brotherhood so zealously as to ignore any check, even of advice, upon its action. Still, as this difference is only one of the exaggeration of the first principle, it follows that every Independent Church is Congregational, though few Congregational churches are Independent in this strict sense.²²

Schaver says that "Baptist churches still hold . . . that the individual church is an independent body. However, even among Baptists there is a trend toward closer denominational affiliation and more effective organization. The Association, for example, which formerly was voluntary is not strictly so today. The recognition of a church as a Baptist Church now depends on affiliation with the Association."²³

There seems to be a trend toward Presbyterian polity. Some writers refer to it as "The Newer Congregationalism." The older congregationalism would not allow local churches to be "represented" by delegates in a major assembly, but the newer accepts the principle of representation.²⁴

²²Barton, op. cit., p. 10, quoting Dexter, Congregationalism, pp. 1, 2.

²³Schaver, op. cit., p. 48.

²⁴Ibid., p. 51.

"Consistent stress on the principle of autonomy or independentism would destroy the congregational or independent denominations. It would cut them up into numerous local democracies which again would disintegrate into even smaller units. The principle of autonomy, if rigorously applied, would lead to ecclesiastical anarchy.

"The thing that saves independent denominations from disintegration is their repudiation of their theory in practice. In practice the independent churches usually heed the advice of the broader assemblies as though it were given authoritatively. Consider, for instance, the practice of independents of excluding from their fellowship an erring church until the wrong be rectified. This is an exercise of jurisdiction over the offending church as severe as any ecclesiastical body can inflict. The strongest presbyterian or episcopal government can do no more."²⁵

The truth evincing from the above quotations was wisely recognized by the founding fathers of the Mennonite Brethren Church. The need for an assembly of churches in the form of a Conference was felt early in its history. "The General Conference (Bundes Konferenz) begun in 1872, was held annually and became the most important uniting factor of the Mennonite Brethren Church, as well as the main channel through which it carried out its activities. The Conference was not a legislative body which laid down laws and rules for the churches. The important decisions were reported to the churches for approval. These decisions were, however, almost invariably accepted by all of the local churches."²⁶

This spirit of cooperation and Christian brotherliness has characterized the Mennonite Brethren Churches and Conferences now for nearly a century. A clarification of the Mennonite Brethren concept of local church autonomy and of a local church's responsibilities toward the Conference was prepared by the Committee of Reference and Counsel to the 45th General Conference on July 21 to 26, 1951, at Winkler, Manitoba, Canada, under the title, "An Appeal for a Reaffirmation of the Historic Principle of the Interrelationship of Mennonite Brethren Churches." Under "Conclusions" the burden of the paper was thus summarized:

From the contents of the above, it appears that in accordance with our Scriptural faith and the constitutional provisions, the order of the Mennonite Brethren Church holds:

1. That each local church is independent in the administration of its internal affairs and functions as an independent unit.
2. That we as a Conference are a Brotherhood of Churches. We are, as our name implies, The Church of the Mennonite Brethren Con-

²⁵Schaver, op. cit., pp. 45, 46.

²⁶Lohrenz, op. cit., pp. 42, 43.

ference of North America, not the Conference of Mennonite Brethren Churches of North America. As such, we carry mutual responsibility for the spiritual conditions in the churches and for the preservation of the purity of faith and doctrine as expressed in our practice.

3. That we as churches of the Conference recognize resolutions and decisions of the Conference as morally binding and obligate ourselves to observe and carry them out to the best of our ability as faithful and cooperating members of the Brotherhood.²⁷

"It was moved, seconded, and accepted with only two dissenting votes."²⁸

With this momentous action the Mennonite Brethren as a brotherhood finally emerged with a crystallization of conviction that the principle of interdependence of believers in a denomination is equally as precious and scriptural as is the principle of independence.

E. The Administrative Personnel of the Local Mennonite Brethren Church.

1. The Ministers. The ministers of today are the Presbyter-Bishops of the New Testament. The presiding Presbyter-Bishop of the New Testament is commonly called the pastor today. He is divinely called (Heb. 5:4), qualified of God (II Cor. 3:5, 6), commissioned of Christ (Matt. 28:19), sent by the Holy Spirit (Acts 13:2, 4), has authority from God (II Cor. 10:8a), for edification (II Cor. 10:8; 13:10). It is his duty to preach the gospel (I Cor. 1:17), feed the flock (Acts 20:28; I Pet. 5:2), build up the church (II Cor. 12:19; Eph. 4:12), watch for souls (Heb. 13:17), pray for their people (Col. 1:9), strengthen the faith of Christians (Luke 22:32; Acts 14:22), teach (II Tim. 2:2), exhort (Titus 1:9), warn affectionately (Acts 20:31), rebuke (Titus 1:13), comfort (II Cor. 1:4-6), convince gainsayers (Titus 1:9), war a good warfare (I Tim. 2:3), endure hardness (II Tim. 2:3). His is the spiritual ministry, supervision and direction. He is to be an example to the flock in all good things, not lording it, but leading God's heritage (I Pet. 5:1-3). He is by the very nature of his divine appointment, office, and work the spiritual leader of the Church. According to a study made years ago by the Rev. J. B. Toews, every name employed in Scriptures to designate God's minister implies the idea of superintendency, authority, and leadership. He is therefore to be recognized, respected, obeyed, and supported in his leadership. God's people are bound to regard ministers as God's messengers (I Cor. 4:1; Gal. 4:14), not to despise them (Luke 10:16; I Tim. 4:12), attend to their instructions (Matt. 23:3), follow their example (I Cor. 11:1; Phil. 3:17), imitate their faith (Heb. 13:7), hold them in reputation (Phil. 2:29; I Thess. 5:13; I Tim. 5:17), love them (II Cor. 8:7; I Thess. 3:6), pray for them (Rom. 15:30; II Cor. 1:11; Eph. 6:19; Heb. 13:17), and support them (I Cor. 9:7; Gal. 6:6).

