

Authority in the Church

I. The Problem of Balance

- A. The ultimate authority over the universal church is Jesus Christ, the head of the body (Eph. 1:10; 4:15; 5:23).
- B. While Christ is also the ultimate authority over each local church, He has prescribed a practical means for each church to determine His will in human authority structures:
1. Congregational Authority: The local church as a unit has authority.
 - a) The congregation has the authority to select its own leaders:
 - (1) The people (not the leaders alone) chose men to feed widows (Acts 6:3-5).
 - (2) The Antioch church as a whole (not the leaders alone) sent Paul and Barnabas to settle a doctrinal dispute (Acts 15:2-3).
 - b) The church as a whole sent out missionaries (Acts 11:22; 2 Cor. 8:19).
 - c) The people themselves have the responsibility for church discipline:
 - (1) The process of discipline can begin with anyone in the body (Matt. 18:15). It also ends with corporate discipline where the sin is told to the church (v. 17).
 - (2) Paul admonished the Corinthian church as a whole to discipline an unruly member (1 Cor. 5:5; 2 Cor. 2:6-7).
 - d) The priesthood of believers gives all Christians equal access to God (1 Pet. 2:9).
 2. Leadership Authority: However, while apostles were the highest authority in the first century, elders had the highest authority after the apostolic age.
 - a) Paul put elders in charge in churches (Acts 14:23).¹
 - b) Every church had a *plurality* of elders in their congregation rather than a single leader (Tit. 1:5).
 - c) “Elder” and “overseer” are interchangeable terms (Acts 20:17, 28; Tit. 1:5, 7; 1 Pet. 5:1, 2), indicating their authoritative role to lead with maturity.
 - d) “Ruling” was one role of elders (1 Tim. 5:17).
- C. The Issue: How can a church balance these two potentially contradictory authority structures of congregation and leaders? How can it have both at the same time?

¹ The congregation, however, chose these elders. In Acts 14:23 the word *appointed* (Gr. *cheirotonesantes* χειροτονήσαντες) means to “choose; elect by raising hands” (cf. 2 Cor. 8:19; Tit. 1:9; BAGD 881; cited by Paul Enns, *The Moody Handbook of Theology* [Chicago: Moody, 1994], 358).

II. Believers are Commanded to Obey Their Church Leaders

- A. The church must obey its leaders: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17).
- B. “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Heb. 13:7). To “imitate” them clearly means not to fight against them!
- C. Obviously, the time when believers are most tempted to disobey their elected church deacons, elders, or pastors is when they disagree with them. Yet the NT does not excuse the congregation from obedience simply based on personal tastes or opinions. Even in these cases they should obey. This means that members should *never* vote against the decisions of their elected leaders. To do so fights against God-ordained authority.

III. What Should Church Members Do if the Leadership Itself is Divided?

- A. Every church leadership team has times of disagreement. This is inevitable due to the limited understanding of fallible men, both in the congregation and in the leadership team.
- B. When leaders themselves are divided, the people should submit in the following ways:
 - 1. Pray for unity on the elder council.
 - 2. Patiently wait for the leaders to render their verdict rather than usurp their authority by taking matters into one’s own hands.
 - 3. Decide in advance to support the leadership decisions, even if these decisions are not unanimous and even if the membership disagrees.
 - 4. The first maxim of George Mueller is helpful here when seeking God’s will in a difficult situation: “I SEEK AT THE BEGINNING to get my heart into such a state that it has no will of its own in regard to a given matter. Nine-tenths of the trouble with people is just here. Nine-tenths of the difficulties are overcome when our hearts are ready to do the Lord's will, whatever it may be. When one is truly in this state, it is usually but a little way to the knowledge of what His will is.”²

IV. What Should Church Members Do When They Disagree with Their Leaders?

- A. If a leader is clearly in sin, members should follow the four-step procedure for restoring sinning Christians noted in Matthew 18:15-20:³
 - 1. Go to this leader in private.
 - 2. Bring one or two others along for a second meeting if there is no repentance.

