

TOWARD A BAPTIST ECCLESIOLOGY: ON BAPTISM, THE LORD'S SUPPER,  
ELDER-LED CONGREGATIONALISM, AND CHURCH DISCIPLINE

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The subject of ecclesiology is vast. Perhaps more than any other loci of systematic theology, ecclesiology is impacted by personal experience, cultural influence, political affiliation, denominational debates, and differences of practical application—even among those who are not divided by denominational lines. That being said, what follows is not a full-orbed ecclesiology. In fact, it only tackles three subjects—the ordinances, church polity, and church discipline. But in order to get a handle on what I believe—make that, what Baptists believe—I have outlined my biblical convictions about the church. They are most influenced by and in agreement with historic Baptist principles.

May God use these biblical reflections to help you think biblically about Baptist ecclesiology.

## **Baptism**

### **Meaning**

Baptism finds its inception in the pages of the New Testament, but watery adumbrations go back as far as Genesis. For instance, 1 Peter 3:18–22 explains Christian baptism by looking to the flood account of Noah. Rewinding to Genesis 6, Peter shows how God's judgment in the flood account typifies New Testament baptism. He says, “eight persons were brought safely through water. Baptism which corresponds to this, now saves you” (vv. 20–21). In Genesis 6, God's judgment was seen in the destructive waters, his salvation in the way he “safely brought” Noah and his family through the waters.

Accordingly, Peter sees this as the first baptism—salvation of God’s people through God’s cosmic judgment. It will function as a pattern for the rest of the Old Testament, until it culminates in Christ and the baptism of his people in the church.

For example, this baptismal pattern is seen later in the life of Moses (Exodus 2) and in the nation of Israel (Exodus 14). In both instances, God brings his chosen leader (in the first instance) and his chosen people (in the latter) through waters of death and destruction. In the case of Israel, as God’s wrath fell on the head of Pharaoh and his army, God’s son is brought through the waters of the Red Sea safely. Consequently, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians 10:1–2, “Our fathers were all under the cloud, and all passed through the sea, and all were baptized into Moses in the cloud and the sea.”

Moreover, Jonah experiences a type of baptism when the belly of a whale saves him from God’s appointed storm and the suffocating waters that engulfed him. According to Matthew’s gospel, this death by ingestion explicitly foreshadowed Jesus’ death, burial, and resurrection (12:40). It is this very death into which the believer is baptized (Rom 6:3–4; Gal 3:27). Participation in Christ’s baptism then becomes the safe route by which believers are saved from God’s judgment.

1 Peter 3:19 has often been accused of teaching that baptism is regenerative, but this is a misreading of the text. Peter’s point is that without baptism the believer is not in fact united to Christ’s death, burial, and resurrection. He clearly qualifies his statement that it is not the “removal of dirt” from the act of baptism that saves. Rather, he articulates that baptism is “an appeal to God for a good conscience, through the resurrection of Christ” (3:21). In this, Peter distills the core of baptism, an appeal and a corresponding act that signify the believer’s union with Christ. In recognition of God’s righteous judgment, the

believer enters the water and is baptized by the church of Christ to signify his death and his new birth. This is what baptism is as it is seen through the comprehensive lens of Scripture. With that foundation in place, it is possible to discuss its mode, its candidates, and its practical application in the church.

## **Mode**

The Scriptural mode of baptism is that of immersion in water. For starters, “The Greek word *baptizo* means ‘to plunge, dip, immerse’ something in water.”<sup>1</sup> The baptism of Christ is also normative, for when Jesus was baptized “he came up out of the water” (Mark 1:10). Likewise, when John the Baptist was baptizing at Aenon, it was “because water was plentiful there” (John 3:23). In Acts 8:36–39, this pattern continues as the Ethiopian eunuch stops to be baptized in the water, like Jesus, “coming up out of the water.” Furthermore, there seems to be no other pattern in Scripture for pouring or sprinkling. Finally, immersion alone, accurately depicts the death, burial, and resurrection that baptism is supposed to symbolize.<sup>2</sup>

Since baptism is more than just a symbolic act intended to be a relic that the people of God carry with them wherever they go, baptism is to communicate something. Only immersion truly communicates the breathtaking reality of new birth. Colossians 2:12 says, “having been buried with him in baptism, in which you were also raised with him,” clearly indicating the two important aspects of the act—death and resurrection. Whenever the church baptizes a new convert, they are testifying to the transfer of membership of this person from the kingdom of Satan and darkness to the kingdom of Christ.

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<sup>1</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 967.

<sup>2</sup>Ibid., 968–69.

## Members

Who should be baptized? In church history denominational lines have been drawn as a result of different answers to this question. Catholics, Orthodox, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and other Reformed churches would say that all members of the covenant community ought to be baptized. However, they would not require any profession of faith or evidence of regeneration to mark out this covenant community. This results in the rite of infant baptism, which sees children of believing parents as members of the covenant community.

