

IS A PYRAMIDAL STRUCTURE OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT SCRIPTURAL?

“Vanity is the quicksand of reason.”

~ George Sand

When people think too highly of themselves, it clouds their ability to reason honestly, and creates a sinkhole for themselves and others. In religion, the quagmire of arrogance can cloud a person’s ability to view scripture honestly, thus harming the church.

We have often heard it explained that Moses set up captains of 10’s, 50’s, 100’s, and 1,000’s to judge matters, with all the most difficult problems coming to him. Is this an example of a pyramid structured government system? Such has been taught for many years now. I remember well the handouts with a large triangle on them and the names of church administration officials organized on the top of that pyramid, and under them various levels of underlings, all the way down to the brethren or church membership. This was taught as being the chain of command that is likened to the system set up by Moses. In such a system, the members and field ministers have little or no contact with the “top man.” They had to go to the “captain” directly over them for answers or for resolution of problems, who in turn could go to “his captain” over him, and so forth. Thus the man at the “top” would not be disturbed by those at the bottom, if he did not wish to be.

The concept of church government being a pyramid structure is still a primary teaching in various COG organizations today. To the casual student of scripture this makes sense, and no one wants to be rebellious towards what God has ordained. **To one seeking to bolster his authority and control over the people, this teaching seems crucial, and is a core doctrine of his church.** One evangelist church leader instructed all his paid ministry, and unpaid elders (at a recent ministerial conference) to teach this form of church government at least twice per year in every church area.

It has been explained like this: The captains of 10’s answer to the captains of 50’s, who in turn answer to the captains of 100’s, who in turn answer to the captains of 1,000’s, who in turn answered to Moses. It is taught that this is a pyramid from the top down, with Moses at the top, then the captains of 1,000 under him, and so forth. That’s the way it has been explained since the mid-1950’s when the pyramidal hierarchy of church government was first beginning to be taught in the Worldwide Church Of God. However, is that belief really based upon good Bible scholarship? God’s Word instructs us to “Prove all things (1

Thes.5:21). Let's do it:

Exod 18:14 *"So when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he did for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit, and all the people stand before you from morning until evening?"*

15 *And Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God.*

16 *"When they have a difficulty, they come to me, and I judge between one and another; and I make known the statutes of God and His laws."*

17 *So Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you do is not good.*

18 *"Both you and these people who are with you will surely wear yourselves out. For this thing is too much for you; you are not able to perform it by yourself.*

19 *"Listen now to my voice; I will give you counsel, and God will be with you: Stand before God for the people, so that you may bring the difficulties to God.*

20 *"And you shall teach them the statutes and the laws, and show them the way in which they must walk and the work they must do.*

21 *"Moreover you shall select from all the people able men, such as fear God, men of truth, hating covetousness; and place such over them to be rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.*

22 *"And let them judge the people at all times. Then it will be that every great matter they shall bring to you, but every small matter they themselves shall judge. So it will be easier for you, for they will bear the burden with you.*

23 *"If you do this thing, and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all this people will also go to their place in peace."*

24 *So Moses heeded the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.*

25 *And Moses chose able men out of all Israel, and made them heads over the people: rulers of thousands, rulers of hundreds, rulers of fifties, and rulers of tens.*

26 *So they judged the people at all times; the hard cases they brought to Moses, but they judged every small case themselves."*

An important point to notice is what Moses and the captains actually did. They did not rule over the people as they saw fit. Rather, they were to **"make known the Statutes and laws of God"** (verses 16 & 20). If God's Word did not seem clear on a point, then Moses would inquire from God for the answer (verse 19). Thus Moses and these captains primarily were to apply and teach God's Statutes and Judgments to the people – not lord over or control them. **Was this a pyramid?**

This teaching reminds me of some of the many trick stories that are told as a joke in a particular manner and order, so as to cause the hearer to think in a certain way that makes the riddle or problem more difficult than it really is. We all get a laugh from these clever stories. For example: How many CLEAN animals did Moses take into the ark? Answer = None. Moses was not alive when Noah built the ark.

