

EXAMINING CHURCH GOVERNANCE

Wil Berg, April 2020

Government is authorized by God for the protection, benefit, and peaceful existence of human society (Romans 13:1- 5; 1Peter 2:13-15). But these purposes and objectives cannot be properly achieved unless they are led and administered by righteous, just, God-fearing people.

However, as the following examples show, God's ways of governance have been distorted, corrupted and obliterated by Satan's influence, who is the worldwide god of this blinded age (2 Corinthians 4:4).

Throughout human history there have always been individuals who wanted to control and rule over others – even in churches. Predicting what would happen in the NT assemblies of God's called-out people [Greek=ekkllesia], Paul wrote, "from among yourselves men will rise up speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves" (Acts 20:30 – NKJV throughout except as indicated).

One way they did this was by elevating themselves above God's children and lording over them (2 Peter chapter 2; 3 John 9). For one example, the brethren in Corinth were deceived by ambitious false teachers who led them into spiritual bondage (2 Corinthians 11:3-4, 20).

Over the years many have been spiritually and emotionally damaged by harsh, overlording, uncaring governance practices.

In contrast, Jesus came proclaiming liberty to the oppressed (Luke 4:18), indicating that God does not want people to live under the subjection and control of other human beings.

Misleading Influences

Looking at more recent times, rule and control of members by church leaders occurred, but in different, more deceptive ways. For example, today many Christians still accept and believe the wording of the widely read 1611 King James Bible (KJV), which contains hierarchical church organization and control terminology (1 Timothy 3:1; Hebrew 13:7 and verse 17), not realizing its translation mistakes.

During the mid-20th century, when many Worldwide Church of God (WCG) doctrines were being studied and established, the KJV was the Bible most commonly used for teaching and research.

Back then few if any knew that the hierarchical words in the KJV Bible are not in the NT Greek text. They were deliberately put in by men who wanted to validate and authorize hierarchical church practices.

In the Western World the dominating religious influence throughout the Middle Ages was that of the Roman Catholic Church (RCC). It created a hierarchical, top-down governance structure of pope, cardinal, archbishop, bishop, priest and deacon.

The RCC used the Vulgate Bible that was translated into Latin from Hebrew and Greek texts by Jerome (345-419 AD). When he completed it around 405 AD, it became the official Bible of the RCC for the next 1000 years.

While the Vulgate was superior to other translations of the time, the Dutch Catholic priest and theologian Erasmus (1466-1536 AD) uncovered over 600 textual errors in it, and the Oxford and Cambridge trained William Tyndale (1494-1536 AD) found that the meanings of some Greek words were deliberately mistranslated to support the hierarchical governance teachings and practices of the RCC.

When the KJV was being translated, it was heavily influenced by the Church of England's Bishop Richard Bancroft, whose personal objective was to preserve the authority of the hierarchical governance structure of the Anglican Church, which was patterned after that of the RCC.

Bancroft had tight control over his handpicked translators, and was instrumental in keeping Vulgate governance wording in the KJV Bible, as he shared King James' strong belief in the divine right and authority of kings. (James even dissolved Parliament for ten years, and ruled as an absolute monarch during that period).

Bancroft also convinced King James that the future of the monarchy was connected with and dependent on the continuing authority of the Anglican Church hierarchical governance model.

Bancroft made sure that misleading translations of words supporting hierarchical governance doctrine and practice were retained in the KJV.

These irregularities are explained in much greater detail by Alister E. McGrath, Oxford Professor of Historical Theology, in his authoritative and very important book, In the Beginning, 2001.

Clarification of Words

Correcting the deliberate KJV mistranslations is important, because such words, (especially if they are connected with church governance), create wrong doctrine and practice that God never authorized or intended. Notice these examples:

Office - The KJV translators inserted the word "office" in five NT places to indicate someone who rules over God's people (Romans 11:13, 12:4; 1 Timothy 3:1, 10, 13 (see also **Bishop** and **Deacon** below). More accurate recent translations have omitted the word "office."