In contrast, Baptist churches intimate that God marks out the covenant community with his Holy Spirit (Ezek 36:26). It is not an external act or an ecclesiastical pronouncement; it is instead an internal rebirth caused by the Spirit, resulting in a changed life marked by faith and repentance. Whereas paedobaptists see OT circumcision being fulfilled in NT baptism, Baptists understand the new birth, with its circumcision of the heart (Deut 30:6; Jer 4:4), as fulfilling and superseding old covenant circumcision.<sup>3</sup> As Colossians 2:11 says, “In him also you were circumcised with a circumcision without hands [thus unseen and not external], by putting off the body of the flesh, by the circumcision of Christ.” In short, for Baptists, Christ’s circumcision and perfect execution of the law becomes the circumcision of the believer, and baptism follows as an expression of belief and obedience.

Candidates for baptism, therefore, must be those who have made a profession of faith in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ and who have submitted themselves

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<sup>3</sup>See Stephen Wellum, “Baptism and the Relationship Between the Covenants,” in *Believer’s Baptism: Sign of the New Covenant in Christ* (ed. Thomas R. Schreiner and Shawn Wright; Nashville: B &H Academic, 2007), 97–161.

to his Lordship through repentance. This *credo*-baptism is supported throughout the Bible. The Great Commission affirms this position when Jesus commands his followers to baptize all his disciples (Matt. 28:18-20). Likewise, the pattern throughout Acts is that of belief in response to preaching of the gospel and then baptism. For instance, Acts 2:41 reads, “So those who received his word were baptized.” Similarly, both the Samaritans (8:12) and those at Cornelius’ house (10:46–48) manifested belief and evidence of the Spirit before they were baptized. In Jerusalem, Judea-Samaria, and among the Gentiles the pattern is the same, belief followed by baptism. Even in the case of the Philippian jailer, the word was first preached and all those who heard the word responded in baptism, rejoicing in the word they had believed (16:32–34). It becomes clear that in all of these cases, baptism followed belief. Additionally, there is not one instance of paedobaptism instructed or modeled.

## Methods

Now the question moves to how does a church implement this kind of *credo*-baptism? First, it should not do what Wayne Grudem in the first edition of his *Systematic Theology* encourages.<sup>4</sup> After biblically defending believer’s baptism by immersion, in an attempt to promote ecumenical unity, he unwittingly undoes Christ’s command for baptism. He writes:

One way forward could be for paedobaptists and advocates of believers’ baptism both to come to a common admission that baptism is not a major doctrine of the faith, and that they are willing to live with each other’s views on this matter and not allow differences over baptism to be a cause for division within the body Christ.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>4</sup>In his later edition of *Systematic Theology* (2000), he retracts this approach.

<sup>5</sup>Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 982.

It is, of course, true that baptism is not as important as the doctrine of the Trinity or justification by faith, but it is nevertheless an unalterable command from Jesus Christ. Application of his command is not an issue of preference or brotherly appeasement, but one of sheer obedience to the commands of Scripture. So, baptism must be something that is reinforced and not devalued. As a church ordinance, it is not something that can be left for the individual to decide. The importance and relevance of baptism must be taught in churches where the ordinance is practiced and especially where it has been misunderstood or neglected.

Preaching and teaching from the Scriptures about baptism is the place to begin in order to properly emphasize baptism in the life of the local congregation. Second, as the lost come to faith in Christ, the baptism ceremony must be a place of instruction and proclamation. For in baptism, both the new believer and the church are making a statement of faith. The individual is professing his or her belief and repentance. Simultaneously, the church is confirming his or her testimony and affirming the evidence of his salvation as genuine. For this reason, baptism is an ordinance given to the church and preserved by the pillar and buttress of truth (1 Tim 3:15). Baptism is not for a randomly gathered collection of believers, an evangelistic crusade, or a parachurch organization. It cannot simply be carried out at the will of any well-meaning Christian. It is an ordinance intended to visibly demarcate the Spiritually regenerate men and women gathered in local assemblies.

With this being the case, Baptism ought to be united to church membership. God has entrusted baptism to the church as the initiatory rite of his eschatological community, and in baptism, men and women ought to be bonded to local assemblies of this elect community. One implication of this, among many, is that the universal church cannot

administer baptism. Because it has no local roots to unite the believers to an established assembly, it is incapable of rightly administering baptism and it is unable to follow up with any type of discipline in the life of this newly minted convert.

This mention of membership leads into the next subject, the Lord's Supper.

## **Lord's Supper**

### **Meaning**

Like baptism, the Lord's Supper finds seminal expression in the Old Testament. From the foundation of the world, God's people, those who have called upon the name of the Lord (Gen 4:26) and who have received a name from Him (Gen 12:3) have shared a meal with their Maker and Redeemer. In the presence of God, Adam had an unlimited supply of Edenic food (cf. Gen 2:16). When YHWH visited Abraham, the progenitor of God's chosen race slaughtered a calf and had a meal prepared for his heavenly guests (Gen 18:1-8). Later, Moses and the seventy elders of Israel ate and drank with God on Mount Sinai in covenant fellowship with God (Ex. 24:9-11). Moreover, in the stipulations of the Torah, God specifically instructed the people to bring fellowship offerings to eat in the presence of God (Lev. 3:11; 7:11-18), just as the priests daily partook of Lord's meals. The bread of the presence represents the food provided by God for his people (Ex. 25:23-30), and all the OT feasts represent times of feasting in the presence of God (Deuteronomy 16).

