

Elder Rule & Congregational Consensus ***— Dance Partners***

What is the advantage of following the early church's approach to decision making? *No matter who has the final authority to make decisions in your church, adopting early church attitudes can make the process both unifying and edifying.* An important role of first-century church leaders was to build congregational consensus.

Profit

The mind of Christ is more likely found when the leaders guide the whole congregation to wrestle corporately with major decisions. Unity is strengthened. The Spirit is given free rein to guide the church. Leadership's role in this process includes helping to build consensus by teaching what Scripture says on various issues, privately talking with church members about decisions, appealing to those who differ and—after much persuasion—calling on any dissenting minority to yield to the elders along with the rest of the congregation. Church members are encouraged and fulfilled as they realize that everyone's thoughts and inputs are respectfully weighed in accordance with Scripture.

Proof #1—A Leader's Authority

Perhaps the best place to begin a study of authority within the church is with the words of our Lord. Contrasting the authority of political leaders with church leaders, Jesus said: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves." Think about that a minute. How much authority does the youngest person in a family have? How much authority does a household servant have? Jesus gave examples of those in Roman society who had the least authority—children and slaves. Although it is true that Jesus was a master of overstatement, there is an underlying truth that must not be glossed over. Church leaders are to be servant leaders. Their attitude should be one of humility in leadership, not kingly authority that lords over people. In harmony with Jesus' words, Peter later instructed elders to "shepherd the flock of God . . . not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock."

An elder must lead with a servant's heart. Jesus offered Himself as an example for church leaders to follow: "Who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves." On another occasion, Jesus washed the disciples' feet. Why did He do this? It was to make the point that anyone who wants to be a church leader must first learn to be the servant of all. He said: "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them." Do you want God's blessing on you as a church leader? Then do what Jesus modeled and wield your authority with a servant's heart.

Proof #2—Shepherds Are Sheep Too

Church leaders were given little prominence in the epistles. Paul's highly theological epistle to the Romans was addressed simply to the "saints" in Rome (1:7), with no special mention of the shepherds. In Romans 13, Paul brought up submission to the civil government, but never mentioned the church submitting to its elders. In Romans 15, Paul expressed to the whole church his intent to visit. Can you imagine the indignation that would take place today if someone like Billy Graham wrote to an entire church that he was soon to visit, rather than writing specifically to its leaders?

The two letters to the Corinthian congregation were addressed to the entire "church" (1Co 1:2, 2Co 1:1), with no mention of its leaders in the greetings or anywhere throughout the entirety of the letters. This is all the more remarkable when one considers that these two epistles deal with many leadership matters: church discipline, marriage, divorce and remarriage, abuse of the Lord's Supper

leadership matters. Church discipline, marriage, divorce and remarriage, abuse of the Lord's Supper, giving, and how to conduct a worship service.

The greeting in Galatians 1:2 was to all the “churches” in the region of Galatia, with no mention of any leadership. The readers were addressed throughout the book simply as “brothers.” This is because shepherds are sheep, too.

The “saints in Ephesus” were the designated recipients of that letter (Ep 1:1). The importance of pastor-teachers was mentioned in 4:11, but pastor-teachers were not written to directly. If ever there was an appropriate place to instruct the church to submit to and obey its elders, it would arguably have been in Ephesians 5-6, where Paul instructed women to submit to their husbands, children to obey their parents, and slaves their masters. Yet it is missing. Could this be in keeping with Jesus' words that a church leader has the same authority as a child and slave?

Philippians 1:1 breaks the pattern of leadership neglect: the deacons and overseers were greeted along with the saints. However, no other mention was made of these leaders, nor was anything written directly to them in the letter.