Bishoprick, Bishop – These are KJV translations of the Greek word "episkopos," which means "overseer," a man who is appointed to watch over and serve the needs of the brethren in a godly and orderly manner (Acts 1:20; 1 Timothy 3:1-2). He should be a righteous example who lovingly serves and shepherds God's people, rather than being an overlord (1 Peter 5:1-3).

Elder – Translated from the Greek word "presbuteros," which means "an older man" (Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1-3). It describes a responsibility and opportunity for wider service to the ekklesia, rather than a position of superiority and rulership. *Presbuteros* is similar to *episkopos*, and is used interchangeably with it (Mounce's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old & New Testament Words, 2006, page 208).

An elder [overseer] is to be a godly example to the brethren, not a dictator or tyrant (1 Peter 5:3). Catholics translate "presbuteros" as "priest" rather than "elder" (The Great Ecclesiastical Conspiracy, Third Revised Edition, page 18).

Deacon – From the Greek word “diakonos,” which means “servant” (Mounce, page 159). Like **elder**, it is not a position of hierarchical superiority or rulership.

Rule over – Examining the KJV translation of Hebrews 13:7 -“Remember them who have the rule over you” - the words “have the rule over you” are not in the Greek text which reads, “Remember your leaders who spoke to you the word of God” (The Greek English Interlinear New Testament, page 783).

“Rule over” in the KJV is an intentional mistranslation of the one Greek word “hegomai”, which means “to lead.” Adam Clark acknowledges this in his Commentary of this verse by translating it - “Remember your guides, who have spoken unto you the doctrine of God” (Volume 6, page 786).

Continuing in Hebrews 13, the KJV translators also changed verse 17 to read, “obey them who have the rule over you,” which intentionally endorsed the illegitimate hierarchical model of the RCC, that conflicts with Jesus’ statement in Matthew 23:8 – “for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and **you are all brethren**,” (not some above the others).

The dictionary section in Mounce’s, page 1297, #5634, explains that the Greek word for ‘obey’ (*hypakouo*) means “to give ear, to listen,” which is a much less authoritative meaning than being commanded by church leaders that the word “obey” conveys.

In biblical context and truth, the words “rule” and “obey” rightly apply to God the Father, rather than to human church leaders. “The Most High rules in the kingdom of men” (Daniel 4:17, 25, 32). “He rules by His power forever” (Psalm 66:7), but is not controlling, as this paper will explain.

In 2 Corinthians 1:24 Paul describes the serving relationship a minister of God should have with those he oversees: “Not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy, because it is by [your personal] faith you stand firm” [by God’s Holy Spirit in you - NIV].

Church, house of God – Bishop Bancroft had the following words put in the KJV translation of 1 Timothy 3:15, to make the reader think that they

described a church with its liturgy, rituals, ceremonies and clergy - "But if I tarry long, that thou mayest know how thou ought to behave thyself in the church of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and ground of the truth."

While the Greek word "oikos" is often translated as "house," it most often refers to an occupant or member of a house, household, or family. This is acknowledged in the NIV translation of 1 Timothy 3:15: "but if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and foundation of the truth." The word "Church" is not a building or corporate institution.

In Mounce's article on "Church," page 110, he mentions that it is noteworthy that the only occurrences of *ekklesia* in the gospels are in Matthew 16:18 - "on this rock I will build My church" (referring to God the Father who is mentioned in the previous verse), and Matthew 18:17 - "And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the church," (in this kind of case, to the elders and older experienced members, as in Exodus 18:21-22, and Deuteronomy 22:15 and 25:7).

As previously mentioned, many Church of God doctrines formed during the mid-19th to mid-20th centuries were based on the widely used KJV Bible that preceded the many newer and more accurate translations currently available. It should therefore not be surprising that many church leaders taught and practiced various kinds of hierarchical governance. The KJV Bible strongly influenced and misled many sincere people.