Yet, all of these "meals" only typify what the Passover explicitly foreshadows. In other words, while much OT testimony points toward the New Covenant meal, it is the Passover that directly correlates with the Lord's Supper. Paul draws the connection when he says, "For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed" (1 Cor. 5:7). But where did Paul get the idea that Christ was the true Passover lamb? From Jesus himself.

In Luke 22:15–16 the good doctor recounts Jesus' words, "I have earnestly desired to eat this Passover with you before I suffer. For I tell you I will not eat it until it is fulfilled in the kingdom of God." After this statement, Jesus distributed the bread and the cup, assigning to each element a particular meaning related to impending death. Of the broken bread he said, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (v. 19). Of the wine, he said, "This cup that is poured out for you is the new covenant in my blood" (v. 20). Jesus taught his disciples that the Passover, which commemorated God's exodus of Israel from Egypt nearly 1400 years earlier, found its antitype in his new exodus (Luke 9:31). Consequently, Jesus is the superior and final Passover lamb, and his supper serves to remember the liberation he purchased with his blood.

The Lord's Supper is retrospective, introspective, and prospective. First, it points backwards to the historical event of Christ's crucifixion. As Jesus explained his new covenant meal, "he took bread, and when he had given thanks, he broke it and gave it to them, saying, "This is my body, which is given for you. Do this in remembrance of me" (Luke 22:19). Similarly, Paul says, "For as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death and he comes" (1 Cor 11:26).

Next, the Lord's Supper is also introspective. Two verses later in 1 Corinthians 11, Paul continues: "Let a person examine himself, then, and so eat of the bread and drink the cup" (11:28). Paul urges that those participants in Christ's meal search their heart and come to the table by faith in Christ's atonement for their sins. This measure is not to restrict sinners from coming to the table, but rather to remind sinning saints of the forgiveness available in the cross of Christ. The time of reflection is not to be one of dour

depression, but one of hopeful confidence in the finished work of Christ, a time to confess sin and be mindful of his finished work.

Third, the Lord's Supper is also prospective. Though meditation on Christ's passion and subjective application is necessary, so is the promise that this feast points us forward to yet a more real encounter with the Lord Jesus himself. Matthew 22:1–14 and Revelation 19:6–9 both speak of the final marriage feast of the lamb of God. When Christ returns he will prepare a banqueting table for his chosen followers (Ps. 23:5–6). The Lord's Supper that the church administers today reminds those in covenant with Christ of this coming banquet. Jesus himself said that he is withholding himself from the fruit of the vine until the consummation of his kingdom (Luke 22:18).

So it seems that as the Lord's supper is retrospective, it serves to proclaim the death of Christ, the forgiveness of sins, and the free offer of fellowship with God for those who have submitted themselves to Christ's new covenant. At the same time, the covenant meal is introspective, promoting sobriety and sanctification in the life of the Christian. Finally, and often forgotten, communion is prospective, reinforcing great hope in the eschatological realization of the kingdom of God. For this reason, the Lord's Supper should not be a merely dismal affair that reminds Christians of their sin. Rather, it must be a sober *and* joyous occasion which humbles us with our sin and stirs our affections with the gospel that reminds us that our sin and death was put to death in Christ's death and resurrection. May we proclaim such a gospel until Christ returns.

### **Participation**

The Lord's Supper is a covenantal celebration between the one who shed his blood to make propitiation for sin and all those who by faith have experienced the cleansing work

of that blood. Consequently, only those who have believed and received Jesus Christ as their atoning mediator have a right to partake of this bread and wine. The Lord's Supper was not given to individual believers as a sentimental meal to be offered as anyone sees fit. Rather, it is a meal superintended by the church of Jesus Christ. For this reason, only local churches ought to serve this holy communion. Simultaneously, only members of that church or members in good standing with another church of like faith and practice ought to be extended access to the table.

General housekeeping items for this supper include qualifications concerning baptism and church discipline. Concerning the former, baptism is a requirement for admittance to the table, because this ordinance follows faith and repentance as the first step of obedience to Christ, and communion is reserved for ostensibly faithful Christians. Likewise, when a church admits anyone to the Lord's Supper, they confer on that person a favorable standing before God. It would be hypocritical and misleading to allow anyone under church discipline to partake of the body and blood of Jesus Christ when they are in fact in direct rebellion against his commands. Therefore, a participant must be in good standing in the church.

In its actual administration, care should be taken to explain who is invited to the table and who is not. In the presence of unbelievers and children, the Lord's Supper is a wonderful way to explain the gospel and to draw a distinguishing mark between those who are in Christ (and his kingdom) and those who are not. In this way, the Lord's Supper, while only given to believers, can effectively be administered in the presence of unbelievers.

Finally, the Lord's Supper should be administered with humble seriousness, as well as exultant jubilation. Accordingly, it is appropriate in conjunction with the Lord's Supper

to bring up any issues of church discipline. That is, if any member has fallen from grace and been confronted by the elders, the Lord's Supper would be the appropriate place to make mention to the church that this person is banned from the table until they have expressed repentance for their sin. This kind of practice would heighten the eternal significance of this activity and purify the church in the process by keeping unruly members from the table. In the same way, the church should welcome back to the Lord's table restored members of the congregation.

