Christian Governance
a response to Dr. Biery

It appears that Dr. Biery is responding\(^1\) to an article that I wrote since he quotes from my article on Christian Governance. While he does not give me credit he quotes from my article, "God alone is the owner of His churches and their ministries").

First of all, I believe that Policy Governance is applicable to Christian organizations, but that it requires an adjustment or particular focus for it to be biblically faithful. This statement alone suggests that Carver's Policy Governance is not in and of itself biblically faithful. And it is not. Biblical faithfulness requires acknowledgment of God's sovereignty and the implications thereof. Carter makes no such acknowledgment, neither explicitly nor implicitly. Rather, he credits several secular writers as providing the essential foundation for his system, and is unaware of the biblical foundation he is building upon.\(^2\) Yet, simply building upon a biblical foundation is no guarantee of biblical fidelity. The Judaizers built on biblical foundations but failed to be faithful.\(^3\)

The issue of biblical faithfulness and the determination of what constitutes such faithfulness is itself a point of contention. For instance, the Unitarian Universalist Association (UUA) is (I believe) the only denomination that recommends Policy Governance\(^\circ\) for its member churches. But the UUA, by its own definition is not Christian in any traditional sense. Following in its wake, other churches are endeavoring to use Policy Governance\(^\circ\) principles, most of which would be categorized as Liberal.\(^4\)

The point I attempted to make in my previous article is that for faithful Christians biblical principles must trump Policy Governance\(^\circ\) principles. Said another way, biblical principles have priority over Policy Governance\(^\circ\) principles. The points at which they are in conflict are no doubt another area of discussion. I suggested in my previous article that the idea of ownership is an area that Policy Governance may easily differ with the dictates of Scripture. The area of organizational ownership provides a clear example of how organizations can give a theological nod to the "ultimate" ownership of God, and proceed to ignore the practical implications of biblical principles through Policy Governance\(^\circ\).

Before you think that I am being unfair to those who use Policy Governance\(^\circ\) in a Christian organization because I accuse them of being philosophically or theologically inconsistent, let me say that such inconsistency is not limited to such a small circle of people. The practice of logical inconsistency is not new with the advent of Policy Governance\(^\circ\). It has a long and distinguished history.\(^5\) Jesus Himself acknowledged the reality of such inconsistency in Matthew 7:21-22, Matthew 13:15 and Matthew 15:18 (quoting from Isaiah 29:13). The fact that this kind of logical inconsistency is rampant today, in the church and out, makes discussion difficult and complex in spite of the fact that biblical truth is itself not difficult to understand.

Let me repeat myself, Policy Governance\(^\circ\) has application to Christian organizations, but to


\(^2\) Request a copy of my article on Christian Governance, which discusses the biblical foundations of Policy Governance.

\(^3\) Romans 9:6.

\(^4\) For a discussion of Christianity and Liberalism, see the book of the same name by J. Gresham Machen.

\(^5\) See the work of Cornelius Van Til who has traced this kind of logical inconsistency through the history of Christianity in his groundbreaking books.
remain faithful to Scripture some adjustments must be made. And the first of those adjustments has to do with the issue of organizational ownership. Since Christians in fellowship are an expression of the church, the issue is who owns the church? I agree with most of what Dr. Biery has said about ownership regarding God as the ultimate owner and the potential abuse of authority. But the abuse of authority is not unique to Christianity, all authority can be abused, whether by an executive, a board of directors or even civil government—Christian, Buddhist or Atheist.

A Google® search using “critique of policy governance” will bring up a list of articles with varying objections to Policy Governance. Among the critics of Policy Governance are those who accuse it of setting up the CEO to abuse the sweeping authority accorded to him/her by Policy Governance boards. My point is simply that Christianity is not the source of the abuse of authority, sin is. And only Christianity faithfully engaged can remedy sin.

By the same token, the issue of the abuse of authority is one of the primary issues that feeds the devolution of civil society in our day. Because corporate structure has historically followed the organizational principles of Congregationalism (my own church background), corporations and other organizations who have charters, officers, boards and by-laws are essentially Congregational in polity. And the single most destructive error of Congregational churches is its failure to understand and abide by biblical authority.

