

**Core Seminar**

**Living as a Church**

**Class 5: Governance**

*Godly Authority Fostering Unity*

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#### I. Introduction

**WELCOME/PRAY**

I want to begin by asking you all a question about who makes the decisions here in our church. If you’re a member of CHBC, when you attend members’ meetings, it can often feel like the elders are the ones who are making the decisions and leading the church. If that’s the case - **what is the congregation’s role in decision making?**

That’s what we want to think about today: Church Governance. Not sure if many of you have woken up in the middle of the night this past week fretting about church governance. In all honesty, church governance isn’t something that most Christians think about much. It’s a bit like a piston in a car engine. We know it’s important, but we don’t give it a whole lot of thought. And yet if it wasn’t there, or was broken, we’d definitely notice.

That’s why we want to take an entire core seminar to think about church governance: it’s an important part of keeping a church running faithful to its God-given mission over many, many decades. And the more we know how church governance works, the better we can adjust the way we live as church members to promote unity in this congregation.

To start, let’s define church governance. Church governance is the system by which decisions are made in a church. Where authority resides. So think for example, of the question of what we should put in our statement of faith? How we decide that question depends on our system of governance. Church governance can be a great tool for unity—or a great opponent of unity in a church. If you think of who holds decision making authority in a family, it shows just how crucial this concept is: when the kids want to have ice cream for dinner and stay up till 1am, they need to be reminded that mom and dad are in charge, not them. Similarly, we need to know who holds authority in the church.

Church governance is important in part because God wrote about it in his word. So he is glorified as we follow his instructions. And as we do, proper authority should protect and prosper the unity of a church.

With that said, let me lay out a brief outline for our time together this morning. We’ll look at the two main leadership offices of the church given in scripture, elders and deacons. Then, we’ll think about the congregation’s role as the final decision making authority. As we consider these issues, we want to focus especially on unity: how organizing the church in accordance with scripture promotes unity, and how we can each live within that organization to maximize the love and witness of our church.

**II. Scriptural Offices of the Church**

Let’s turn first to the offices in the church that the Bible describes: elders and deacons.

I’m not going to spend a lot of time describing these offices because many of us are familiar with them and would have been introduced to them in the membership classes. For our purpose this morning, I want us to focus instead on the benefit that these authority structures provide for unity in our church.

**A. *Elders***

So, let’s start with the office of elder. The term elder (or, in the Greek, *presbuteros*), is used interchangeably with overseer or bishop (*Episkopous*), and pastor (*Poimenas*).[[1]](#footnote-1) *(See Acts 20-17-37.)*

Elders are charged with the spiritual oversight of the church. So, in Acts 20:28, Paul tells the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”

We see in Acts 6 that elders should especially devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the word. They’re also charged with being the principal governing body of the church. 1 Tim. 5:17, “The elders who *direct the affairs of the church* well are worthy of double honor”); (*see also* 1 Peter 5:2-5.)

Now, with that background in mind, let me suggest four ways that having a biblical eldership promotes and protects unity in a church:

**First**, this elder model of leadership places authority in those most qualified to exercise it. It entrusts the primary preaching and teaching duties, along with significant decision-making authority, to those who meet certain qualifications as set forth in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1:6-9 (1 Tim. 5:17; Hebrews 13:17).[[2]](#footnote-2) Just like you probably wouldn’t entrust your medical care to someone without an M.D., the church is assured that those who are charged with the most significant responsibilities have met certain biblical criteria that establish their character and ability to serve. This fosters unity because we recognize a common standard that elders live up to.

**Second**, elder leadership places special responsibility for the spiritual health of the membership in the hands of those who have special accountability to God. So in Hebrews 13:17, we read that elders “keep watch over you as men who must give an account.” This means that if we have godly elders, they will lead us as men who fear God first, not us. God holds them responsible to obey Eph 4:12-13, which says that the pastors’ job is to prepare the church for works of service so that we can all reach *unity* in the faith.

A **third** way that elder leadership promotes unity is through God’s requirement that members “obey” their leaders and “submit to their authority” - Hebrews 13:17. When we submit to authority together, it promotes unity. Why? Think about this posture of submission: Submission makes us more humble and less headstrong; more deferential and less defiant. Like in a home, or in our own relationship with God, a humble recognition of rightful authority brings benefits. So Hebrews 13:17 says, “[o]bey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.”