While adding these two practices—discipline and restoration—to the Lord's Supper is not biblically mandated, it is advisable to make a practice of uniting discipline with the Lord's Supper, as the two reinforce the meaning of membership in the church. Additionally, practicing “closed communion” (i.e., restricting communion to members only) when church discipline was being conducted would be a wise pattern to adopt to help foster a sense of *gravitas* and meaning to the Lord's Supper. In the ebb and flow of church life, I would recommend practicing “close” and “closed” communion.

## **Presence**

Another debated issue regarding the Lord's Supper is the “presence” of Christ in the meal. Simply put, I disagree with the Roman Catholic view of Transubstantiation and the Lutheran view of Consubstantiation. The former does damage to the gospel, when it posits that Christ's sacrifice reoccurs during every mass and that it in some way bestows grace on its participants. This violently opposes Christ's final words on the cross, “It is finished” (John 19:30).

Luther's view also misrepresents Christ when he advocates the presence of Christ in every Eucharist. Christ abides in heaven at the right hand of God. In John 16:7, he said that

it was to the believers' advantage that he go away and that his Spirit come. Why would we want to believe otherwise in the case of communion?

It seems much safer to assert Christ's spiritual presence in the symbolic act of the Lord's Supper or to affirm the historic Baptist belief that the Lord's Supper is a memorial remembering Christ's death. In my estimation, both of these views are acceptable, as Christ is always omnipresent in the world and is especially experienced among believers in worship. That said, an important distinction should be made. The Lord's Supper is not a thing but a word. As a means of grace, it does not impart grace as a thing. Rather, it conveys grace as a dramatized word. In the Lord's Supper, the gospel is seen, tasted, touched, and smelt. While palpable and pleasing—the bread and wine are both sweet—the Lord's Supper declares the goodness of God in the gospel and reminds of our union in Christ by means of faith in Christ. For this reason, I would advocate taking the Lord's Supper on a weekly basis. Practically and pastorally, in a church that has quarterly communion, I would stress the need for monthly communion. In a church that has monthly communion, I would look for ways to incorporate the Lord's Supper more regularly, if not every week, following the pattern in Acts 2:42–47.

### **Congregational Authority / Elder Leadership**

Should the church be congregational or should it be led by a plurality of elders? This oft-debated question finds its difficulty in the fact that both approaches find substantial biblical support. So the question, "What does the Bible say," does not sufficiently lead to a one-sided resolution. To answer this question, the first thing that must be seen is the asymmetry implicit in the question. Congregationalism pertains to authority. Plurality of elders concerns leadership. Together, it is vital to recognize that authority and leadership

are not synonymous, and that in fact, God has wisely designed power and authority to be distributed through the church, even as the church recognizes and submits to appointed elders. Therefore, even though many Baptist churches elevate congregationalism over and at the expense of elder leadership (i.e., ecclesial democracies) and other Presbyterian churches elevate elders at the expense of the congregation (i.e., elder ruled), it is both possible and best to have congregational authority and elder leadership. In fact, when the whole of the New Testament is considered, that is exactly what we find.

### **Congregational Authority**

At first glance, congregationalism might be missed among the pages of the New Testament because its primary support is found in the structure of the New Testament, more than in the statement themselves.<sup>6</sup> In other words, congregational authority is a presupposition (evident in the structure of the New Testament), more than a series of propositions (found in the explicit statements of the New Testament). Here's what I mean: Consider the fact that Paul did not write a systematic theology or a confession of faith for the church, instead he wrote letters addressed to local churches. In fact, nine of his thirteen epistles were addressed to the believers gather in Rome, Corinth, Galatia, etc. The scope of his letters was to the whole church, not just those "in charge." As a result, Paul holds culpable all the believers in the churches of Galatia who are turning away from his gospel, not just the elders. Likewise, in his two letters to the Corinthians, he instructs the congregation on how to handle church discipline. Following Jesus, he sees the congregation as the final line of authority (for church discipline, in this case).

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<sup>6</sup>I make this statement because in the study of church polity at the rigorously biblical SALT Institute at Woodland Park Baptist Church (Chattanooga, TN), the study of polity never considered these persuasive congregational arguments. The model they taught was a soft elder-ruled model.

Even in the Pastoral Epistles, Paul's audience is intentionally wider than the person to whom he is writing. For instance, the whole congregation is held accountable for their doctrine and practice when he writes that the "household of God, which is the church of the living God, [is] a pillar and buttress of the truth" (1 Tim. 3:15). Each congregation was also responsible for evaluating the men in their midst who would be qualified to be elders or deacons.<sup>7</sup> Jude concurs when he tells the church, not just the elder, "to contend for the faith that was once for all delivered to the saints" (Jude 3).

More explicit rationale for congregational polity is also available. In Acts 6:1–6, it is the "full number of the disciples" who chose the seven men who would serve as deacons. This demonstrates the congregation's role in electing their officers. Likewise, the qualifications for elders and deacons in 1 Timothy 3:1–13 are given to the whole congregation, so that they can appropriately select who will be their leaders (see also Titus 1:5–9). This begins to unveil the congregation-officer relationship in the church, but it certainly emphasizes the whole church's responsibility to select godly, capable leaders.