²⁷Year Book of the 45th General Conference of the Mennonite Brethren Church of North America, 1951, pp. 129, 130.

²⁸Ibid., pp. 143, 144.

2. Deacons. The origin and institution of the deacon's office is related in Acts 6:1-6. An exigency in the first church called for it. The apostles directed the church to elect deacons.

The deacon's work deals in temporalities. His duty is:

a. To relieve the ministers of encumbering temporal cares and obligations so that they may be free to attend to the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:24).

b. To look after the needy in the church (Acts 6:3).

c. To demonstrate great faithfulness in the administration of the bounty of the church and the needs of the poor (I Tim. 3:10,13).

d. To assist in the preparation and distribution of the Lord's Supper.

e. To assist the pastor or ministers to preserve high moral standards and holy doctrines through a blameless personal and family life (I Tim. 3:8-12).

However, Stephen and Philip, two of the appointed deacons, either in their capacity as deacons or as evangelists, proclaimed the Gospel and even baptized (Acts 6:8-7:53; 8:5-13, 26-40). Therefore, the confinement of the deacons task is said in I Tim. 3:13 was actually demonstrated in them--that because of having used the "office of a deacon well" they had "purchased to themselves a good degree" (a promotion from deacon to elder by divine appointment)?

The qualifications of a deacon are as stringent as those required of a candidate for the ministry (Acts 6:3; I Tim. 3:8-12). It is for this reason primarily that in Mennonite Brethren Churches the deacon (1) is ordained for life; (2) is usually considered the pastor's "right hand man"; (3) is usually in the church council by virtue of his office; (4) is usually a likely nominee as a delegate to a Conference; (5) is usually a likely choice for leadership in the absence of other ministers when the pastor is away; (6) is usually held in esteem and is often the confidant of people with problems; (7) the name "deacon" either instills respect or evokes derision in any community.

3. Church Council. The term, church council, designates the governing body of a Mennonite Brethren Church. Though the total administrative work of the church is accomplished through the coordinated efforts of pastor, ministers, deacons, council, and trustees, the church council has hitherto been regarded the body which bears the main burden of the spiritual responsibility of the Church.

For the longest period of the Mennonite Brethren history it consisted of the ministers and deacons. More recently, it has been felt that it should be made up of representatives of various committees and service organizations. There is no longer much of uniformity in the choice of personnel making up the church council.

Inasmuch as the work of the church council revolves around the spiritual interests, welfare, and soundness of the Church of Jesus Christ, only the most spiritual brethren ought to be voted into the council. They ought to be men of doctrinal soundness, spiritual insight, openness and maturity. They ought to surround their pastor with wise counsel, undergird him in prayer, share his burdens with him, shield the pastor, be men who are psychologically and spiritually well adjusted individuals, capable of making a constructive contribution to the council meetings and to the healthy promotion of the church.

Some churches have gone back to the clear Biblical teaching of plurality of elders and have, instead of a church council, elected a Board of Elders. Elders are elected by the church on the basis of spiritual qualifications as described above. They are not only a consultative but a cooperative body. Each elder is given the responsibility of oversight over a given group of families for which he is held responsible. When a need or a problem arises among the families of his assignment, he goes to check, to teach, to pray, to counsel, to help, to solve. He must report to the pastor or the Board of Elders and may ask for assistance.

4. Board of Trustees. The board of trustees is actually an expansion of the board of deacons. The scattered believers, meeting from house to house, had no need of it. It is as churches become settled and prosperous that trustees are called for.

Trustees, like deacons, deal with temporalities. They superintend the physical assets of the church. It is their duty to look after grounds, property, repairs, renovations, maintenance. In later years they have been chosen primarily for their gifts as good business administrators, and the budget is fairly entrusted to them.