These and other deliberate KJV deceptions are explained extensively in The Great Ecclesiastical Conspiracy by George Davis, Michael Clark, and Kirk Pearson, (Third Revised Edition). It is available free for viewing or download from the following link:

<https://www.truthaccordingtoscripture.com/documents/books/conspiracy/Ecclesiastical%20Conspiracy.pdf>

A Wrong Interpretation

The Radio Church of God (later renamed Worldwide Church of God) published an article in 1950 stating that Jesus was the God of the Old Testament, (instead of the Father, who alone is the Supreme, Most High God of both the OT and NT—Isaiah 37:16; 44:6). In following years other doctrines were created that were also not based on Scripture.

This condition was similar to that of Isaiah's day: "Who take counsel but not of Me, and who devise plans, but not of My Spirit" (Isaiah 30:1

When I came to the Radio Church of God headquarters in Pasadena, California in 1955, I personally experienced the negative and spiritually damaging effects of wrong teachings and practices, which almost everyone at that time (including myself) thought were correct. Subjects such as OT God identity, prophecy, divorce and remarriage, true womanhood, child rearing, sequence of end-time events, church government, holy day meanings, worship music, were negatively affected by many wrong understandings and applications of biblical details.

Needing a Scripture based governance model and doctrine, leaders of the WCG connected the KJV wording of 1 Corinthians 12:28 – "first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, with Ephesians 4:11 – "apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers."

Realizing that "apostle" was not a current position, (one had to be a witness to Jesus' resurrection – Acts 1:22), and "prophet" was no longer an active role – Hebrews 1:1, WCG concluded that evangelists were first in authority, (top authority was changed to apostle when its founder was declared one), making evangelists second, pastors third, teachers (elders) and deacons were then next in hierarchical, military-like rank order, all of whom were over the brethren.

Many varied experiences show that a system of rank creates levels of class distinction that diminish and erode the love and camaraderie that people should have for one another. A system of rank creates a much different environment of how God wants His children to interact with each other.

Additionally, as the Greek-English Lexicon of the NT And Other Early Christian Literature, Third Edition, 2000, Bauer, Danker, Arndt and Gingrich, (BDAG), and the Analytical Greek Lexicon (Harper) and Phillips NT translation show, the 1 Corinthians 12:28 words “first,” “second,” and “third” are all adverbs - firstly, secondly, thirdly – that portray a common listing of things, rather than a hierarchical order of rank.

Paul clarified 1 Corinthians 12:28 by writing, “For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same **FUNCTION**” -not rank - (Romans 12:4). Also, the last part of 1 Corinthians 12:28 – “miracles, gifts of healings, helps, administrations, varieties of languages” – cannot be rationally understood as being levels of hierarchical authority.

God did not create His ministry to rule over His people. He instructed them to lovingly and gently serve them, and tend to their various needs

One major purpose of the elders is “For the equipping (developing) the saints for the work of ministry (Greek=service) for the edifying (building up) of the body of Christ” (Ephesians 4:12).

Pau added, “our authority which the Lord gave us [is] for edification [building up, giving encouragement] and not for your destruction” (2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10). Elders should be servants of God’s people, not dictators or overlords (1 Peter 5:3).

During my many years at WCG headquarters, its leader personally told me and others, on several different occasions, **that he did not understand church government**. He also wrote and spoke publically saying that he had to be in charge of doctrine to maintain control of the church.

In contrast, when the controversy about circumcision was about to divide the early NT church, the entire ekklesia at Jerusalem was involved in the final decision (Acts 15:22). The controversy was not resolved by a top leader or Council of Elders. (An ekklesia COE is never mentioned in the NT.)

Some have referred to the 24 elders at God's throne in heaven (Revelation 4) as an example of a Council of Elders. But the 24 elders are always described as worshiping God, rather than offering advice or making decisions. The Father does not need advice or counsel, as He is eternal and omniscient (all knowing).

