

Thoughts about a Portion of the Proposed Constitution for MBC

Introduction:

One of the over-arching concerns about the Constitutional changes being proposed by the Elders is the way in which organizational power is handled. It would seem that those of us who believe in Jesus Christ for who He is, would also agree that we believe in the Power of Ideas. In contrast, we may be slower to recognize that our adversaries believe in the Idea of Power. Power to control does seem to be the underlying theme here.

The Distribution of Power and Managing Control in Organizations:

When the Founding Fathers were crafting the mechanisms of American governance, as Christian Principled thinkers, they well understood the sinful nature of man. Accordingly, they set about to create an organizational structure for governance that would have in-built protections against this sinful nature and guard against the misuse of power.

Such a protection – an organizational device called “the separation of powers principle” – is clearly exemplified in one of the foremost Primary Documents – the U.S. Constitution. The Founders clearly understood when the power to control is too highly concentrated among too few in charge, it lends itself to corruption and misuse. Absolute power corrupts absolutely (Lord Acton). Accordingly, they worked to separate power and break-it up into pieces. In so doing, this separation could serve as a check and/or balance within the system of governance. No one branch or section of government would have enough power on its own to dominate the work of governance. Such work would require cooperation among the separated powers to accomplish.

Some quick examples to illustrate: The members of the House of Representatives stand for election every two years. That way, they could only stay in office if elected to do so. As a minimum, a representative termed to be a ‘bad apple’ could be removed by the voters within two years and not be allowed to continue.

The Legislative Branch, citizens elected by the people, author the laws. But the Executive, also a citizen elected by the people, commissions them and enforces them. Any laws submitted to the Executive for concurrence, but found to be defective in some way, can be vetoed by the Executive.

The Judicial Branch, citizens appointed by elected officials, hears cases that test the legality of these laws and compares them with the Constitution for conformity. They have the power to overturn laws that do not meet such conformity. As they were appointed and not elected directly, their power is also constrained by the power of the House to Impeach and the Senate to Convict.

There are many more examples, but these help to illustrate how law making and law management was intended to occur through distributed powers and cooperation between the branches. And while the country is led by these elected officials, the people exercise a very powerful say in who those officials are. As Lincoln said, a *“government of the people, by the people, for the people”*.

The Founders gave us some wonderful modeling to work with, as the same concerns over the concentration of power apply to nearly every organization. And while our governance mission at McLean Bible Church is somewhat different from government – we seek to do God’s will as distinct from doing the people’s will – the principles apply to churches as well, for the organization of a church is still comprised of human sinners.

When looking at McLean Bible Church, we have enjoyed a very similar blessing, under the current MBC Constitution. **McLean Bible Church is a Congregational Church.** In our application, we are an ***Elder led, Member controlled church***. The overall authority is retained by the Members of the church. Though the Elders have enormously important roles to play in the church and they lead us in many important ways, the members of our church retain ultimate control over their selection.

Members can nominate candidates for Elder, but the Elders themselves largely supervise the process of selecting new elder nominees for election. Once elected, if there are problems with individual Elders or the Elder Board as a whole, however, there are practicable means available for the Members to take corrective action. The members of our church exercise ultimate control over the selection and retention of Elders.

The Proposed Constitution Seeks to Undo this Blessing:

There are many articles of our current Constitution that are targeted for change in the Proposed Constitution. Many or most of these changes are related to this issue of the distribution of power and managing control within the church. Consequently, they would significantly alter the nature of our church. The implementation of the Proposed Constitution would turn the situation on its head and change our church from an ***Elder led, Member controlled church*** to an ***Elder led and controlled church!***

Some of the major changes include:

Majority Threshold Change – Three-Quarters to Two-Thirds: The majority threshold for selecting Elders would be reduced from Three-Quarters to Two-Thirds, which waters-down and dilutes the solidarity by which selections are made and makes it makes it easier to get a questionable Elder elected. Stop and think for a moment. It is already a precarious situation in the current Constitution to think that an Elder could get elected with only 75% of the vote. That means that 25% of the members did not want him! That is a very large portion of the members who disagree with the selection. That large of a disagreement not only can generate problems, but is usually an indicator something is wrong with the candidate. The Proposed Constitution only makes matters worse by reducing the majority threshold to Two-Thirds. Now we can elect an elder whom a Third of the church did not want! This increases the opportunity for disunity and makes it much easier to slip-in a marginal candidate. (See: Current – Art VI, Sec 4 / Proposed - Art V, Sect 3 b.)

Employees on the Elder Board:

In the current Constitution, the Associate pastoral members could not comprise more than One-Third of the Elder Board. Under the language of the new Proposed Constitution, this description changes the name from “Associate Pastoral Staff” to “employees of the church” and the limit increases to One-Half. This will increase the influence on the Board and further support the will of current leadership, as the livelihood of employees is under the control of the Elders who are in majority. (See: Current – Art VI, Sec 1 / Proposed - Art VI, Sect 1 b.)

Term Limitations Essentially Meaningless:

Under the current Constitution, Elders are limited to serve a defined term of three (3) years, with One-Third of the Board to be chosen each year. This provided a very nice rate of rotating members on and off the board. It was a good frequency for spelling Elders from service and giving them a rest, while refreshing the composition of the Board membership and the benefits that can bring. Further, it helped to prevent power from becoming deeply seated and concentrated. Under the Proposed Constitution, if the Board cannot get the required two-thirds to elect a replacement for a term-expired incumbent Elder, the Board can extend the term – think re-elect – the term-expired incumbent Elder until the next church meeting. As the Board will have total control of the new process under the Proposed Constitution, this means that an Elder could be extended indefinitely, should the Board so desire. (See: Current – Art VI, Sec 1 / Proposed - Art VI, Sect 1 c.)

