

What form of Church Government is Substance? Who holds you Accountable?

First of all, let me warn you. I'm somewhat of a geek when it comes to church governance theory. Not long ago, I wrote a manuscript on the statistical and sociological connections between church governance and church health. So, it's hard for me to stay concise on this issue (which is really the case with almost every issue). But here is the basic explanation.

Substance is a hybrid of numerous forms of church governments. We are one-part congregational; one part Presbyterian (elder board -run); one part "Apostolic-CEO" led; and one part "Episcopal" (bishop-oriented). In other words, Substance borrows from each of the four classical forms of church government. The idea behind this hybrid came out of years of researching church splits and church politics.

Historically each classical form of church government has both strengths and weaknesses which affect everything from "likelihood of church growth" to "likelihood of church split". Some governments enable churches to change quickly; yet, many of these same governments lack adequate safeguards and balance of power. Other governments have endless accountability, yet constantly predispose their churches towards becoming politically deadlocked, outdated and inefficient. Church splits are everywhere. But certain forms of church government can dramatically increase the odds of survival.

So, in light of all of these systems: Is there a way to borrow the best parts from each of these systems, maximizing their strengths while minimizing their weaknesses? Can we have "safe-guards without stalemates" and "maximize fruitfulness while minimizing politics?" At Substance, we believe the answer is Yes. Therefore, Substance is a "hybrid" of each of these classical systems.

A hybrid system is not unique to Substance. In fact, on a global level, this new "hybrid" approach is one of the fastest growing forms of church government on the planet. Many of the fastest growing churches in the world have adopted this system, which is partly why it is growing in popularity. But what is this system? And how does it play out at Substance?

In short, our hybrid system generally looks like this: When it comes to the selection of Senior Pastor and Elders, we are Congregationalist (an independent democracy). When it comes to budgeting, assets, and bylaw management, we are Presbyterian (board-run). When it comes to investigating / disciplining / or removing the senior pastor, we are Episcopal (bishop, or "Overseer" run); and when it comes to day to day management of the staff and smaller budgeting decisions, we are "Apostolic-CEO" led. Yet this explanation does not quite do the system justice. After all, there are many similar looking systems that do not really tap into the benefits that this particular hybrid employs. The difference is in the details.

This hybrid model is based on the idea of having *three separate boards*. As churches become larger, church governments must become more sophisticated. Most church problems can be traced to a lack of specialization in a church government. Thus, these independent entities consist of a board of *elders*, a board of *trustees*, and a *board of overseers*. Here is the specific role of each board:

1). The Trustees are responsible for the financial well-being of the church. They monitor accounting and business practices. They assure fiscal responsibility (both to the church and the I.R.S. They help develop the budget, manage the assets, & aid in facility acquisition and management. I.e., their role is primarily placed on the “business” of the corporate church. And their distinct focus enables them increased efficiency (being freed up from the typical responsibilities of an elder). Thus, most churches over 500 often separate the role of trustee from elder to aid in corporate expedience.

2). The Elders are responsible for shepherding the people. Their distinct focus frees them from the endless lists of corporate responsibilities. They are free to serve the people through prayer and pastoring. They assist in administering the sacraments. They decide and manage the statement of faith (if necessary). They help manage the church in times of duress (for example, they would aid in mediating or settling a dispute in the church). And in cases where pastoral staff are being accused or investigated for misconduct (moral or doctrinal), they call in the third board, which is the board of registered Overseers.

3). The Overseers are a board of successful senior pastors who govern churches *outside* of Substance. Generally, these are well loved "mentor" pastors who lead churches similar in dna to the local church. Through mentoring the senior pastor and annually preaching at the local church, they have a relationship with the local church that they are overseeing.

So, in the case of alleged misconduct, they investigate and, if necessary, decide the disciplinary course of action. The key words which define this board are: Professional, and Objective. For example, when accusations or crises occur, most local disciplinary boards tend to lose both their objectivity and discernment. The increased impartial nature of the overseers eliminates the possibility of dirty politics and mixed motives which often embroil a crisis or a leadership vacuum. The sheep should never have to discipline their shepherd. Thus, overseers alone have the ability to remove, discipline, or exonerate a senior pastor. Even more they are ministry professionals who are better attuned to satisfying the corporate management needs of a church – (while key staff members are being investigated or removed). Often played by denominational leaders or apostolic mentors, their resourcefulness during times of duress can be indispensable (such as finding supply preachers, and/or guiding the public relations process). However, this system also prevents these overseers from becoming micro-managing “bishops” as they are only called upon when authorized by the Elders. And even then, their authority is officially limited to investigating the allegation and promulgating their “official ruling”.

Of course, there are many more fantastic nuances to this government. But, the penchant of this system is: “safe-guards without stalemates” and “maximized fruitfulness; minimized politics.”

So, if you have any more questions about this, check out my free book offered in pdf format on my Backstage Pass question list on our website.

I have not officially published this book as I'm waiting to continue a certain amount of statistical research. (I.e., I'm still trying to finish the research which would confirm or deny some of my theories :) And, if you read it, you'll definitely find that it's very much a rough draft. In the meantime, I love having life-giving debates about this stuff.

But the overarching point is this: I believe that Substance has one of the most life-

giving forms of church government out there. We have the government that is the least likely to split; yet, its the most likely to grow (especially as our congregation ages). So, if you're going to build a house, you should build it on a foundation that will last. And I believe that we have one of the best foundations we could have.

So, who holds me accountable?

Well, the trustees hold me accountable for good financial management. The elders hold me accountable for my doctrine and plan for pastoring the people. The overseers hold me accountable for good senior pastoral management (& have the ability to fire me). But beyond this, I still have more accountability.

My spiritual "accountability group" is a group of 4 other guys who I pray and confess my sins with on a weekly basis. This isn't a "corporate group". And they have no legal power over me. But they are the surest thing to a "band of brothers." Aside from my wife, they are one of the first lines of defense who get in my face about Bible reading, prayer, and moral purity in all areas.

You see, there is no "perfect accountability system." And if you've been hurt by a pastor in the past, I can empathize with you. My hope is that, like me, you would surround yourself with godly men and women who can partner with you and guarantee that you live a successful life.

People always ask me: Why are you and your wife so blessed? It's because we have an amazing amount of Godly feedback in every area of our lives. So the question I ask you is this: Do you have the same level of support? You may not need quite as much support and accountability and my wife and I; but, it doesn't hurt to get all of the Godly prayer, encouragement and wisdom that you can.