The salutation of Colossians 1:2 was simply to “the saints and faithful brothers.” Nothing was written directly to or even about the leaders. Chapters 3-4 parallel Ephesians 5-6 in dealing with the relationship between man and wife, parents and children, and slaves and masters. It would have been a logical place to write about the submission of a congregation to its leaders, yet nothing was written. Similarly, in 1 Peter 2-3, Peter dealt with a believer's submission to the government and a wife's submission to her husband, but, like Paul, wrote nothing about the church's submission to its leaders. In all the letters to the churches, it is not until 1 Peter 5 that elders are written to directly.

This ignoring of the leadership is also seen in the salutations of the letters to the Thessalonians, James' letter to the twelve scattered tribes, Peter's and John's epistles, and Jude. All of this implies that the elders were themselves also sheep. The elders were a subset of the church as a whole. There was no clergy/laity distinction. In the very last chapter of Hebrews, the readers were asked to “greet all your leaders” (13:24). Not only did the author not greet the leaders directly, he assumed they would not even be reading the letter!

Much may be gleaned from the way that New Testament writers appealed directly to entire congregations. They went to great lengths to influence all believers, not just those in leadership. The apostles did not simply bark orders and issue injunctions (as a military commander might do). Instead, they treated other believers as equals and appealed directly to them as such. No doubt local church leaders led in much the same way. An elder's primary authority was in his ability to influence with the truth. The respect they were given was honestly earned. It was the opposite of military authority wherein soldiers respect the rank but not necessarily the man.

Hebrews 13:7 reflects the fact that the leadership style employed by church leaders is primarily one of direction by example: “Remember your leaders . . . Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” Along this same line, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 reveals that leaders are to be respected, not because of the automatic authority of appointed rank, but because of the value of their service—“Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work.” As Jesus said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (Mt 20:25-28).

Proof #3—Be Persuaded & Yield

Hebrews 13:17 instructs believers to *obey* church leaders. However, mindless obedience is not what is pictured. The common Greek word for “obey” (*hupakouo*) was used with reference to such situations as children obeying their parents and slaves their masters. However, the common word for “obey” is not found in Hebrews 13:17. Instead, the word used is *peitho*, which fundamentally means persuade or convince. In Greek mythology, Peitho was the goddess who personified persuasion. Consistent with this root meaning, McReynolds' literal interlinear translates *peitho* as “persuade” in Hebrews 13:17. The expositor Vine went a step further and stated that with *peitho*, “the obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.” Lenski's comment on this text is that if one allows oneself to be convinced by someone, one obeys him. In our passage, it is found in the present imperative passive form, which takes on the meaning “obey.” However, the author's use of *peitho* may suggest that dialog will take place, teaching will be given, and arguments will be made in order to bring about this obedience. When someone is persuaded of something, he will act on it and, in that sense, obey it with joyful conviction.

One of the qualifications of an elder is that he should be able to teach. This is because church leaders have to be eminently good at persuading with the truth. Dwight Eisenhower captured the idea behind Hebrews 13:17 when he said, “I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone.” Elders are not to simply pronounce decisions from on high like Popes, *ex cathedra*. Ideally, the obedience of Hebrews 13:17 happens after a process of persuasion.

Hebrews 13:17 further instructs believers to *submit* to their church leaders. However, the common Greek word for “submit” (*hupotasso*) is not found here. Instead, the classical Greek word *hupeiko* was chosen by the author, a synonym for *hupotasso* that means to give way or to yield. Rienecker defined it as “to give in, to yield, to submit.” *Hupeiko* was used elsewhere of combatants and meant to yield after a struggle. The nuance of *hupeiko* is not a structure to which one automatically submits (like submission to civil government). Rather, it is submission after a process, struggle, or contest has occurred. The picture is one of serious discussion and dialog prior to one party giving way.