Other wrong church governance practices (such as politicizing and voting for church positions of responsibility) contributed to the dissension and split of the Church of God (Seventh Day) in 1933. "The leadership was divided over the question of the amount of authority the Conference should exercise in matters of doctrine and policy." (The Story of the Church of God (Seventh Day), Robert Coulter, 1983, page 44)

God's Ways of Governing

The most fundamentally important governance truth is that God the Father is the Supreme, Most High, Living, Sovereign God and King of the heavens and the earth. "For thus says the LORD . . . who is God . . . I am the LORD [Hebrew=YHWH (Jehovah)=God the Father], and there is no other" (Isaiah 45:18).

"For the LORD is the great God, and the great King above all gods" (Psalm 95:3). "The LORD is King forever and ever" (Psalm 10:16). God the Father is King and Ruler over everything He created. It is therefore important to understand how He governs.

The Bible shows that the Father interacts with mankind very lovingly, truthfully, justly, gently and patiently, and wants humans to deal with each other in the same way.

However, from the time of Adam and Eve most people have NOT wanted God to be their King and Ruler, as they have wanted to determine for themselves what is right and wrong. But they need to understand that God deals justly and decisively in His time and way when sin gets out of hand.

The Father allows choices because in His wisdom and purpose He gives everyone the freedom to choose either His way of life, laws and instruction that lead to eternal life, or their own human inclinations that lead to eternal

death. Either way, all people are accountable to God as their Maker and Judge (Genesis 2:16-17).

The Father's way as King does not force or control anyone to make them His followers. God's desire and hope is to help all people understand and voluntarily choose to practice His laws because of the righteousness and goodness of His instructions, and for their own well-being, the benefit of all humanity, and the rest of His creation.

As the following examples show, **both the Old and New Testaments contain instruction about how to become holy as God is holy, how to obtain eternal life, and how to govern like God.**

Notice **Deuteronomy 30:15-20**. Shortly before his death Moses spoke to the second generation of Israelites coming out of Egyptian bondage. He repeated God's hopeful instruction: "See I have set before you today life and good, death and evil" (verse 15) . . . "therefore choose life, that both you and your descendants may live" (verse 19)

The Father wanted them to choose life rather than death for their own good, but He let them make the decision. Even though He was their Sovereign King, He gave them the freedom to make their own choices. He did not force, control, or lord over them. God wants all people to acquire the wisdom and experience to make right judgments and decisions (Proverbs 1).

To illustrate one of Israel's worst wrong decisions, 1 Samuel 8 tells of their rejection of God as their King. Looking at the governance examples of the Gentile nations around them, they thought that having a human king was better than having the Father as their King, even though Samuel explained in detail the very negative consequences of their decision (verses 9-18).

But Israel insisted on having a human king, so God angrily told Samuel to make them a king (verse 22; Hosea 13:11). Again, the Father did not impose His power and authority on them, but allowed them the liberty to make the choice.

Deuteronomy 17:14 ff shows that the Father foresaw Israel's desire to have a human king. He said that He would choose the first human king, who should govern without multiplying horses, wives, silver and gold for himself (verses 16-17).

Notice especially verse 18: "he shall write for himself a copy of this law in a book . . . read it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the Lord his God and be careful to observe all the words of this law and these statutes . . . **that his heart may not be lifted above his brethren**, that he may not turn aside from the commandment to the right or to the left."

Deuteronomy 17:18 teaches that leaders should humbly and sincerely love those they serve as themselves, realizing that they will be held accountable and judged by God for their decisions and actions, like all other people. *God is not a respecter of persons.*

Therefore, leaders should follow God's way of governance, which is to love, benefit, encourage, and support all people, rather than lording over, controlling, and suppressing them.

As the prime example of God's governing way, Jesus "did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many" (Matthew 20:28).

