

Question: How would you best describe the system of government in the church of Christ?

It will help to begin by pointing out what systems of government do not exist. First, she is not an “authoritarian” institution: characterized by demanding unquestioning obedience from her members, like a dictatorship. Secondly, she is not a “democracy”: a government by the members through elected officials. Third, she is not “totalitarian” in nature: imposing authority that exercises absolute and centralized control over all aspects of the lives of her members.

Jesus described His disciples, that make up His church, as sheep. Of them He stated, “*My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me.*” The tenor of that statement will not fit very well in the systems of government described above.

However, one could describe it as a “theocracy”: a government ruled by or subject to religious authority. The word “monarchy” comes to mind as an apt description of the government of the Lord’s church. A monarchy is a state (including people), headed by a monarch. A monarch is one who reigns over a territory, by hereditary right, as a sole or absolute ruler, a sovereign, such as a king.

If you will look carefully at the definition of theocracy stated above, you will notice that it is a government ruled by a recognized authority. God has rarely seen fit to govern by His primary and personal authority. He has delegated that authority to others.

The first delegation of authority is from Father to Son. “*God...has in these last days spoken to us by His Son*” (*He 1:2*). Jesus reigns supreme, by inheritance, and His willing subjects constitute His body the church, “*those who will inherit salvation*” (*cf. He 1; 1Ti 6:15*). Jesus stands nearest the Father in delegated authority (*Mt 28:18*).

Christ, then, delegated authority to the apostles, “*He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me*” (*Mt 10:40*). The magnitude of their authority is obvious when reading the statements He made to them: “*Receive the Holy Spirit. If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained*” (*Jn 20:22-23*). “*Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven*” (*Mt 18:18*). Such authority was never given to the church. The church can only direct people to what Christ and the apostles taught.

Jesus Christ now sits on David’s throne as prophesied in the Old Testament and proclaimed on Pentecost (*2Sam 7:16; Ac 2:30*). The apostles now sit upon twelve thrones judging the church, spiritual Israel (*Mt 19:28; Ro 2:28-29; Ga 6:16*). It is clear that the work of the apostles is perpetual. “How”, you ask, “if they are no longer with us?” Oh, but they are! Their writings, which are a product of the Holy Spirit, are with us unto this very day. As we pointed out last week, the teaching of the apostles constitutes “*all truth*” (*cf. Jn 14:16-17, 26; 15:26-27; 16:13*). They gave us the very word of Christ.

Elders (i.e., pastors or overseers), deacons, evangelists and teachers each have some delegated authority from Christ. Authority that is tied to their responsibility as set forth in the New Testament. Yet, it is not law making authority. In short, the church must always look to her Head, even Christ. God, the Father, “*put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all*” (*Ep 1:22-23*). This “system” of government we must defend until He comes again! -- C. Boyd Jennings