Jesus' teaching about church discipline also indicates the authority vested in the congregation. The order of operations for church discipline delineated in Matthew 18:15–20 lets the final decision rest with the congregation. Not coincidentally, the keys of the kingdom are given to the church—not the pope, nor any other administrative body. Notice how the keys in Matthew 16:19 bind and loose on earth those things that are divinely decided in heaven, and how in Matthew 18:18–19 the congregation's decision is the authoritative decision actually rendered in heaven. Summarily, the final decision is made

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<sup>7</sup>Even if Timothy and Titus appointed the first generation of elders, they would be dependent on the judgments of the local congregations. Likewise, since Timothy and Titus were apostolic delegates (not local pastors), their instructions were received so that the churches themselves would be able to recognize and appoint men to lead them. In this way, the authority to hold elders accountable rests finally in the congregation.

among the whole congregation, and it is this decision that is representative of the mind of Christ seated in heaven.

This type of logic is delineated in 1 Corinthians 5. When Paul is apostolically instructing the church at Corinth how to handle the sexually immoral brother, he charges the church to reinforce discipline/judgment. He sharply rebukes the whole church to discipline this sinning church member, for rhetorically he asks, “Is it not those inside the church whom you (plural) are to judge” (1 Cor 5:12). Clearly, Paul sees in the local church the final authority to judge and make decisions.

Additionally, the doctrine of the priesthood of believers<sup>8</sup> gives theological warrant for a congregational authority (1 Pet 2:9). As all regenerate believers, young and old, are indwelt by the Holy Spirit (Eph. 1:13–14) and have “the mind of Christ” (1 Cor 2:16), all members of the local church ought to play some part in the decision-making process within the local church. This type of corporate interaction, where ideally every member is participating in the life of the church, helps mature individuals. At the same time, this congregational model benefits the whole because each gifted member of the body exercises his or her gift for the edification of the body (Eph 4:7–16).

With that said, the church cannot be a pure democracy, disregarding any sort of ordered leadership. While every member has a voice and a vote, not every voice can be as

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<sup>8</sup>Significantly, this doctrine affirms the corporate priesthood of believers (plural), not the priesthood of the believer (singular). The former rightly recognizes the authority invested in the local church; the latter unwittingly promotes individualism and self-autonomy. Although many (moderate) Baptists have advocated this doctrine, they have often do so erroneously—suggesting that “personal freedom” is a historic principle for Baptists. In truth, this doctrine affirms the dignity of the believer. Every person must give an account to God. However, it does not follow that every person has the autonomous freedom to do as they please. This runs into the problem of mutuality in the congregation and submission to the elders appointed in the congregation. In practice, a right understanding of the priesthood of believers is a healthy affirmation of congregational authority, but too often an unhealthy, headstrong priesthood of the believer is seen in congregational churches. This latter iteration should be recognized for what it is—an endorsement of self-centered human autonomy. It is neither biblical, nor helpful. That said, we should not reject congregational authority, membership mutuality, and the priesthood of the believers, especially when united with respectful desire to submit to local shepherds—otherwise called pastor or elders.

influential. Nor does every decision need to be run past the whole church. In general, the whole congregation should be involved in three D's—doctrine (with the especial help of gifted teachers and mature members, see Titus 1 – 2), discipline (see Matt 18:15–17), and delegation of eldership to those recognized in the church to be qualified. In the context of local churches, the New Testament speaks of two divinely-inspired offices—that of overseer/elder/pastor-teacher and deacon. We will need to consider each in turn.

### **A Plurality of Elder-Leaders**

A plurality of elders in leadership is supported by many passages. In Acts Luke reports that Paul and Barnabas had appointed elders (plural) in every church (14:23). Likewise, Acts 20:17 speaks of “elders” as being synonymous with “overseers” in 20:28. In both cases there is a plurality of elders/overseers in a single church. Moving into the letters of Paul, it is obvious that plural leadership continues. Philippians 1:1 bears witness to the assumed roles of overseers and deacons in every church when Paul addresses his letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with overseers and deacons.” In Titus 1:5 Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders (plural) in every town (singular). Moreover, Paul instructs Timothy, his delegate to Ephesus, to “let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor” (1 Tim. 5:17). To summarize, Paul instructs and assumes multiple elders to be appointed in every church.

The Catholic Epistles reinforce this teaching. In the case of illness in the church, James 5:14 tells the elders (plural) to come to the aid of the sick congregant. Next, Peter explicitly instructs to elders in his first letter. Here the “fellow elder” addresses the “elders among you,” and proceeds to exhort them on how to serve as leaders within their church. Last, Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping

watch over your souls.” While *presbuteros* is not used in this passage, the plurality of church leaders remains.<sup>9</sup>

### **Congregational Authority / Elder Leadership**

James Leo Garrett defined congregational polity as follows:

Final human authority rests in the local or particular congregation when it gathers for decision-making. This means that decisions about membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships and the like are to be made by the gathered congregation except when such decisions have been delegated to individual members or to groups of members.<sup>10</sup>

This straightforward definition nicely enumerates many of the areas where leadership is needed in the church. It also rightly puts final authority in the hands of the congregation. However, since Garrett stresses the leadership of the congregation as a whole, he unwittingly minimizes the place of elders in the life of the church. He rightly affirms the *possibility* of elder leadership (“delegated to individual members or groups of members”), but he overlooks God’s mandate that local churches are commanded to appointed qualified shepherds to lead them.

