**Week 5: Congregationalism and Elders**

**I. Introduction**

Good morning! Welcome back to the Theology of the Church core seminar. As I mentioned upstairs, our topic this morning is the leadership of the local church as we look at the role of the congregation and of elders—and how the two fit together.

As is the case, I think, with all six of these classes, before we get into these questions, we need to figure out why they’re important. I can’t say that congregationalism and eldership are burning topics for most Christians today. And, even though you’ve decided these topics are important enough to justify coming to today’s class, I think you’ll profit more if you understand *why* they’re important.

So let me put that to you as a question. Let’s say that you don’t hold any office in our church—and you never will. You will never be an elder or a deacon. *Why is it important for you to understand what leadership model the Bible describes for the local church?*

[Answers: Heb 13:17 tells us to help our leaders lead; we do that better if we understand how they’re supposed to lead; we’re in a Baptist church, so we all recognize that a church’s membership has decision-making authority in addition to our leaders; we should select a church in part based on whether they’re faithful to Scripture in how they structure leadership]

OK. Let me give you an outline for the rest of our time together. We’re going to start with the congregation’s authority. That’s because, under Christ, their authority is the most basic level of authority in a local church that we see in Scripture. Then we’ll look at the authority of elders. In that sense, we’re placing the authority of the elders *inside* the authority of the congregation since elder authority exists to help lead and equip the congregation to exercise *their* authority. And finally we’ll look at some interplay between the two.

**II. Authority of the Congregation**

For a lot of people, “congregationalism” is a scary word. What are we talking about: having the whole church vote on what kind of pencils we’re going to buy? Breaking into fights over carpet color?

Stories like these certainly give congregationalism a bad name. But the question is, what does the Bible say?

Here’s the big idea I want you to get: the Bible teaches that church membership is an office. It’s a job. And your job as a church member is to guard the *what* and the *who* of the gospel.

It’s the whole church’s job to answer the questions, “Is that a true gospel confession? Is that a true gospel confessor?” That, right there, is the biblical heart and substance of congregationalism.

Let me start unpacking that with four statements.

***# 1: There are different kinds of authority in the church.***

People often treat authority as an either/or. Either this group has authority, or that group has authority. And in many places in life that’s true.

But that’s not the case in the church. The pastors have one kind; the congregation has another kind. And Jesus holds each responsible for its part.

**# 2: The authority of the keys of the kingdom belong to the congregation as a whole.**

We spent weeks 2 and 3 exploring the keys of the kingdom, which is an idea Jesus introduces when he introduces the church in Matthew 16. Just to review, Jesus asks Peter: “Who do you say that I am?” Simon Peter answers, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” Jesus affirms Peter’s answer, and then says,

**18**And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. **19**I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.” (Matt. 16:18-19)

Jesus is interested in a *what* and a *who*. *What* is a right confession, and *who* is a right confessor?

Then Jesus gives Peter and the apostles this same authority: the authority to stand in front of a confessor, to hear his or her confession, and to announce an official judgment on heaven’s behalf.

* That is or isn’t a right confession.
* And that is or isn’t a true confessor.

I want to make sure you get this: Whoever is holding these keys of the kingdom has heaven’s authority not to make a Christian, but to declare who is a Christian, which (as we talked last week) we do through baptism and the Lord’s Supper. It’s visiting the embassy if your passport expires when you’re out of the country. They don’t make you a U.S. citizen, but they have the authority to renew your passport and declare that you are a citizen.

In Matthew 16, the apostles are said to hold the keys. Then in Matthew 18, Jesus puts the keys into the hands of the local church. A man is unrepentant of serious sin. And so Jesus calls the church to take action—and he references the language of the keys. No mention of pastors or elders here. The final court of appeal is the church.

The local church has the authority to guard the *what* and the *who* of the gospel. It hold the keys.

So is congregationalism about putting a microphone in the aisle at a “business meeting” so that disgruntled members can come up and tell the pastor how to do his job? No way.

It’s about protecting and proclaiming the gospel. When you are baptized into the name of Christ (Matt. 28), you become responsible for the family name. And that responsibility is matched by an authority: wherever two or three are gathered in the name of Christ as a church to exercise the keys (say, through church discipline), there Christ is ([Matt. 18:20](http://biblia.com/bible/esv/Matt.%2018.20)). His reputation and authority stand behind its exercise of the keys.

Don’t tell me that I formally wear Jesus’ name before the nations, but that I’m powerless to protect his name against false doctrine and false professors. That’s why congregational authority is important.

**# 3: Church membership (therefore) is an office, or job.**

*Job responsibility number 1: help preserve the gospel*. To everyone joining your church, you should say, “You, as an ordinary member of this church and baptized Christian, are responsible for protecting and preserving the gospel.”

That’s why Paul calls on the congregation to clean up false teaching about the gospel in Galatians 1. I hope that in every church you’re ever a part of in life, the congregation has the authority and ability to fire its pastor if they ever need to.