Elder Requirement for Six Members Essentially Meaningless:

Under the current Constitution, the Elder Board is to consist of “*a minimum of six (6) elected elders, plus the pastor-teacher.*” And If the Board of Elders fails to consist of a minimum of six (6) elected elders following the election process (not including the pastor-teacher) the elders have to submit additional nominations to the congregation for approval within ninety (90) days. A second election. This requirement disappears under the Proposed Constitution as it says that “Board of Elders shall retain its authority under this Constitution”, even if the number falls below six for any reason. The second election language is struck. (See: Current – Art VI, Sec 1, 4 and 11 a. / Proposed - Art VI, Sect 1 b.)

A ‘Safety Valve’ Method for Dismissing a Problem Board:

Under the current Constitution, if the Board fails to achieve the required six in that second election, then the entire Board that remains is subject to a “Vote of Confidence”. Providing Elder Nominees acceptable to the Members is a core responsibility of the Board. So this “Vote of Confidence” was to be held at a Special Congregational Meeting to determine whether they should remain in office or be replaced with a new Board.

The new board would be nominated and directly elected by the Members themselves in this instance. The Proposed Constitution has no such method or ‘safety valve’, no such way of dealing with corruption or otherwise problem Elders. The “Vote of Confidence” language has been struck. The Elders would retain all the authority if this Proposed Constitution is approved. And the Members would have no recourse. (See: Current – Art VI, Sec 4 and 11 / Proposed – no provisions)

A Disingenuous Claim for a “Safety Valve”:

Some of the proponents for the Proposed Constitution might object to the statements immediately above and claim that there is in fact a ‘safety valve’ – a method to remove problem Elders. They might point to the newly Proposed Constitution’s Article VI, Sect 1, f. But this cite is not a viable ‘Safety Valve’. This measure requires a written statement signed by *“at least fifty percent (50%) of the total number of Church members entitled to vote.”* This is 50% of ALL members, not just those at a Congregational Meeting! This presents a hurdle that is in practicality, so unlikely to be overcome as to be considered impossible to jump. So in reality, it is not a viable solution. Further, to add insult to injury, when you examine the last sentence in this clause, it states that: *“...an elder in office may not be removed by such written statement if such removal results in the number of elders in office being less than three.”* So it is impossible to completely remove the Board of Elders, given these restrictions. There is nothing that even approaches a “Safety Valve” in the Proposed Constitution. (See: Current – Art VI, Sec 4 and 11 / Proposed – Article VI, Sect 1, f.)

Elimination of Nominating Committee:

Under the current Constitution, a Nominating Committee *“appointed by the Board of Elders, consisting of six (6) members, three (3) or more of whom shall be church members at large.”* is established to provide a list of candidates for the Board to consider. In the Proposed Constitution, there is no such committee composed of church members. Another way in which the voice of members has been silenced. (See: Current – Art VI, Sec 3 / Proposed – No Provision)

Membership Requirements:

After becoming a member, under the current Constitution, your right to vote can be removed under four(4) *objective* conditions: 1) You move out of the commuting area, 2) You resign your membership, 3) As a result of church discipline, or, 4) are absent from worship services of McLean Bible Church for a period of eight (8) consecutive weeks without reasonable excuse. Under the Proposed Constitution, the scope for possible loss of voting rights and/or membership has been greatly broadened and expanded. Under the Proposed Constitution, a member could now be *“removed from membership by the Board of Elders based on the Board’s determination that the individual no longer satisfies constitutional membership requirements.”* This is brand new language and such *‘requirements’* do not appear to be defined elsewhere in the document. This then becomes a totally *subjective* criterion. As a result, the Board of Elders become the sole determiners of what those requirements are and in turn, would have the latitude and unchecked power to silence the voice of any member who does not agree with them. (See: Current – Art V, Sec 4, 5 & 6 / Proposed – Article V, Sect 1)

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There are many other dangerous problems with the Proposed Constitution. But in the interest of time, I will limit this piece to what has been covered thus far. Even so, as this is an ‘all or nothing’ proposition and we cannot consider these changes individually, there would seem to be more than enough evidence here to indicate that this Proposed Constitution ***should not be approved !***

Unfortunately, there has been no serious or genuine attempt on the part of the Elders to do an in-person, item-by-item run-through, explaining each proposed change and its implications, in a meeting before all the Members who will be voting on this matter, and allowing them ample time to digest the significant and numerous changes, followed by an opportunity to voice their views in front of all of those voting members, before the vote.

But then, limiting information about the proposal, limiting discussion among the voting members and limiting time to digest and consider the implications by members, would all serve the idea of consolidating power, if this is what they are attempting to do.

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Under the current Constitution, the powers are distributed and separated. It utilizes a team approach between Elders and Members. Further, the Congregation of Members retains the final say on who their leaders are. In the Proposed Constitution, the Elders are totally in charge and the Congregation of Members is there simply for window dressing. They have no real power. They have no real say.

In my humble opinion, this is another in a string of attacks on our church to consolidate power and silence the Membership.

The implementation of the Proposed Constitution would turn the current Constitution on its head. It would change it from a blessing of freedom and distributed power in serving the Lord together as a church body with in-built checks and balance, into a curse to serve the power and tyranny of the church's leadership. We would no longer be serving Christ. We would be serving the Elders. In my view, it would change our church from an ***Elder led, Member controlled church*** to an ***Elder Cult!***

Concentrating power like this will only lead to corruption and misuse of that power.

Is that what we want for McLean Bible Church? I for one don't think so.

One More Very Concerned Member