Distinguished from deacons, who assist the elders and typically meet the physical needs in the church, the elders (or pastors or overseers) are, in Garrett’s words, *the* “delegated individual members or groups of members” instituted by the New Testament. The only distinction to be made with Garrett—one that is sadly neglected in many churches—is that God himself “delegated” certain persons to lead the church. These are the gifted men of Ephesians 4:10–11 given to the church to equip the saints for the work of the

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<sup>9</sup>For more on elders see “Unpublished Papers” on [davidschrock.com](http://davidschrock.com). I have written a longer study on elders that expounds on all the passages mentioned here.

<sup>10</sup>James Leo Garrett, “The Congregation-Led Church,” in *Perspectives on Church Government* (ed. Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman; Nashville: B&H, 2004), 157.

service (v. 12) and the up-building of the body (vv. 13 – 16). While God doesn't "name" these men in each local church; he does give qualifications in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to help local churches identify their elders. Therefore, in every local congregation that aspires to be biblical, they must pray for, raise up, recognize, call, and submit to elders.

That said, how do elders relate to the congregation? First, the institution of elders does not remove the local church's autonomy or corporate responsibility to govern themselves. Rather, God has graciously resourced his local churches with men who are called and equipped to lead the church. Therefore, even in congregational settings where discussion pertains to the often complex matters of "membership, leadership, doctrine, worship, conduct, missions, finances, property, relationships and the like," there are godly leaders and teachers directing the whole congregation. They lead not by fiat but by teaching and establishing a biblical consensus. This is true shepherding and the plan for God's local churches—elders who lead the flock by teaching; sheep who trust, follow, and esteem their leaders who give them the Word of God (Heb 13:7).

Accordingly, decisions in the church are not resolved through the casting of lots,<sup>11</sup> the contest of wills, or the embattlement of opinions in a business meeting free-for-all. Instead, all congregational decisions are superintended and presented by the governing elders of the church, with the whole body supplying support and relevant information and counsel. This method preserves congregational polity, but always under the wise guidance of elders. In experience, it moves the church slower than an elder-ruled or staff-directed church. But that is part of the beauty. God's church is a flock, not a speedboat. As the elders painstakingly lead, teach, counsel, and correct, they gain the trust of their people, and thus

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<sup>11</sup>The people of God at one time were forced to make decisions this way (Num. 27:21; 1 Sam. 28:6). Even before Pentecost and the outpouring of the Holy Spirit, the church made decisions by use of lots (Acts 1:26).

the congregation functions (Lord willing) as a people who submit to their leaders, even while retaining their congregational authority.

### **How do elders lead in the congregation?**

The Scriptures are not silent about how the elders relate to the congregation. The consistent testimony pertaining to the elders' role in the local church is for the members of the church to submit and obey their leaders (Heb. 13:7). Those who are younger are to be "subject to the elders" (1 Pet. 5:5). Similarly, Paul's commendation of faithful elders is for those who rule well, laboring in teaching and preaching (1 Tim. 5:17). This clearly gives elders pride of place in teaching and ruling the local church.

The implication is that while authority lies in the entire body of the church, the local assembly is not an absolute democracy. The church is to be an orderly household, and just like a well-ordered home has a father who leads and instructs well, it also has children who submit to and obey their father. In the same way, babes in Christ ought to participate in the activities of the congregation, but with respect and submission to their fathers in the faith (i.e., elders in the church).

This in no way depreciates the congregational responsibility to govern its own affairs. Rather, it promotes an environment where spiritual maturity is fostered. As newborn believers learn to submit to those in governing positions, mature men can aspire to the office of overseer, so that older and younger men grow up in the local church (see Titus 2). At the same time, older and younger women follow suit, as they watch their fathers and husbands lead spiritually.

It is God's design that younger believers should learn from their elders, and over time be given opportunities to influence the congregation through their own giftedness. It

is this multi-generational church leadership that promotes godly character in the lives of church members (1 Tim 5:1–2)—submission in the young (1 Pet. 5:5ff) and increasing responsibility for the mature (1 Tim. 3:1–7, 1 Pet. 5:1–3). As Titus 2 teaches, the church is a family where the older teach the younger. This appreciation for age and wisdom (as well as spiritual maturity) puts the brakes on absolute democracy in the church. While the congregation does retain authority; it's family structure (i.e., “the household of God”), recasts the church in the light of family relations, not political power-plays.

Of course, this description is idealized. Sinful personalities and extra-biblical cultural dynamics will always encroach upon the “success” of this model. But again, with the checks and balances of God’s Word in place, the balance of congregational authority and elder leadership provides the best model for church life. It is designed to give oversight to the sheep who need leaders, without stripping these believers from the responsibility to grow and take ownership (in the right way) in their local church. Experientially, every congregational/elder-led church will tend toward too much democracy or too much power in the elders. Acknowledging this point, we are reminded that the system of government does not save. Christ is building his church. And we who lead and live in the community of the church must relentlessly depend on God for his grace to see our misguided and sinful tendencies and to correct them by the power of the Spirit and instruction of the Word.