In summary, mindless slave-like obedience is not the relationship presented in the New Testament between leaders and those led. For their part, God’s flock must be open to being persuaded (*peitho*) by its shepherds. Leaders, in turn, must be committed to ongoing discussion and teaching. However, there will be those times when someone, or some few, in the fellowship can’t be persuaded. Congregations are made up of both mature and immature Christians, of those who walk in the Spirit and those who do not, of those with the gift of discernment and those without it—so impasses will arise. After much persuasion and prayer, Hebrews 13:17 calls on dissenters to give in to, to yield to (*hupeiko*), the wisdom of church leaders. This submission, however, is to come only after dialogue, discussion, and reasoning. Thus, a critical aspect of elder rule must include a commitment to building Spirit-filled congregational consensus.

Proof #4—Church As Congress

Our understanding of Christ’s church will be impoverished if we fail to factor in the dynamics of the original Greek word for church, *ekklésia*. With so much emphasis today on the separation of church and state, the last thing people associate church with is government. Yet *ekklésia* was a government word in its original, secular setting. In Jesus’ day, *ekklésia* was used outside the New Testament to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions. According to Thayer, it was “an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberation.” Bauer’s lexicon defines *ekklésia* as an “assembly of a regularly summoned political body.” Lothar Coenen, writing for *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, noted that *ekklésia* was “clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken . . . the word *ekklésia*, throughout the Greek and Hellenistic areas, always retained its reference to the assembly of the polis.”

The secular meaning of *ekklésia* can be seen in Acts 19, where it is translated as “legal assembly” rather than as “church.” Two of the occurrences in Acts 19 refer to a meeting of silversmiths convened by Demetrius. Trade union members rushed into the theater (where civic decisions were normally made) to decide what to do about a damaged reputation and lost business. However, they overstepped their jurisdiction, so the town clerk counseled that the matter be settled by the “legal” *ekklesia*, rather than by the trade union *ekklesia* (Acts 19:37-39).

Why did Jesus choose such a politically loaded word (*ekklésia*) to describe His people and their meetings? Had He merely wanted to describe a gathering with no political connotations, Jesus could have used *sunagogé*, *thiasos* or *eranos*. Perhaps Jesus intended His followers to function together with a purpose somehow parallel to that of the political government. If so, believers have the responsibility to decide things together and experience the consensus process. God’s people have a decision-making mandate. A church is a body of Kingdom citizens authorized to weigh major issues, make decisions, and pass judgments on various issues. Thus, according to the *Baptist Faith and Message* of 2000, “Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.”

There are many examples in the New Testament of God’s people making decisions as a body. After promising to build His *ekklésia* on the rock of Peter’s revealed confession, Jesus immediately spoke of the keys of the kingdom of heaven and of binding and loosing (Mt 16:13-20). Keys represent the ability to open and to close something, “kingdom” is a political term, and binding and loosing involves the authority to make decisions. Was this authority given to Peter only? In Matthew 18:15-20.

involved the authority to make decisions. This authority given to Peter only. In Matthew 16:18-20, binding and loosing authority was conferred by Jesus on the whole *ekklésia*. In Acts 1:15-26, Peter charged the Jerusalem church as a whole with finding a replacement for Judas. Later, the apostles looked to the church corporately to pick men to administer the church's food program (Acts 6:1-6). Acts 14:23 indicated the apostles appointed elders with the consensus of the local congregation.

If ever there were a proper time and place for the Apostles to make a decision alone, apart from the church, it was at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The Apostles were the standard for doctrine and practice. The very nature of the Gospel had been called into question. Yet, even here, the amazing fact is that the Apostles not only included the local Jerusalem elders but also the whole church! Colin Brown observed that "in the council's decision-making they are accorded no special preeminence . . . It is consistent with the non-authoritarian, collegiate character of church leadership which Acts consistently depicts (1:13-26; 6:2ff; 8:14ff; 11:1ff; 13:1-4)." Furthermore, 1 Corinthians 5 also reveals the church corporately has the authority to lovingly discipline unrepentant members for their possible future restoration and for the holiness of the church.