*Job responsibility # 2: help affirm gospel citizens.* Every member of your church is responsible for protecting and preserving the gospel by affirming and disaffirming gospel citizens.

Like we saw two weeks ago, this plays out in 1 Corinthians 5 and Matthew 18 as we look at discipline. It is the *congregation* that is to act to clear up who represents Jesus to the world.

Think about what this means: When the pastors or elders say to Christians, “Hey, it’s *our* job receive members. It’s *our* job to discipline. It’s *our* job to guard the gospel. You sit down,” they simply weaken Christians and promote complacency and nominalism. Hello, 1500 years of Christendom.

That’s why we take up so much of our members meetings seeing members in and out. It’s not just that we want you to know who’s joining; we want you to feel the authority Scripture gives you. Otherwise, we’ve effectively fired you as members from the responsibilities Jesus assigned to you.

**# 4: The church has office authority in discipline and membership (Matthew 18; 1 Cor. 5) and doctrine and leadership (Galatians 1).**

That’s what we vote on: membership, discipline, the statement of faith when you’re joining, and who the leaders are.

And, simply as a prudential matter, we ask the church to affirm the annual budget as whole, because a budget determines the direction of our gospel ministry.

Now, this has relevance far beyond formal voting authority at members meetings. If we’re to exercise this responsibility, we need to know the gospel, don’t we? Beyond that, we need to understand our Bibles well enough so that we can spot teaching that—while at first seems appealing—carries the potential of eventually corrupting our gospel message.

And we need to know each other. We talk a lot about that at this church. Part of being a member is knowing and being known. I hope you can see how this flows directly from our job description as a congregation. We have authority to affirm whether someone is in fact a right confessor of Christ—and we need to be actively involved in each others’ lives to do that. Thus all the talk about a culture where discipling and hospitality and grace and honesty are normal.

That means that when a friend is struggling spiritually, it’s your job to help them. Not just by alerting an elder to the situation, but by being on the front lines of pastoral care. The elders will be there to equip and encourage and sometimes walk alongside you. But ultimately, care for each other is our job together.

And, lest I sound at all scolding: as a congregation you do a wonderful job of this. That’s part of what makes this church such a joy to lead! It’s rarely the case that a pastoral care situation comes to the elders when several members are not already involved, helping and praying and encouraging and teaching. Praise God—that’s exactly as it should be.

**Any questions so far?**

**III. Authority of the Elders**

If that’s the authority of the congregation, how does the authority of the elders sit inside of it? Well, remember I said there are two kinds of authority? The church as the authority of the keys. The elders have the authority of teaching and oversight. Paul in Acts 20: “the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.”

Paul in Titus 1: “[An elder] must...give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (1:9).

And the author of Hebrews, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls”

That means that other than in extraordinary circumstances, the elders use their authority of teaching and oversight to *lead* the church in *its* use of the keys.

The congregation cannot wisely adjudicate the *what* and the *who* of the gospel— they cannot wisely fulfill their job responsibilities—unless they have gospel teachers teaching and giving oversight.

They *need* elders to do their job! They *need* elders to lead them in the exercise of the keys.

How do elders do this? Well, we can break down their responsibilities into a few categories that we find in Scripture.

1. The ministry of the Word

Other than not being a new convert, the only qualification that an elder has and a deacon doesn’t is his ability to teach. So, not surprisingly, elders are to teach the Word. In public and in private. Always ready to apply the Word to the situation at hand. So in Acts 6 when the apostles first introduce the idea of deacons, one of the main roles of those deacons was that the apostles not be distracted from the ministry of the Word and of prayer. And the same is true today of elders.

An elder must have utter faith in the ability of God’s Word to do God’s work.

1. The ministry of prayer

That’s the other things we saw the apostles devoted to in Acts 6. So it follows that elders must also pray. Praying for themselves, praying for other elders, praying for needs they know of in the church, praying for larger challenges facing the church.

You know from experience how much your best intentions for prayer can be scuttled by the busyness of life. Don’t think that your elders are immune from those same temptations and pressures! So when you pray for our elders, pray that they would pray. Pray that God would sustain them in prayer. Like Hur who held up Moses’ arms in Deuteronomy, hold your elders up in prayer so that they can continue to pray.

1. The ministry of gathering and protecting

One of the main condemnations that God levels against the bad shepherds of the Old Testament is their having scattered the flock. Yet God promises to gather them back (Jer. 50:6, 23:1-4).

Sure enough, Jesus is the Good Shepherd whose voice the sheep hear and follow. He gathers them to himself. But not only that, he protects them. He is the shepherd who leaves the 99 sheep to track down just one that’s gone astray. And then he tells his Father that he has not lost *any* of the sheep the Father had given him. The job of an elder is to be an undersheperd of this good shepherd.

Paul tells the elders in Acts, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). And Peter says,

“Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.” (1 Peter 5:2-4)

Elders are to keep watch over *all* the flock. They are to watch out for the weak and struggling, the rebellious, and the wolves in sheep’s clothing.