Now, lots of people—particularly in my generation—are uncomfortable with the idea of authority anywhere—not to mention in a church. Authority can be abused. It can be sinfully misdirected. But God invented authority. It’s for our good as a church. And it’s also for the good of members individually, because learning to trust authority is good for us spiritually. In the church, when elders’ authority is used with the consent of the congregation for the good of the congregation, the congregation will benefit as God builds his church.

As members, we’re called to submit; but the other side of that is that the elders are called to exercise their authority rightly. So, in 1 Peter 5, Peter, addressing elders, tells them: “Be Shepherds of God’s flock . . . not lording it over those entrusted to you but being examples to the flock.” (vv. 2-3). Elders should be marked by a use of their authority which shows that they understand that the church belongs not to them but to Christ. They should be servant-hearted and exhibit the same humility that Christ exhibited.

**Fourth** and finally, the biblical model of elder leadership promotes unity by establishing a plurality of elders, instead of having the leadership of the church rest heavily on one man’s shoulders. In Acts 14:23, we read:

*Paul and Barnabas appointed* ***elders*** *for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord in whom they had put their trust*.

*(E.g.*, Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; Philippians 1:1.)

And many other verses uphold this idea of a plural eldership. How does having multiple elders foster unity in the church? A few ways:

**For one,** decisions made by the elders collectively rather than by a single elder are more likely to have the support of the entire congregation. Think of Proverbs 15:22—“Plans fail for lack of counsel, but with many advisers they succeed.” Having plural elders means the elders must have humility as they relate to each other - and their humility should be a model for the whole church. The other side of this is that a plurality of elders increases the members’ confidence in the decision-making process while alleviating the pastor from bearing all of the criticism for a decision.

***Also***, a plurality of elders enables the leadership to know the congregation better. It’s easier for multiple elders to know and care for different parts of the congregation than just a single pastor. With a plurality of elders, it’s less likely that members of the congregation will feel neglected, or feel like they don’t have access to the leadership.

***Application***:

So, how does this understanding of the office of elder change the way we live as church members so that we can build our unity as a church?

**Three ways:**

**First**, and this is obvious, we should obey our elders and submit to their leadership. The elders’ authority in this regard is tied to the faithful teaching of scripture -- so Hebrews 13:7 says: “Remember your leaders who spoke the word of God to you.”

Now, does this mean that an elder can tell you to purchase a blue car rather than a red one? No. Elders have the authority to lead the congregation by explaining the word of God, and applying it in specific circumstances. They provide Godly wisdom based on scriptural principles and truths. So members should obey them. In a few weeks, we’ll devote a large part of our class to the question of what to do when we disagree with them. But normally, we are to obey them.

**Second**, strategize to make the elders’ work a joy and not a burden. We know from Hebrews 13:17 that this will do us good too. So, let’s look for ways to encourage our elders and pray for them. Part of that involves the perception we create of the elders in the eyes of others—particularly newer Christians - the way that we talk about elders to others, and the way that we engage with elders at members’ meetings. It doesn’t mean we never ask questions of the elders or ask them to explain what they mean - it means we do so in a way that assumes the best and helps others get in line with how the elders are leading.

**Third**, consider the qualifications of those put forward as potential elders. Although we should give the elders’ recommendation of a prospective new elder great weight, we should also should make an effort to get to know prospective elders. If you don’t know a prospective elder at all, seek the opportunity between the time the person is nominated and when the congregation votes on him (about two months), to talk to the him, to ask him questions. In fact, our church constitution says that we can only vote against recognizing a prospective elder if we’ve spoken with an elder ahead of time about our concern. The reason for that is simple: if there’s some concern you have about that individual’s ability to lead this congregation that’s significant enough that you would withhold your vote, it might be a good reason for the elders to withdraw that person’s nomination.

In all this, remember that our elders serve as undershepherds of the Great Shepherd. They won’t be perfect, like Jesus is. When they *do* lead like Jesus, we should encourage them. We should follow them as they follow Christ. **QUESTIONS?**

**B. *Deacons***

The second type of office clearly set out in scripture is the office of deacon. In the New Testament the word *diakonos* can be translated deacon or servant it refers to service in general. Deacons attend to the practical details of church life such as administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical needs. *See* Acts 6:1-6.

The qualifications for deacons are set forth in I Timothy 3:8-12, and are similar to those of elders. There are, however, two clear differences. Unlike elders, deacons can be women, as well as men.[[3]](#footnote-3) Second, unlike elders, deacons aren’t required to be able to teach. *See* 1 Tim. 3.

So, how does a proper biblical understanding of the relationship between deacons and elders foster unity within the church? In Acts 6, we see something of the root of the distinction in the roles and responsibilities of deacons and elders. In chapter 6, verse 1, we read that the Grecian Jews were complaining against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily distribution of food.