### **What about inter-church connectedness?**

Another feature of congregational authority and elder polity concerns the relationship between churches. Unlike the Presbyterian hierarchy, these locally governed churches are autonomous. All associations with other churches are conducted on a voluntary basis. The argument that Acts 15 implements a network of churches and a

centralized authority in Jerusalem does not hold weight. First, “there is not the slightest intimation that delegates went from the other churches, which were now numerous, and scattered through different countries.”<sup>12</sup> J. L. Dagg’s point is that Scripture is silent about any sort of pre-established or emerging general assembly among the early Christians.

Second, even if a general assembly is conceded in Acts 15, the issue at hand is one concerning salvation. It occurred during a unique time in the church where apostolic authority was still setting the foundation for the church. The Jerusalem Council served as an instructive body for the corpus of the New Testament and how Gentiles were to be grafted into the church as a whole. It was not convened to serve as a model for how church decisions were to be handled in coming generations.

Third, the genesis of the meeting came from Antioch not Jerusalem. In this way, it was not like James, bishop of Jerusalem, ordered the other churches to send delegates. Rather, in the period of the apostles a question concerning grace, faith, circumcision, and the nations arose, so that Paul and Barnabas required the consideration of the pillars of the church. Therefore, the source of authority comes not from a centralized ecclesial body; it actually comes from the authors of God’s Word. In this way, Acts 15 functions more like a return to the Bible than an assembly of church leaders.

Nevertheless, the Bible does encourage awareness of and interaction between independent congregations. Paul encourages the church in Thessalonica because they are “an example to all the believers in Macedonia and Achaia” (1 Thess 1:7). He implies other churches ought to replicate this faithful congregation. Likewise, Paul speaks more than once of the generosity of one church giving financially to another (Rom 15:26–27; 2 Cor

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<sup>12</sup>J. L. Dagg, *Manual for Church Order* (South Carolina: The Southern Baptist Publication Society, 1958; reprint, Harrisonburg, VA: Gano Books, 1990), 131.

9:1–5; Phil 4:14–19). In the same fashion, John speaks of how churches ought to receive traveling Christians from other churches (3 John 5–8). All of these references serve as examples of inter-church relations, but they do not set up any authoritative oversight larger than the boundaries of the local church.

### **Church Discipline**

Church discipline is a gift of grace to the church of Jesus Christ. Though sadly misrepresented as a scolding technique punishing ostracized members of the church, the purpose of church discipline is (1) to keep genuine members walking in harmonious fellowship with their Father and their family of faith, and (2) to reprove, correct, and restore erring members of the covenant community to fellowship with Christ. The former is known as formative church discipline, the latter is corrective discipline. While church discipline focuses on the individual, its effects impact the corporate body, as well. Therefore, church discipline is both individual and corporate.

Corporately, church discipline must be carried out in order to maintain and even improve the purity of the local church. For instance, the church grows in its overall purity as its individual members grow in their personal holiness and devotion to Christ. When unrepentant members of the church are permitted unfettered residence in the church, grace is perverted, holiness ignored, and the gospel is muzzled. By contrast, as unrepentant members are confronted and shown to be wolves in sheep's clothing, the church experiences a greater degree of purity. Scriptural evidence is plentiful for both formative and corrective discipline. Individually, church discipline is vital for growth in grace and perseverance in the faith.

## Formative Discipline

“Strive for...holiness without which no one will see the Lord” (Heb. 12:14). It is no coincidence that this statement follows a passage of Scripture detailing the importance of God’s fatherly discipline. In Hebrews 12:1–11 the author reminds his Jewish audience of the salutary purposes of discipline. Conjuring up images from childhood, he compares God’s unpleasant discipline to that of a loving father. Why? So that each true son or daughter of God may “yield the peaceful fruit of righteousness” (v. 11).

For this reason, the importance of formative discipline cannot be underestimated. It has eternal ramifications. The New Testament speaks about discipline and self-control in many ways and in many places. Consider a few:

- But the fruit of the Spirit is...self-control (Gal 5:22–23).
- Have nothing to do with irreverent, silly myths. Rather train yourself for godliness; for while bodily training is of some value, godliness is of value in every way, as it holds promise for the present life and also for the life to come (1 Tim. 4:7–8).
- For God gave us a spirit not of fear but of power and love and self-control (2 Tim. 1:7).
- All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped for every good work (2 Tim 3:16–17).

Sanctification is impossible without this sort of discipline. Corporately and personally, discipline must be exercised to grow in grace and to enter into the kingdom of God (2 Pet 1:11). This is why prayer, fasting, tithing, and reading the Bible are called spiritual *disciplines*. Still, there is another side to church discipline. In order to keep sinners from stumbling and falling into egregious sin, God has wisely and compassionately set in place corrective church discipline to help erring sinners return to the path of life.

## Corrective Discipline

Matthew 18:15–20 is the primary text for corrective church discipline, but before addressing this passage head on it is necessary to consider the context. Before speaking to the church corporately, Jesus teaches individuals about the gravity of sin and the radical necessity of removing sin from their lives (18:7–9). Using sober hyperbole, Jesus says, “If your hand or your foot causes you to sin, cut it off and throw it away. It is better for you to enter life crippled or lame than with two hands or feet to be thrown into the eternal fire” (v. 8). Such a shocking statement alerts the hearer to the life and death nature of sin and the personal responsibility to put sin to death.

