

What type of Church Government does Substance have? Who holds *you* Accountable?

First of all, let me warn you: I'm somewhat of a geek when it comes to church governance theory. Years ago, I wrote a nerdy and philosophical book called "Church Government Revolution" that has circled the globe. (I don't talk about it much because, it was written for pastors and it's NOT funny at all :) So, it's hard for me to stay concise on this 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 "Episcopalian" (bishop-oriented). In other words, Substance attempts to borrow the best from each of the four historical forms of church government. And the motive for this is to prevent all the silliness splitting and politics that occur in other forms of governance.

If you study church governance long enough, you'll find that every form of government has strengths and weaknesses. Unfortunately, most people never think about this stuff until a church disaster has occurred – which is sad because, when Christians get wounded, they often pendulum swing to forms of church government that are equally flawed.

Thankfully, Substance has a form of church governance that known for having "safeguards without stalemates." I'm actually quite proud of it. It's the least likely to split and the most likely to grow. And not surprisingly, it's the fastest growing form of church government on earth right now.

Most church governments were created in the Middle Ages (like Catholic and Episcopalian); other church governments (with lay-boards and church wide votes) only worked because 99% of the global churches were small (less than 150 members). Thus, back then, it made sense for churches to pull on *lay-people* to make decisions. However, when churches use these archaic models to lead sophisticated organizations (like a mega-churches) it often results in mega-disasters. Quite often, it's like running an NFL football team where season ticket holders can call the plays! It doesn't produce a lot of wins! And yet, amazingly, these types of boards sadly exist in churches all over. So, it's time we learn: "Bad forms of church government cause good people to behave badly."

Thankfully, many of the most successful churches in the world are switching to a model called the "Congregationalist hybrid" – a model of church government that is specifically designed to keep larger churches happy and healthy for far longer than other models. And here's how it works:

The hybrid model takes the "Biblical Elder" and splits it into 4 entities: Pastoral Staff; Trustees, lay-Elders (Deacons); and Overseers (outside Senior Pastors). And out of these 4 categories, it creates *three* separate boards who create an elegant balance of power that most church governments simply can't achieve. And here's how they function:

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 the senior pastor develop the budget, manage the assets, & aid in facility acquisition and management. They aren't distracted with pastoring people.

They don't enter into endless debates about worship formats. They simply keep the church on a brilliant financial track.

2). The Lay-Elders (Deacons) are responsible for shepherding the people. Rather than being endlessly distracted by building decisions, they focus on the heart-beat of church health: Small groups and pastoring. They aren't a committee of lay-people who whine to the pastor about church politics. They're a Spirit filled group who prays and pastors so much that politics don't constantly bother the pastors. 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 lead thriving churches *outside* of Substance. Generally, these are well loved "mentor" pastors who lead churches that have similar dna to Substance. 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*. Studies show that when church members decide the fate of their own pastor, local boards have a tendency to either be too harsh or too lenient – amplifying the credibility gap instead of bridging it.

Even worse, when boards of "lay people" are seen making complex decisions for mega-churches (without professional consultants), its not very reassuring to the staff (who are often *more qualified* than the lay people – yet, have no power). Thus, when crisis comes, most boards melt into a blur of emotion, sending the entire church into uncertainty. And THAT's when this board of outside senior pastors makes the biggest difference.

The impartial nature of an outside overseeing board eliminates the possibility of internal power struggles, subjective opinions, and "mixed motives" which often amplify a crisis or leadership vacuum. The sheep should never have to discipline or exonerate their shepherd.

Thus, overseers alone have the ability to remove, discipline, or exonerate a senior pastor. Even more they are successful 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, if you have any more questions about this, I wrote an entire book on it – and all of the church splits that refined it. And it's FREE (in pdf format) on my Backstage Pass page (on the Substance website.)

But the overarching point is this: the global church seriously needs to get smarter about the statistics on church government. Very few churches tend to stay united after the

founding pastor is gone – *unless* they have our form of church government.

But I still haven't answered the question: Who holds me accountable?

So, who holds me accountable?

Well, the trustees hold me accountable for good financial management (in fact, they set my salary, based on national averages). 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 regular 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." There is no form of church government that will compensate for pride and prayerlessness. And if you've been hurt by a pastor in the past, I can empathize with you. It's a huge reason why I wanted to plant a *better church*: a church that prays more than politics. And by the grace of God, Substance will bring life to wounded people... and do so for a very long time.