And so, upon the recommendation of the apostles, the church appointed deacons to make food distribution among the widows more equitable (vv. 2-5). In this, we see three ways that deacons contribute to the unity of the church.

**First**, deacons care for all the members of the church. Their work among the widows in Acts 6 was important because the physical neglect of the Grecian widows was causing spiritual disunity. One group of Christians was beginning to complain against the other group and in a particularly dangerous way – along cultural lines. This seems to be what, in particular, caught the attention of the apostles. In attending to all of the widows, the deacons defused the situation and preserved the unity.

**Second**, the deacons in Acts allowed the apostles to devote their time to the ministry of the word and prayer. In verses 2-4 of Acts 6, we read:

*So the twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, “It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order to wait on tables. Brothers, choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom. We will turn this responsibility over to them and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.*

Today, deacons play the same role in support of the ministry of the elders. Our elders are able to spend often 1-2 hours in prayer at their meetings precisely because the deacons are coordinating so much of the church’s ministry. This is a living picture of unity: deacons humbly pursuing their service while elders teach and lead, each embracing their God-given role.

**Finally**, a third way that deacons cultivate unity is by distributing work throughout the congregation. Deacons coordinate volunteers for particular needed ministries in the church such as providing rides for the elderly or setting up for refreshments on Sunday mornings. This prevents a disproportionate amount of work from falling on just a few members; and it enables all members to have the opportunity to participate in the joy of serving others.

Well what are some of the implications of deacons’ work for the rest of us? A couple of thoughts:

***First***, this understanding of deacons should inform our selection of deacons. If deacons are ones to foster unity, then those who serve in this capacity should be “uniters not dividers.” They shouldn’t be concerned about protecting their own turf – they should not be the kind of folks who are always lobbying for their big idea. They’re not like a second house of the legislature, competing with the elders. Instead, they come on behalf of the whole – to serve particular needs, yes – but with a sense of contributing to the whole body.

***Second***, we should, as members, support the deacons by volunteering in their various ministries. In so doing, we promote unity in the church by encouraging the deacons, serving the body, and helping in distributing the work evenly. We’ll be talking more specifically about serving in the church in week #11.

**III. Congregationalism**

Well, so far we’ve considered what church offices are set forth in scripture. But what about the form of church government? Who should have the final say on matters in the church?

When we read through scripture, we see that it’s the congregation that has the final authority in three particularly significant matters of church life: discipline, membership and doctrine. Thus, the weight of scripture supports a congregational form of government (and by that I simply mean that the congregation is the final court of appeal).

So, first, we know from Matthew 18 (vv. 15-17), that the congregation has the final say on matters of discipline. If one member has sinned against another, and refuses to listen even after being confronted by other members, Jesus says in Matthew 18:17, “Tell it to the church.”

Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 5, we see that it’s *only* the congregation that has the authority to discipline a member. Paul says in 1 Cor 5:4 “When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ***you*** are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.” Also, in 2 Corinthians 2 (vv. 6-8), Paul urges the whole church to re-admit someone who was previously expelled from the church at Corinth, and who apparently had repented – so we see in this example that the congregation as well has the final say in matters of membership.

And finally, this is the case with regard to matters of doctrine. In Galatians 1:8 Paul says to the Christians in the churches, not just the pastors, “Even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel contrary to the one we preached to you, let him be accursed.” And many other times in the New Testament, it’s the church that is blamed for bad teaching, not the leaders. *See* 2 Tim. 4:3-4. So the church is ultimately accountable for doctrinal matters.

So the question for us is: Does this congregational authority help our unity as a congregation?

I think the answer is yes. For one, this authority gives us as members a great amount of stewardship in the local church. There’s a responsibility, a sense that we have to answer to Jesus for how we fulfill our role. If the health of the church is ultimately up to the leaders, we can sit back and relax. But if it’s up to us, we should take an interest in the health of the body -- which should lead us to care about one another, and love one another, and do all that we can to pursue unity.