To ensure just (fair) governance at the start of the exodus, Moses followed his father-in-law's advice and appointed honest, righteous men to equitably judge the disputes and grievances of the Israelites: "So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they judged every small case themselves" (Exodus 18:25-26).

At the end of his life, just before Israel entered the promised land, Moses again gave the same instruction to the next generation. "You shall not show partiality in judgment; you shall hear the small as well as the great; you shall not be afraid in any man's presence, for the judgment is God's. The case that is too hard for you, bring it to me, and I will hear it" (Deuteronomy 1:17).

Ancient Israel also consulted the wisdom and experience of the older men of their cities. When decisions were difficult to make, they were brought to the elders at the city's gate, where judgment was made (Deuteronomy 21:19; 22:15; 25:7).

To emphasize the importance of righteous judgment, king David wrote, **"The rock of Israel [=the LORD=YHWH=Yehovah] spoke to me: 'He who rules over men must be just, ruling in the fear [awe, reverence] of God' "** (2 Samuel 23:2-3).

The Gift of Liberty

Looking next at **Leviticus 25**, which continues the example and principles of godly governance, God's loving, gracious, fair-to-all way during the Jubilee Year was to give liberty to those who were indentured, return property to original owners, giving them an opportunity for a new life, **prohibiting oppression** (verses 14 and 17), stopping lending of money for interest (verse 37), and **forbidding ruling over one another** (verses 43, 46 and 53).

Fulfilling Isaiah 61:1-2, Jesus came proclaiming liberty to the oppressed, those in spiritual bondage to Satan and to the sin in themselves (Luke 4:18). "Do you not know that to whom you present yourselves slaves to obey, you are that one's slaves whom you obey, whether of sin leading to death, or of obedience leading to righteousness" (Romans 6:16).

The Father does not prevent people from sinning and disregarding His laws, which are as eternal as He is. Some wondered about their relevance in Paul's day, so he answered them clearly, "Do we then nullify the law by this faith? Not at all. Rather, **we uphold the law**" (Romans 3:31, NIV).

Paul clarified God's liberty further in Galatians 5:1 and verse 13: "For you, brethren, have been called to liberty, **only do not use liberty as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.**"

Peter gave the same instruction: "as free, **not using liberty as a cloak for vice**, but as bondservants of God. Honor all people. **Love the brotherhood.** Fear God. Honor the king" (1 Peter 2:16-17).

The point that both apostles were making, besides emphasizing the importance of practicing godly love, is that **God's children should appreciate and enjoy their freedom and liberty, but never forget that both must be WITHIN GOD'S LAWS, not apart from them,**

While all of the Father's children are free to choose either righteousness or sin, both He and His Son hope they will choose righteousness. If His children sin and repent, the sacrifice of Jesus will blot the sin out and reconcile them with God the Father.

The Heart and Core of God's Way

Jesus emphasized to His disciples that God was their Father and they were all brethren in His family, as they were spiritually engendered by His Holy Spirit (Matthew 23:8-9; 2 Corinthians 6:18; Ephesians 2:19; 1 John 3:9). All of God's children are a holy and special people to the Father who loves them deeply (1 Peter 2:29).

Jesus also taught that the two foundational great commandments are "love the Lord your God [the Father] with all your heart" (Matthew 22:37), and "love your neighbor as yourself" (verse 39).

He further emphasized this critically important subject of godly love in John 13:34-35: "A new commandment I give to you [one that is on a higher level of spiritual application] that you **love one another as I have loved you**, that you also love one another. **By this all will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another.**"

As firstfruit "called out ones" (ekklesia), we are to become love in thought and deed as He (God the Father) is (1 John 4:17).

Jesus and His apostles repeatedly instructed the brethren to love, honor and respect one another. "Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others as better than himself. Let each of you look out not only for his own interests, but also for the interests of others" (Philippians 2::3-4).

