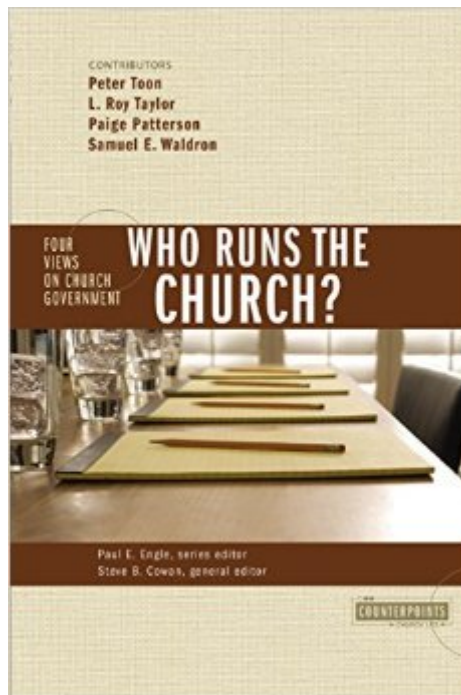


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# Who Runs The Church?: 4 Views On Church Government (Counterpoints: Church Life)



## Synopsis

Churches have split and denominations have formed over the issue of church government. Yet while many Christians can explain their particular church's form of rule and may staunchly uphold it, few have a truly biblical understanding of it. What model for governing the church does the Bible provide? Is there room for different methods? Or is just one way the right way? In *Who Runs the Church?* Four predominant approaches to church government are presented by respected proponents: • Episcopalianism (Peter Toon) • Presbyterianism (L. Roy Taylor) • Single-Elder Congregationalism (Paige Patterson) • Plural-Elder Congregationalism (Samuel E. Waldron). As in other Counterpoints books, each view is followed by critiques from the other contributors, and its advocate then responds. The interactive and fair-minded nature of the Counterpoints format allows the reader to consider the strengths and weaknesses of each view and draw informed, personal conclusions.

## Book Information

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## Customer Reviews

This is a key book for anyone seeking to understand the different views regarding church government. Following the classic Counterpoints style, advocates for each of the four positions state their case, and then the other three critique each presentation. There is also a "Closing Remarks" section that provides a final opportunity for each contributor to respond to their critics. This approach allows the reader to examine the varying church government models as explained and defended by

people who actually hold the respective views, and to listen in as these scholars interact with and challenge each other. It's proven to be an enlightening approach in other works, and no less so with this book. The book begins with a readable introduction to the topic by the editor Steven Cowan. This section is thorough, but concise, getting right to the point. I thought this was very well-written, a pleasure to read, and serves to draw the reader into the discussion. Fairly quickly, we get an idea of the dividing lines between the various views. Peter Toon (presenting Episcopalianism) doesn't spend much time defending his view scripturally. He feels that the Bible doesn't give us a definitive model of church government. He also believes that the early history of the church was providentially guided by the Holy Spirit, and is thus an authoritative guide for later generations. All of the other participants note the lack of biblical support for Toon's view---even noting that it contradicts the New Testament's equating the terms 'elder/presbyter' and 'bishop/overseer/episcopos' as referring to the same office. This is an important issue because the other three all claim that Scripture does, in fact, teach a definite model of church polity. All three of Toon's fellow contributors question the acceptance of church history as authoritative, and some wonder why Toon stops at the first five centuries. They also challenge Toon with the historical fact of unorthodox practices and beliefs that crept into the early church. (Why accept some historical developments as divinely guided and authoritative, but not all?) Toon places a lot of weight on the church's supposed determination of the canon of Scripture. In my opinion, he mischaracterizes both the nature of canon and the process of recognizing and affirming the biblical canon.

L. Roy Taylor presents Presbyterianism. It was interesting to see how much of his view was colored by, possibly even dependent on, his covenantal theology. During the course of his chapter, he gives a fairly extensive overview of church history (managing to sneak in a little support for his eschatological views, and stacking the deck against his opponents). A primary division between Taylor and the two Congregationalists (Patterson and Waldron) is the extent to which the early churches were connected. Taylor sees biblical principles requiring organization, authority, and accountability beyond the local congregation. Patterson and Waldron see the New Testament churches as autonomous, but voluntarily interdependent (in spirit, not in any official capacity). The only text to which Taylor can point for definitive support of this extra-congregational system of church courts is Acts 15. Waldron protests that this declaration was authoritative to the other churches specifically because of its apostolic nature, a setting which is historically unique and unrepeatable after the late first century. Patterson questions where these courts of Presbyterianism are clearly found in Scripture. Paige Patterson's chapter is titled "Single-Elder Congregationalism," but could be more accurately described as 'primary-elder Congregationalism' (as Waldron notes in his response). This is very similar to the