This authority also fosters unity by enabling the congregation to protect the purity of the Gospel – which is the very thing that unites us as Christians. So the congregation serves as a fence to protect the church against false teaching or to discipline a member who is in unrepentant sin. Think of the spotter that stands above someone who is bench-pressing an extremely heavy weight. If the weight lifter is in danger, the spotter exerts his authority, interrupts the exercise, and takes over. Like that spotter, the congregation is the one called to safeguard the gospel and make sure it is preserved. And this arrangement makes sense. History has taught us that it’s more likely for a few church leaders to go astray than a whole congregation of regenerate believers who know the gospel and are filled with the Holy Spirit.[[4]](#footnote-4)

That leads to one final topic for today: the balance between elder leadership and congregationalism. We’ve seen that scripture teaches the idea of elder leadership in the church (and in fact Hebrews 13 states that members should obey their leaders and submit to their authority (*see also* 1 Tim. 5:17)), and yet, we’ve also seen that scripture gives the congregation final say on certain matters of significance. This tension raises two further questions.

First, what about other matters that arise in the life of the church besides discipline, doctrine, membership and personal disputes. So, for example, issues like: should we make renovations to part of the building or provide funding for an overseas worker? Should the congregation have the final say on these issues? Well, the New Testament doesn’t address this question. So, how much further a congregation decides to involve itself corporately in matters like staff, budget, missions, etc. is a matter left to its discretion and prudence. Our church Constitution, for example, requires a congregational vote to approve the annual budget, to elect elders, to elect deacons, and to call the senior and associate pastors, among other things.

The second question is how we can be obedient to the biblical command to obey and submit to our leaders, and at the same time exercise our membership responsibility of guarding the purity of the Gospel – of serving in that spotter role?

Well, one helpful way to think about this is to consider how serious the matter is and whether the matter is clear or not.

So, for example, let’s say that the issue is whether the Bible is the inspired word of God—or just parts of the Bible are inspired. This issue is both serious and clear - the Bible in its entirety is inspired. This is the kind of clear doctrinal issue that if the elders teach something false, the congregation should not defer to them. This is where the congregation has the duty to step in as the spotter to preserve the integrity of the Gospel message.

What if, on the other hand, the issue is whether the congregation should approve the elders’ recommendation that a prospective member be admitted into membership? Well, this is also a serious issue, but, in most cases, it won’t be as clear to the congregation because all 900 of us can’t get to know that person’s testimony closely. This is the kind of area for which it’s most important for the congregation to trust the elders. In many ways, it is these kinds of issues where the elders most particularly serve the church by doing the specific work of interviewing and considering potential members. Because membership does require congregational approval, we *should* make as informed a decision as possible -- and if we have good reason to doubt the elders’ recommendation, we should let them know -- but generally, this is an area where our default should be to trust the elders.

So, how can we, as members, contribute to unity by participating in the decision-making process of the church? Let me suggest two ways:

**First**, we should take seriously the responsibility we have to guard against false teaching and error in the church. I love how the Bereans are described in Acts 17:11 - “Now these Jews were more noble than those in Thessalonica; they received the word with all eagerness, examining the Scriptures daily to see if these things were so.” If you believe that there is doctrinal error taught from the pulpit, then you’re responsible to learn more about that -- go talk to an elder in person to find out what the pastor or elders believe on that point - if the elders ever stray from our Statement of Faith, the congregation must step in.

**Second**, we should take seriously our membership privileges and responsibilities, including our voting privilege. So, we should attend the church’s members’ meetings, which take place every two months, and we should be participating in the various votes that come up. This is another way that we can promote unity in the body. By voting along with the rest of the congregation on important matters such as approving the budget or electing new elders, we are showing our agreement (assuming we agree) with the elders and the rest of the church on these actions.

**IV. Conclusion**

As we reflect on our authority as a church, let’s not forget that we only have this authority because Christ laid down his authority for us. He was delivered over to death for our sins and was raised to life for our justification. It is his example of humility that we follow as we govern this church--His church--for God’s glory.

1. Although some churches since the second century A.D., have used the word Bishop to refer to a single individual with authority over several churches, this was a later development of the term and is not found in the New Testament. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The Bible is clear that only men are to serve as elders. In 1 Timothy 2:11-14, we read that a woman should not teach or have authority over a man. *See also* 1 Corinthians 14:34-36; 11:2-16. Whatever the exact authority Paul intended to speak of here as inappropriate, it clearly involves women teaching. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. 1 Timothy 3:11, Romans 16:1. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Historically, this is generally how things have worked. If the national leadership of a church with hierarchical governance adopts false doctrine, that error may be forced on local churches, creating disunity and strife in those churches. So, while it’s clear that no particular form of church polity prevents churches from error, more centralized polities seem to have a worse track record than congregationalism in maintaining a faithful, vital, evangelical witness. Moreover, consider what happens when a congregational church does fall into doctrinal error. Well, over time, it will likely simply die out -- it has no ability to force that error on other churches. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)