With such teachings in mind, Jesus gave His iconic command to His disciples about how they should govern His Father's children: "You know

how the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and those who are great exercise authority over them, **YET IT SHALL NOT BE SO AMONG YOU**, but **whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you, let him be your slave** – just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28).

Also keep in mind that **everything Jesus taught was from His Father**: “He who does not love Me does not keep My words; and the word which you hear is not mine but the Father’s who sent Me” (John 14:24). “Whatever I speak, *just as the Father has told Me, so I speak*” (John 12:50). **Therefore when we disobey Jesus’ teachings, we disobey God the Father.**

Jesus is our Teacher (Matthew 23:8), who gives us instruction from His Father who gave it to Him (John 12:50).

God and His Son do not change (Malachi 3:6; Hebrews 13:8). They work together in love, Spirit, purpose and unity: “I and My Father are one” (John 10:30). Their oneness is maintained by the Father’s love, and Jesus’ love and faithful keeping of His Father’s word (John 8:55). Jesus set the example for God’s children of how they can also be at one with the Father.

Jesus and His apostles repeatedly emphasized the importance of godly love: **“You shall love the LORD your God [=the Father, YHWH, Deuteronomy 6:4] with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind . . . you shall love your neighbor as yourself”** (Matthew 22:37, 39; Leviticus 19:17). **“Everything in the law and the prophets hangs on these two commandments”** (Matthew 22:40, NEB).

“Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you” (Luke 7:27). **“He who says he is in the light, but hates his brother, is in darkness until now”** (1 John 1:9). **“Whoever hates his brother is a murderer, and you know that no murderer has eternal life abiding in him”** (1 John 3:15).

The Apostles' Teaching

The apostles understood and followed Jesus' governance instruction. They used His teaching to instruct the ekklesia how to be servant leaders in a godly way. Central to their purpose was the creation of a loving, gentle, non-abusive, collaborative congregational culture and environment.

Peter wrote, "Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly, **not as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock**" (1 Peter 5:2-3).

Paul explained, "**not that we lord it over your faith, but we work with you for your joy**, because it is by [your personal] faith you stand firm" (2 Corinthians 1:24, NIV).

Further, "**our authority, which the Lord gave us [is] for edification [building up, support, encouragement] and not for your [spiritual] destruction**" (2 Corinthians 10:8; 13:10).

"**But we were gentle among you, just as a nursing mother cherishes her own children**" (2 Thessalonians 2:7). "**Let your gentleness be known to all men**" (Philippians 4:5).

"Brethren, if a man is overtaken in any trespass, you who are spiritual **restore such a one in a spirit of gentleness**, considering yourself lest you also be tempted" (Galatians 6:1).

Paul also taught that Jesus is in His Father's character image (Colossians 1:15), and that we are "to be conformed to the image of His Son" (Hebrews 8:29), creating God's character image in us.

During the millennium, the Father Himself with Christ will deal gently with those who are bruised and oppressed (Isaiah 40:11; 42:3).

Peter reminded all, "**And if you call on the Father, who without partiality judges according to each one's work**, conduct yourselves throughout the time of your stay here in fear" (1 Peter 1:17). James reinforced this by warning, "If you show partiality you commit sin" (James

2:9). He also told the elders that they should be **“easy to be entreated”** (James 3:17 – KJV).

Disregarding James’ instruction to be easily entreated, the current practice of some Churches of God does not allow discussion of alternate view doctrinal papers between authors and evaluators. Neither do some permit elders to discuss controversial matters on online ministerial forums. Such practices are very controlling, unjust, and discouraging.

We should see the difference between absolute doctrines (like God’s laws, holy days), and interpretive ones (like prophecy, 8th day). When interpretive subjects are taught, they should be presented as being personal opinions subject to deeper understanding and possible change.

Even though repeated requests were made over the years to a number of church leaders for discussions of doctrinal differences, they were all refused, and in most cases, not even acknowledged.