Almost always, members should submit and follow their leaders. They should obey them, as Hebrews 13:17 says. And follow their example, as Hebrews 13:7 says. Elders are there to equip us—through teaching and praying and protecting—to do the work of the ministry so we can be faithful to Jesus.

**IV. How do these fit together?**

OK. So one last question: how does the authority of the elders fit together with the authority of the congregation?

I think a good place to start is with Paul’s description of ministry in Ephesians 4. Here’s what Paul writes, starting in verse 11:

**11**And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, **12**to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, **13**until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ, **14**so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes. **15**Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, **16**from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.

Part of what we see here is the first responsibility of the church that we saw in Matthew 16: to guard a good confession. You see it there in verse 14: instead of being carried about by every wind of doctrine, we’re stable, grounded in an unchanging gospel. Now, how does this happen. Is it that a church’s leaders protect our doctrine? No: it’s the congregation. Look back to verses 12-13. It’s as we the congregation do the work of the ministry, we mature in unity and into the fullness of Christ. We care for each other, and as each of us stays true to the gospel, the church as a whole stays true. That’s something that even the best statement of faith can’t accomplish.

And yet the congregation doesn’t do this on their own, do they? They do this as they’re *equipped*. Equipped by the teachers of the Word Paul mentions in verse 11. So it’s not that the authority of the elders overshadows that of the congregation or vice versa. It’s that the two authorities support each other. Neither can accomplish the task God’s given them without the other.

*Not a passive congregation*

So on the one hand, congregationalism does not see the congregation as merely rearing its head to exercise authority in only emergency situations. There may be some of that, as I’ll explain in a moment. But on the whole, gospel protection is the day-to-day work of the congregation, equipped by the elders. Think of two hypothetical churches for a moment.

* Church 1: the pastors have the bar bells and the jump rope. He’s doing all the exercise. And the church is sitting around on lawn chairs watching him.
* Church 2: the pastors are walking into that crowd of lawn chairs, giving people a hand out of them, and then showing them how to use the bar bells and the jump rope.
* Of course we’re not talking about bar bells and jump ropes; we’re talking about guarding the *what* and the *who* of the gospel. So which church do you think will be healthier internally, and more evangelistic externally?

*Not an all-powerful congregation*

But on the other hand, this is not representative democracy either. Especially here in DC, some people look at Baptist polity and think, “OK. I get it. It’s like the congregation is the people and the elders are congress. We vote them in to do what we want, and we vote them out when they don’t.” No No No! It’s not like that at all.

To be true, the congregation does have the most basic authority under Christ. But the authority of the elders isn’t given to them by us—it’s given to them by Christ, in passages like Hebrews 13:17. And the elders are to use their authority to help us, the congregation, exercise our authority.

That means that 99.9% of the time, these two authorities work together. Then, in extreme situations, the congregation uses their authority over and against the authority of the elders, kind of like veto power. Like an emergency brake. As we teach in membership matters, when the elders lead in a way that is clearly contrary to Scripture, in a very important matter, the congregation needs to rise up and get rid of the elders.

But generally, these two authorities work together, not opposed to each other. And generally neither elders nor congregation are exercising their authority as a trump card. “Do this because I say so!!” Instead, they are living under the weight of their responsibility before God—the responsibility that comes from that authority. To care and exhort and encourage and teach so that as a church we can continue to protect the *what* and *who* of the gospel.

**V. Conclusion**

I love how Charles Spurgeon thought about his own calling in this regard, borrowing an image from Pilgrim’s Progress:

*I am occupied in my small way, as Mr. Great-heart was employed in Bunyan’s day. I do not compare myself with that champion, but I am in the same line of business. I am engaged in personally-conducted tours to Heaven; and I have with me, at the present time, dear Old Father Honest: I am glad he is still alive and active. And there is Christiana, and there are her children. It is my business, as best I can, to kill dragons, and cut off giants’ heads, and lead on the timid and trembling. I am often afraid of losing some of the weaklings. I have the heart-ache for them; but, by God’s grace, and your kind and generous help in looking after one another, I hope we shall all travel safely to the river’s edge. Oh, how many have I had to part with there! I have stood on the brink, and I have heard them singing in the midst of the stream, and I have almost seen the shining ones lead them up the hill, and through the gates, into the Celestial City[[1]](#footnote-1).*

That’s the goal of our elders, isn’t it? And more ultimately, that’s the goal of our whole congregation as equipped by our elders. To see each other safely to the rivers edge, and to rejoice in their reward on the far side.

**Discussion question: what implications might this have for how pastoral care should work in our congregation?** [answers: members are mainly pastored by each other. Elders mainly equip through public teaching. Elders should be involved mainly as coaches, helping members care for each other. Etc.]

1. C. H. Spurgeon, *Autobiography*, vol. 2 (London: Passmore and Alabaster, 1898), 131. No modern reprint with this quotation is yet available. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)