In the same way that the CEO can abuse his/her authority in the organization s/he is responsible for, the board can abuse its powers of oversight, using those powers to inappropriately to seek their own gain, break laws, and/or act immorally. While one of the strengths of Policy Governance® is its emphasis and treatment of accountability, the wrong understanding of accountability definitions and structures—and particularly to whom one is ultimately accountable to—can still lead to a lack of accountability.

Again, my point is that Christian organizations have not cornered the market in abuse of authority. In fact, with some adjustments Policy Governance® can help to reclaim a proper understanding of authority and accountability. But it must be understood that all authority is founded on biblical authority because God is the original author (author-ity) of humanity, social order and history. The perspective that I am arguing for (and I believe that Dr. Biery and may I agree on this) is that biblical principles and values must actively engage policy development and deployment for Christian organizations. The critical issues involve the definition of said principles and values and the methodology of their employment. (Dr. Biery and I may even discover that we have much agreement about these matters, as well.)

Nonetheless, I must press the point. The danger of people thinking of themselves as owners or even co-owners of Christian organizations is that Carver insists that the board is obligated to accomplish the purposes set by the owners. When people—in particular the board—understand themselves to be owners or co-owners they tend to believe that they then hold the power (or some of the power) to determine the ends and purposes for which the organization exists. My point is that such determination belongs to God alone. And so, I cry with the historic Protestant Reformers, “Sola Scriptura, Solus Christus, Sola Gratia, Sola Fide and Soli Deo Gloria.” As stewards we are relatively free to determine how to accomplish God’s purposes, but not to alter those purposes themselves.

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7 See my articles on Congregational history at www.pilgrim-platform.org.
Often purpose and methodology are intimately related. And a change in methodology will often produce a change in purpose. Great care must be taken to honor and maintain God’s purposes for His church. This is the issue, and I am arguing that too many churches take too many liberties at exactly this point, policy governed or not.

In other words, God is not merely the “ultimate” owner, but He is the “immediate” owner as well. The suggestion that God is the “ultimate” owner suggests the theology of deism, not Christianity. Deism teaches that God wound the church (world) up and left it for us to take over. Such a theology denies the sovereignty of God and substitutes the sovereignty of humanity by suggesting that God allows people to do whatever they want. In contrast, traditional, biblical Christianity understands human freedom to have its highest expression in the accomplishment of (and obedience to) God’s will.

This is the issue of authority that must be explicitly addressed and exercised by those organizations that intend to be faithful to Scripture. Therefore, prior to a discussion of how Carver’s Policy Governance® applies to biblically faithful governance of Christian organizations there must be some common understanding of what it means to be faithful to Scripture because the principles of biblical fidelity must take precedence over the principles of Policy Governance® in church related organizations. At the same time, it will be discovered that there are many areas that the principles of Policy Governance® do provide helpful clarity and appropriate application for Christian organizations.

Biery says that “Policy Governance, whether religious or secular, is always temporal and composed of people.” I agree, all human authorities must be held accountable to other human beings. Christian Governance is also always temporal and composed of people, but it is not merely temporal. It is also eternal. And in a similar vein, Jesus Christ is a person—not only was He a person when He walked the earth, but He is an eternal Person of the Holy Trinity (a point that is denied by Unitarians, by the way). Biery’s point is that people must be accountable to other people. I agree.

But at the same time, people are not merely accountable to other people. They are also accountable to God, to history, to law, etc. Can living people be accountable to dead people? Yes, according to current law people can be accountable through corporate and legal structures like wills and trusts to someone who is deceased. My point is that living people can be accountable to more than other living people—and limiting accountability merely to other people in denial of immediate accountability to God and history encourages the failure to learn from and incorporate the values and principles of history and Scripture.

Biery’s treatment of the relationship between church and state is too shallow—yet understandably so. This is a side issue that I brought up in my previous article as an example of how biblical authority differs from so-called secular authority. He says that “the U. S. Constitution guarantees that the government does not have the right to 'establish' or intervene in the religious enterprise of the people, their beliefs and religious practices.” I agree. However, the establishment of 501(c)(3) taxable status for religious organizations constitutes a violation of the Establishment Clause of the First Amendment because it establishes civil government tax laws for churches. That is the central protection of the Establishment Clause and constitutes an encroachment of civil authority into the jurisdiction of church authority because, as Biery acknowledges, it subsumes church authority under civil authority.
And in fact, that law impinges directly upon the preaching (and therefore the doctrine and theology) of churches in that it forbids certain political topics from the pulpit in order to maintain that tax status. Technically, the law was not passed by Congress, but by the IRS, so the letter of the Constitution is acknowledged at the same time the spirit of the Constitution is denied. This is another example of that logical inconsistency mentioned earlier.