Next, in verses 10–14 Jesus speaks about the lost sheep of the Chief Shepherd’s fold. Jesus reveals the gracious and compassionate nature of the Father. Matthew records Jesus’ words, “It is not the will of my Father who is in heaven that one of these little ones should perish” (v. 14). While the directives to cut off sin speak of the individual’s responsibility, the compassionate parable of the searching shepherd depicts God’s sovereign response to retrieve his straying children.

Matthew then turns to Jesus’ teaching on church discipline in verses 15–20, where he fuses the two preceding principles of man’s responsibility with God’s sovereignty. Jesus delegates to the church the responsibility of superintending the sheep of God’s fold. Essentially, Jesus is establishing means to protect redeemed sinners. By recruiting the eyes of the whole congregation to help the blinded sinner, Jesus protects the weakest sheep—those too feeble to “cut out their eyes” to avoid sin. As with evangelism, God uses means to save his sheep. At the same time, this corporate sanctification process maintains the purity of the local church, divesting from the congregation wolves in sheep’s clothing.

Jesus' teaching is not theoretical though. He specifically instructs the local assembly how to conduct church discipline. They are to follow three simple steps, involving three very particular groups of people:

- 1) "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, *between you and him alone*. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen" (18:15-16a), [go to step two].
- 2) "Take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of *two or three witnesses*" (16b). [If he listens to the witnesses, you have gained your brother]. "If he refuses to listen to them" (17a, [proceed to step three].
- 3) "Tell it to the *church*" (17b) [And if he listens to the church, you have gained your brother]. "And if he refuses to listen to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector" (17c).

The hope and prayer of each step is the restoration of this brother to the believing assembly. This can be seen both in the optimism of verse 16 ("you have gained your brother") and the passage that follows this set of instructions (18:21–35). The following passage reinforces the need for forgiveness in the church, an absolute essential when the brother repents.

In the case of the unrepentant, the wayward member is now to be treated as an unbeliever and handed over to Satan (1 Cor. 5:4). Practically, this should involve a definitive statement to the man concerning his standing in the church and before Christ. For the discipline carried out in this context is not like revoking a membership at a ritzy golf club. No, Jesus explains "whatever you bind on earth shall [have already been] bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall [have already been] loosed in heaven" (Matt 18:18). Jesus' endows his church with the legal authority to proclaim on earth what is true in heaven. Of course, the church is not infallible, but as it is Christ's embassy on earth, it serves as his mouthpiece for announcing forgiveness and judgment (John 20:23).

Baptism and the Lord's Supper correspond to the former; church discipline the latter. This delegated authority is incredibly sobering and is designed to put the fear of God into the hearts of those who are excommunicated from the church.

At the same time, an official statement should be made to the church concerning the status of this unrepentant brother or sister. Full details do not need to be disclosed, but the standing of this person before Christ does. This must be a time to explain with proper seriousness, the realities of heaven and hell. By refusing to heed the voice of Christ proclaimed by the church, this man has shown himself to be an enemy of Christ (i.e., "a Gentile or a tax collector"). Consequently, the church is to break all ties with this man, save prayer and reiteration of the commands to repent and believe (cf. 1 Cor 5:5; 1 Tim 1:20).

### **Practical Considerations**

In addition to Jesus' instructions to the church about discipline, the apostle Paul reinforces the teaching with his statements in 1 Corinthians 5, where he instructs the Corinthian believers to judge the sexually immoral brother. Moreover, Galatians 6:1–4, Jude 22–23, 1 Thessalonians 5:14 give practical advice for conducting church discipline. In Galatians 6 those who seek to restore the believer are warned to beware of sinning in the process of helping a brother (vv. 1–4). At the same time, Paul emphasizes the reality of bearing the burdens of those who are engrossed in sin. Many times, extreme measures will need to be taken by brothers and sisters in the Lord to help retrieve a wayward Christian.

Jude resonates with this warning. Here the Lord's brother writes "have mercy on those who doubt; save others by snatching them out of the fire; to others show mercy with fear, hating even the garment stained by flesh" (vv. 22–23). In this last statement, Jude hits the same note as Paul, in warning the assisting believer to beware of falling into the same

sin as the erring brother. Such advice, naturally leads the practitioners of church discipline to admit their own weaknesses and to assist in groups of two's and three's, as the Lord prescribed. As Jesus says in Matthew 7:4 we must first remove the log in our own eye before we endeavor to do surgery on the speck lodged in our brother's eye.

Finally, 1 Thessalonians 5:14 advises the counselor(s) to bear with the erring brother and to consider whether or not the counselee is unruly, fainthearted, or weak. Such spiritual sensitivity will temper the way that the correcting brother will address the person in question. In all of these matters, extensive prayer, fasting, and the examination of Scripture will be necessary. Just as salvation is a miracle, recovering a brother entangled in gross sin is also a regenerative miracle. Oh, may the Lord give us pastors and elders the fortitude to implement and exercise church discipline for the radiance and purity of Christ's church.