III. Evaluations and Conclusions.

1. Christ and the apostles did not prescribe any fixed and standard pattern of church organization and administration. But the fact that there are two offices definitely established, that of the presbyter-bishop and of the deacon, is plain evidence that Christ intended for the Household of God to perpetuate these offices for an orderly administration of the spiritual and temporal affairs of His ecclesia. The Scripture, in the main, however, has only given us the broad outline, in terms of these specific directives, to be filled out in detail as apparent exigencies may arise in various places. Certain problems of organization were wisely left to be solved in the light of these guiding Bible principles, according to changing times, customs, and circumstances in a changing world. But whatever office we create, biblical precedence makes it plain, the officers filling these offices must have spiritual qualifications in harmony with the Person of Jesus Christ--the Head of the Church.

2. We say, in the main, Mennonite Brethren Churches have a congregational type of church organization and government. We do in the sense that there is not a single principle in this polity, if scripturally interpreted, to which we do not subscribe. However, thank God, that it may truthfully be said of the Mennonite Brethren Church what has been said about the Congrega-

tionalists and Baptists that in many instances and ares, "the thing that saves the independent denominations from disintegration is their repudiation of their theory in practice." Consistent stress of the extreme principle of autonomy and independence would destroy, not only the denomination, but the local church itself. And so, the Mennonite Brethren Church, either by divine overruling grace or by obedience to the light of truth has in the practical outworking of its organizational structure absorbed at least parts of the principles of the Presbyterian polity: (1) We believe in councils on the local level, and in assemblies on the Conference level; (2) We believe in the equality of ministers; (3) we believe in the people's right. Thus by careful selection in the light of God's work, and by peaceful blending into one polity much that is good in both, we have come to a brotherhood concept of church polity.

Under the enlightening of the Word of God and in the light of our own experiences in our work together as spiritual brethren, we have come to recognize that we are not merely independent, locally autonomous churches. According to I Cor. 12, we are independent, dependent, and interdependent. We are, as our name implies, a Brotherhood. Kingdom responsibilities call for projects that we can carry on must efficiently and effectively as a Conference of Congregations. Most Mennonite Brethren local churches consider Conference action quite as final and Conference resolutions quite as binding as those of their own. This cooperation is not, however, on the basis of any dictatorial authority over the congregation, but rather it is the local church's voluntary Christian expression of the Brotherhood concept of church polity.

I like what Meredith Davis on The Ideal of Congregationalism says:²⁹

Its ideal is that the Church should be the organized expression of the creative will of Christ, as revealed to believers in devotional and deliberative fellowship. The aim of a Congregational Church, in ultimate definition, is to give effect, throughout the entire field of its activities, to the supreme and sovereign principle. So that, "When the Church reaches its ideal perfection, the acts of the Church are the acts of Christ, and what it binds on earth is bound in heaven." Those are the words of Dr. Dale, and it is significant that in his application of that principle he lays stress, not upon the right of every man to share in the government of the church, but upon the responsibility of each to secure in the discipline, doctrine, and worship of the Church the supremacy of its Divine Founder and Lord. So long as we effectively ensure the living headship of Christ, polity may be safely regarded as subsidiary and revisable.

3. The above ideal, however, will never be realized from polity alone, be it ever so good. We have need to guard against the danger of becoming well-governed political machines, either as churches or area conferences. Our strength of unity must be an inner strength derived from a living relationship to, and fed by an unbroken stream of fellowship from, our blessed Fountain Head.

²⁹Meredith Davis, Constructive Quarterly, Sept., 1905, pp. 550-551, as quoted by William E. Barton, Law of the Congregational Usage, p. 11.

SUPPLEMENT, BY THE FINDINGS COMMITTEE, ON THE PAPER

by BTBarn

"THE SCRIPTURAL TEACHING ON ORGANIZATION AND GOVERNMENT OF THE LOCAL CHURCH"

CORRECTIONS: Page 1, par. 2, the word "latter" is to be changed to "former."

REVISION: Page 12, par. 2, change the first sentence to read as follows:

"Some churches have essentially retained the pattern, according to Biblical teaching, of the plurality of elders although not always called by that name. A few churches are returning to a selected Board of Elders instead of a Church Council to serve as those vested with the spiritual oversight and care of the Church."

GENERAL CONCERNS

1. By consensus of opinion the brethren agreed that we evaluate our position and guard against departing from the New Testament precedent of selecting elders and/or Church Council by adopting methods foreign to the concept of the brotherhood. The extreme immediate danger cited is the tendency toward the popular concept and practice of ultra-democratization. The Board of Elders and/or Church Council carries the responsibility of the spiritual oversight and life of the church. The administrative functions of the church may find their initiative in this body. Spiritual qualifications shall be predominant over any other considerations in selection of brethren to the Board.

(Reference made to General Conference Book of 1951, Article on subject of "Elders." Exact name and page of Document to be supplied.)

2. This suggested directive, it was agreed, shall be submitted to the Provincial and District Conferences for their approval and conveyance to the churches.

3. The suggestion obtained that a handbook on Church Polity be compiled and published to guide churches in polity and practice.