Professors

Church government is one area of early church practice where there is little scholarly agreement. G.W. Kirby, lecturer in practical theology at London Bible College, wrote that "The NT does not lay down precise rules either as to the form of ministry or of government of the Church. Over the centuries several different theories of church government have emerged, each of which claims some scriptural basis." However, commenting on the general nature of congregational involvement, Donald Guthrie observed, "These early communities displayed a remarkable virility, which was a particular characteristic of that age. The churches were living organisms rather than organizations. The promptings of the Spirit were more important than ecclesiastical edicts or Episcopal pronouncements. When decisions were made, they were made by the whole company of believers, not simply by the officials . . . It would be a mistake, nevertheless, to suppose because of this that the church was run on democratic lines. The Acts record makes unmistakably clear that the dominating factor was the guidance of the Holy Spirit."

Regardless of your church's process of government, the New Testament approach would be for leaders to involve the whole church in big decisions, depending on the Holy Spirit and seeking to build congregational consensus in matters of importance. Examples include church discipline, deciding on a new meeting place, changing a doctrinal stance, appointing new elders and deacons, deciding which missions to support, or altering how church meetings are held. Early church government was a combination of plural elder rule and congregational consensus as Christ was followed as Head.

Provision

It is important to remember that the process a church goes through in achieving consensus may be just as important as the consensus that is finally achieved. Consensus governing takes time, commitment, mutual edification, and lots of brotherly love. It truly *can* work in smaller churches, such as were found in the New Testament era. We must love each other enough to put up with each other and work through disagreements. The concept of consensus might be called government by unity, oneness, harmony, or mutual agreement. Do we really trust in the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and churches?

Lest achieving consensus seem too utopian, consider what the Lord has done to help His people. First, our Lord Himself prayed "that they may be one as we are one . . . that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you . . . May they be brought into complete unity" (Jn 17:11, 20-23). Because Jesus prayed this for us, unity is certainly achievable.

Another provision God made for our unity lies in the Lord's Supper. According to 1 Corinthians 10:17, "Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf." Examine the prepositions in 1 Corinthians 10:17 ("because" and "for"); partaking of the Lord's Supper not only pictures unity, it may even create it.

Finally, Christ gave the church various leadership gifts (such as pastor-teacher) for a purpose: "until we all reach unity in the faith" (Ep 4:11-13). Leaders play a critical role in building consensus. Aristotle astutely realized that "we believe good men more fully and more readily than others. This is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided . . . his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses."

Proposition

The church as a whole may be compared to a congress with authority to make decisions and render judgments that are binding on its members. Church leaders are congressman also but appointed to a special committee whose purpose is to study issues, make recommendations, teach, inform, or prompt the congress. Church leaders should not normally make fiat decisions on behalf of the church in lieu of the consensus process. Elders should guide, teach, suggest, and build consensus. However, when the church finds itself in gridlock, unable to resolve an issue, the elders serve as predetermined arbitrators, or tiebreakers. In these instances, those in opposition are called on to submit in the Lord to the elders' leadership and wisdom (Heb 13:17). Spirit-filled elder rule combined with congregational consensus in major decisions gives free reign to the Holy Spirit and puts the church in a better position to discern the mind of Christ and to walk in the Light of God's Word.

Click [here](#) for practical ideas on elder-led congregational consensus.

Audio and video on elder-led congregational consensus, along with a teacher's discussion guide, can also be found on our web site.

Discussion Questions

1. What can be learned about a church leader's authority from Luke 22:24-27?
2. To what did the Greek word *ekklésia* originally refer?
3. Why do you suppose that Jesus chose a political word like *ekklésia* to describe His followers?
4. What are some examples in the New Testament of God's people making decisions as a body?
5. What is the difference between majority rule and congregational consensus?
6. What is the difference between consensus and unanimity?
7. What provisions has God made to help a church achieve consensus?
8. How do elders build congregational consensus?
9. In Hebrews 13:17 believers are encouraged to obey and submit to their leaders. How does this square with congregational rule?
10. How should both local church congregational consensus and universal church consensus apply to interpreting the Bible?