However, this does not mean that religious organizations are “above” the law. Churches that violate the law and endanger and/or abuse people must be held responsible. Church jurisdiction is not immune to the civil jurisdiction any more than the civil jurisdiction is immune to church jurisdiction. There are areas where these jurisdictions will impinge upon one another and discretion is required for adjudication. Complete separation is impossible.

But that is far beyond the scope of our present concern. For our purposes, we need to acknowledge that churches must comply with civil law. It is the extent of the jurisdiction of civil law that is in question. Nonetheless, we all must “Render to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God’s” (Mark 12:17). Paul repeats this sentiment in Romans 13:1, “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God.” (For those who will not follow the footnotes I will simply note that religious organizations are not mandated to become governmentally sanctioned 501(c)(3) taxable organizations. Such a designation is voluntary and not required by the IRS or any department of the Federal Government.)

Biery's conclusion that Policy Governance® as a structure builds in the idea that the board must know the ends and purposes of the owner(s) is true enough, as far as it goes. Policy Governance® does do this. However, that fact in and of itself is no guarantee that those who practice Policy Governance® will in fact faithfully honor the purposes of the founders and/or owners. If you need an example of this, ask yourself whether any organizations have ever gotten away from the original purposes of their founders. This is such a commonplace fact of modern society that it might be better to ask what long standing organizations have not done this. And when its done it begins in the board room.

Take Yale or Harvard Universities, for instance. Both were founded for the purpose of providing educated clergy for faithful Protestant Reformed Christian churches. They were both founded as bastions of orthodox Protestant theology. Where are they now? Are they faithful to the vision of their founders? No, they produce far more atheists and agnostics than Christians. The same pattern of the abandonment of founding principles has swept through modern society, and much of it occurs in the name (but not in the spirit) of historical and theological fidelity. In other words, it is common today for organizations to claim to be faithful to their founders while undermining and disregarding the very faith they claim.

These organizations have always been accountable to their boards. That fact is indisputable. But what they have not been accountable to is God and history. It is precisely because of the effectiveness of Policy Governance® that makes it both appealing and dangerous. Authority is clearly identified and empowered, decision making is streamlined, and

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9 This is a huge issue. For further study see: www.hushmoney.org.
organizations are equipped to do what they do much more effectively by using Policy Governance®. That is not in doubt.

The issue I am trying to raise is that it is not good to give an organization that is already going in the wrong direction the power to accomplish the wrong ends more effectively. I enthusiastically agree with Dr. Biery that the obligation of the religious board is to “know both the mind of its temporal owners and the Mind of its ultimate Owner to the extent it can know His Word and seek His wisdom.”

However, after twenty-five years of ministry I must confess that religious boards are awash in the worldly concerns of fund raising and property management and all too often fail to “know His Word and seek His wisdom” in the board room. Fund raising and property management are not the central concerns of Scripture, nor do they reflect the core values and principles of Scripture. Boards focus on them because they are relatively easy to accomplish, are immediate, demanding and pressing, and are measurable. Whereas the high ideals, values and principles of Scripture provide a much more difficult row to hoe. They are more difficult to measure. But they are the true ends for which Christ’s church should exist. Difficulty is not an excuse for poor performance.

In as much as the governing bodies of Christian churches and church related organizations focus on worldly ends, they encourage the adoption of worldly ends by their members and future leaders. And that is exactly what we see when we take a long view of the historical development of Christian churches in America over the last two centuries.

Furthermore, I contend that this is a central concern for Policy Governance® because Policy Governance® has taken its central insights from Scripture (though Carver has not acknowledged the extent of his debt to Scripture). Thus, Policy Governance® in general should conform to the (greater, larger, wider, higher) ideals, values and principles of Scripture prior to the engagement of the tasks of governance.

Policy Governance® is in fact a highly effective method of organizational governance. And precisely for that reason, greater attention must be given to consistent biblical faithfulness prior to and during the exercise of Policy Governance® lest the very effectiveness of Policy Governance® become the source of greater demise by more efficiently leading churches and ministries further and faster away from God’s central purposes.

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