A few of the off-shoot groups from WCG have created their own Constitution, By-Laws, policies, and procedures. These were written to protect and preserve WCG teachings, without realizing that many are not correct. This has made it almost impossible to change wrong doctrine.

Many former WCG members continue to believe God revealed new doctrinal truth only through its founding leader, and still consider his teachings to have the same or even greater authority and truth than the Bible.

This mind-set has had very damaging effects on the scattered Churches of God, because it has squelched God’s Spirit, and retarded growth in grace and knowledge. Following men instead of God has blinded many people, and kept them from personally searching the Bible for truth and greater understanding.

Jesus warned of such a condition, “in vain they worship Me, teaching as doctrines the commandments of men” (Mark 7:7). “All too well you reject the commandment of God, that you may keep your tradition” (verse 9).

To those who don't heed this instruction Jesus said, "Therefore whoever hears these sayings of Mine, **and does them**, I will liken him to a wise man who built his house on the rock: and the rain descended, the flood came, and the wind blew and beat on that house; and it did not fall, for it was founded on the rock.

"But everyone who hears these sayings of Mine and does not do them, will be like a foolish man who built his house on the sand: and the rain descended, and floods came, and the wind blew and beat in that house, and it fell. And great was its fall" (Matthew 7:24-27).

Early Church Practices

In 1 Corinthians 12 the early NT organization of God's ekklesia was likened by Paul to the human body, which needs all its parts to function best. God gives different spiritual gifts (talents, abilities) to each person, to be used "for the profit of all" (verse 7). Each member is important, no one is excluded or lessened. *Even "those members who seem to be weaker are necessary"* (verse 22).

Paul added, "the whole body, joined and knit together by what every joint supplies, according to the effective working by which every part does its share, causes growth of the body for the edifying of itself in love" (Ephesians 4:16).

Details indicate that 1 Corinthians 14 describes early NT worship services, practices and problems. Men were given opportunities to speak, but not to confuse by talking in different languages without interpretation. Women were not invited to speak during services (verse 34).

"For you [men] can all prophesy one by one" [verse 31 -prophesying in this context is one who "speaks edification and exhortation and comfort to men" - verse 3], "that all may learn and all may be encouraged" (verse 31).

"And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets" (verse 32). This vague and hard to understand comment is not explained. It might be showing that the speakers were helping each other "not to think beyond what is written" (1 Corinthians 4:6).

The Master Potter

To help develop us as profitable servants, the Scriptures teach that God the Father is the Master Potter, who works together with His children to shape them into the image of His spiritual character. "But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You our potter, and all we are the work of Your hand" (Isaiah 64:8).

This process of becoming holy and growing in God's character is ongoing (Ephesians 2:10). It is foundational to the baptismal covenant between the Father and our spiritually engendered selves (Jeremiah 31:33; Ezekiel 36:27; Acts 2:38; Hebrews 8:10). He leads and helps us by His Spirit to recognize and respond to our need to repent of disobeying His laws, to discipline ourselves into alignment with His righteous standards (1 Corinthians 9:27), and to produce spiritual fruit (Galatians 5:22-23)..

As the Supreme Craftsman, He is working with and shaping His children by His Spirit to become as He is - loving, righteous, just, truthful, compassionate, merciful, gentle, gracious, long suffering, forgiving, peaceful, faithful.

These are the characteristics we need to develop to become like our Maker. These are the attributes Jesus called "the weightier matters of the law" (Matthew 23:23), and Paul described as "the whole armor of God," that shield us from Satan's influences (Ephesians 6:11 ff).

"For if you live according to the flesh you will die; but if by the Spirit you put to death the deeds of the body, you will live. For as many as are led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God" (Romans 8:13-14).

In summation, God does not govern people by lording over and controlling them. He leads and instructs us in love and concern. He helps us to grow spiritually and make righteous choices and decisions. The Father does this so we will have become love as He is, and have confidence of being pleasing to Him at the time of our judgment (1 John 4:8, 16-17).