So it is with the recounting of the captains of 1,000's and 100's, etc. It has been explained in such a way as to also "give a slip" to the casual reader or listener. Was God or Moses

establishing a pyramidal form of government? Answer = No. Let's see from God's Word.

Often students of God's Word will ask why the account in Deuteronomy is slightly different than the parallel account in Exodus, Numbers or Leviticus. For example, the account of how to count Pentecost is explained differently using different words in Deuteronomy than it is in Leviticus. Deuteronomy occasionally states different Statutes in a different order – and with sometimes different words – from the way they were given in Leviticus, Exodus or Numbers. Why? Those who spend time studying the Statutes will know. The answer is given at the beginning of the book of Deuteronomy.

Deut 1:5 “On this side of the Jordan in the land of Moab, Moses began to **explain** [expound (NAS)] this law, saying...”

Moses “**explained**” the laws that had been previously given, in order to clarify and explain them. Moses undertook to “**expound**” the laws. Moses had seen (for about 40 years) where the Israelites had confusion regarding the Statutes and instructions from God's laws. Deuteronomy was not a second giving of the law, as some have stated. Why would it need to be given a second time, when they still had the first giving recorded? In Deuteronomy, **God inspired Moses to EXPLAIN and EXPOUND what had previously been given**, with some additional information and warnings for Israel at the end of the book.

Therefore one should understand the book of Exodus IN LIGHT OF MOSES' EXPLANATION in Deuteronomy OF WHAT WAS MEANT, not the other way around. Not many seem to understand this today, since not many have learned to value and carefully study God's Statutes, which make us wiser (Deut.4:5-10 & Ps.119:97-104).

Let's see if we find a pyramidal form of governance being taught in the parallel account in Deuteronomy:

Deut 1:12 “*How can I alone bear your problems and your burdens and your complaints?*
13 *'Choose wise, understanding, and knowledgeable men from among your tribes, and I will make them heads over you.'*

14 *And you answered me and said, 'The thing which you have told us to do is good.'*

15 *So I took the heads of your tribes, wise and knowledgeable men, and made them heads over you, leaders of thousands, leaders of hundreds, leaders of fifties, leaders of tens, and officers for your tribes.*

16 *Then I commanded your judges at that time, saying, 'Hear the cases between your brethren, and judge righteously between a man and his brother or the stranger who is with him.'*

17 *'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 to me, and I will hear it.'*”

In verse 13 the KJV and other translations say, “choose you.” “YOU” choose, not Moses.

This was not a matter of Moses setting up a pyramidal hierarchy of one-man rule over a group or council who then ruled over others in a pyramid. Moses told the people to CHOOSE! He did not choose for them! Moses then confirmed, ordained, or publicly established the leaders that each tribe or family had chosen as the most respected patriarch of that family. This was a more “mature” version of the same family system we see among Abraham, Jacob, Esau and Joseph, as heads of their growing families or tribes. This was not an appointment from men “above.” The selection was made by the people as they discussed and chose among themselves, and notified Moses of their choice. These were well-respected family or tribal leaders chosen by the people according to their family pedigree and leadership qualities (Num.1:16-18 & Deut.1:13).

Notice further what Moses said to each of the captains in verse 17: “...The case that is too hard for you, bring it to me, and I will hear it.” The captain of a small family of only 10 that had a case too hard, was NOT instructed to take his case to another family captain of 50 to decide, who in turn may need to go to the “next higher up” captain of 100 and so forth. He was instructed to take his case directly to Moses! This is not to say there were no leaders. God’s Word is teaching us how the leadership system was to be set up. It was a system that worked based upon the respect of the people – a respect that the leaders had to have EARNED!

Additionally, it was not a system of many appeals to the next higher up court or leader, as in various nations’ judicial systems today, and in many systems of church government today. **Here the captain of 10 was instructed to take the difficult matters STRAIGHT TO MOSES! Each of the captains of 50, 100 and 1,000 were all to do likewise. EACH ONE went directly to Moses. That is what your Bible says. You can accept it when God says it, can’t you? This system was very horizontal. THERE WAS NO PYRAMID!**