monoepiscopacy (elders plus single bishop leading each church) that led to a full-fledged episcopal model in the late second century. Patterson doesn't have a problem with a church having multiple elders as long as there is one primary pastor. I was surprised by the lack of a robust case from Patterson. There seemed to be a tremendous amount of appeal to history and tradition, while claiming to be establishing the NT pattern. While he allows for the possibility of churches adding multiple elders, he assumes that the NT churches began with one elder and added more as needed. He also seems to assume that many of the NT churches still had only one elder. This appears to me a real stretch since no passage confirms any of this. Waldron claims that Patterson is merely defending the status quo, and this seems to ring true, at least regarding the distinctive role of the pastor. Samuel Waldron presents "Plural-Elder Congregationalism." The difference between the two Congregationalists involves the plurality of elders, the parity between the elders, and the appropriateness of distinguishing a pastor from the other elders. Waldron convincingly (to me) establishes a consistent biblical pattern of each church being led by a plurality of elders. This is such a strong pattern, supported by many related passages, that Waldron feels that, while not sinful, it is abnormal and unhealthy for a church to be led by a single elder and that this is a situation that would need to be rectified. He also argues exegetically against the Presbyterian distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders. While he allows for diversity of gifting, influence, and extent of ministry among the elders---even to the point of a de facto first among equals---he points out that there is no biblical support for setting apart one elder and giving him an office (e.g. senior pastor) in distinction to the other elders. He challenges both Taylor and Patterson that if they are willing to distinguish between elders and a pastor despite both of them teaching that Scripture equates the two, how can they criticize Episcopalians for distinguishing between elders and a bishop in the same manner? Waldron begins his chapter with a very helpful explanation of the two aspects of Congregationalism: the autonomous nature of churches, and the democratic involvement of the congregation in making decisions. I appreciate this because there seems to be a lot of confusion today regarding the exact nature of Congregationalism. Waldron frequently uses the word 'democratic' to describe congregational involvement, and this will be off-putting to some (as it was to me). However, he clarifies that he is using the word hesitantly, and both he and Patterson warn against the extremely democratic form of Congregationalism with which many readers will be most familiar. Waldron repeatedly refers to the "consent" of the congregation, which will be much more palatable to some. What he and Patterson seem to be advocating in their Congregationalism is a process where the elders lead the church in arriving at a consensus regarding the will of Christ for His church. I think this could be a healthy corrective for churches that practice an overly democratic

model, and a healthy challenge to those, like myself, who have avoided what we thought of as Congregationalism because of the abuses and weaknesses of the extreme democratic approach. This aspect of the discussion in this book was thought-provoking to me in a way that I didn't expect. As mentioned, the contributors are given a final closing to respond to their fellow writers and to make their case one last time. This gave a nice sense of completion to the book, but it didn't really add any new insights. I think this book is a wonderful resource, and I warmly recommend it. We plan to use it as part of our in-house pastoral training program.

One of the divisive matters in many churches today is the subject of church polity. In particular, what is the appropriate form of church government? In *Who Runs the Church?: 4 Views on Church Government* the editors compile the views of representatives of the four predominant types of church government. Just about every form of church government is some variation of one of these four. The four views discussed are Episcopalianism, Presbyterianism, Single-Elder Congregationalism, and Plural-Elder Congregationalism. Arguing for Episcopalianism is Dr. Peter Toon, rector of Christ Church, Biddulph Moor, Diocese of Lichfield, in the Church of England. Arguing the position of Presbyterianism is Dr. L. Roy Taylor the clerk/coordinator of administration of the General Assembly of the Presbyterian Church in America. Presenting the position of Single-Elder Congregationalism is Dr. Paige Patterson, president of Southwestern Baptist Theological Seminary in Fort Worth, Texas. And presenting the case for Plural-Elder Congregationalism is Samuel E. Waldron, Ph.D. candidate in systematic theology at the Southern Baptist Theological Seminary. A typical chapter starts with one of them presenting their position on their chosen form of church government and why it is the most appropriate one. This presentation is then followed by commentary by each of the people with differing views. Each presents their case with passion and argues it well. If you want to understand why some churches choose one form of government or why others feel that position is wrong you will find excellent explanations in this book. *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government* is highly recommended to anyone interested in this area.

This book is good for pastors to read. It's also good for those who are considering a denominational change. If you are a young pastor, this book will help you understand church government and the model that best fits your leadership style. Each scholar articulates his position well, and all four views are supported by Scripture. No one view appears to be against Scripture. Churches in the First and Second Century may have varied in their approaches, according to the authors. And it's

obvious that God uses all four models today. The four are described here but may be summarized in three. Episcopal is "hierarchical" with the bishop ordaining each priest or rector in the local church. This model includes churches such as the Catholic Church, Anglican Church, Episcopal Church, the United Methodist Church, and some Lutheran groups. Presbyterian is "representative" with presbyters or elders providing the oversight of local churches and pastors. This model includes the Presbyterian Church (USA), Christian Reformed Church, the Assemblies of God, and others. Congregational is "independent" with the pastor providing the oversight of the local church without any external ecclesiastical authority (or regional district) as found in the other two models. This model includes churches such as the Southern Baptists, General Baptists, Churches of Christ, and other independent churches. (The fourth view is an offshoot of this model but with a plurality of pastors as the authority instead of a single pastor). If you are considering a denominational change, particularly for leadership reasons, then this book is a must read. It gives insight into how denominations function and why. It will confirm which model best fits your style and goals. Some pastors enjoy climbing ecclesiastical ladders within a denomination, while others enjoy their exclusive focus on the local church. It may save some pastors years of frustration fighting red tape, while birthing vision in others who desire to oversee a region of churches. It is well written and researched.

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