² George Mueller, *George Mueller: Man of Faith*, reprint of “How I Ascertain the Will of God,” from *An Hour with George Mueller: The Man of Faith to Whom God Gave Millions*, ed. A. Sims (Warren Myers, P.O. Box 125: Singapore, ca. 1981), 43.

³ A detailed look at Matthew 18:15-20 is in my separate study on “The Process of Church Discipline” (NT Survey class notes, 240a-c).

3. If there still is no repentance, bring the matter before the entire church body.
 4. If publicly exposing the sin does not restore him, the leader should be removed from office and treated like a non-Christian (i.e., encouraged towards repentance).
- B. However, many church disagreements between a congregation and the leaders are differences of opinion in matters that are not sinful or addressed in Scripture. What should the church do over debatable matters?
1. God expects respectful appeal to authority here as well. The Matthew 18:15 principle of keeping matters as small as possible is wise in these situations too.
 2. The church should *never* appeal to unbelievers to solve church matters (1 Cor. 6:1-8). Such cases of the justified going before the unjustified for justice (!) shows that the church is defeated already (v. 7a). It is better for believers to be wronged (justice not meted out) than for the truth of the gospel to be tarnished—or the truth of the situation be exposed before ungodly civil authorities. This prohibits a church from ever seeking a judgment from the Registry of Societies, the courts, or any other unbeliever. A neutral, godly arbitrator is best in these situations.
- C. When a believer disagrees with the church leadership, he has but *three options*:
1. *Submit* to these leaders without appeal, even though in disagreement.
 2. *Appeal* to them respectfully, but still abide by their decisions.
 3. *Leave* the church so as not to be under their authority by transferring his membership to another church that is led by leaders he respects.
- D. The option that is *not allowed* in Scripture is to fight against God-ordained leaders, whether in the civil (Rom. 13:1-7; 1 Pet. 2:13), family (Eph. 5:22-6:3), employment (Eph. 6:5-8), or church realm (Heb. 13:7, 17; 2 Cor. 10:8).

V. When Should Church Members *Not* Obey Their Leaders?

- A. John encouraged Gaius not to allow one of his church leaders named Diotrephes to lead a fight against missionary teachers (3 John 9-10). This situation was so serious that the minority group led by Diotrephes actually removed ministry staff! This congregation was held captive by aggressive and ungodly leaders that they should have opposed but did not.
- B. Believers should disobey their church leaders only when these leaders mandate them to do something unscriptural, such as murder (e.g., abortion), lying, etc. One clear NT example of disobeying spiritual authority is when Peter and John disobeyed the command of the high priest and Council who would not permit them to share Christ. They replied, “Judge for yourselves whether it is right in God’s sight to obey you rather than God” (Acts 4:19), then they continued to publicly witness for Christ.
- C. If the issue at hand is one that does *not* oppose the Bible (e.g., a command from deacons or elders to attend or not attend a meeting), then those under authority are obliged to obey. Otherwise, one’s submission to authority soon becomes a “pick and choose” situation whether to obey or rebel against God-ordained leaders.

VI. What Does “Congregational Authority” Mean?

- A. Sometimes congregational polity is misinterpreted to mean that the congregation is the final authority in church matters. This view sees the church governed by the congregation. This is not accurate and will lead to micromanagement.⁴
- B. What, then, is proper congregational authority? (One Baptist theologian suggests it is best to talk of “congregational authority” rather than “congregational government,”⁵ which seems appropriate since even congregational church also have leaders.) These are three basic elements that our church seeks to maintain:⁶
1. Autonomy: Congregational polity means that a bishop or pope or denomination board or any other outside body does not determine local church polity. This is often called the autonomy (independence) of the local congregation. Each congregation calls its own pastor, determines its rules, and determines its own budget rather than having a pastor assigned to them (as in the Anglican structure).
 2. Priesthood of the Believer: “Every member of the local congregation has a voice in its affairs. It is the individual members of the congregation who possess and exercise authority. Authority is not the prerogative of a lone individual or select group.”⁷ The primary manner in which the church members express their “priestly” function is in the selection of their leaders.
 3. Leadership: Even congregational governments must have leaders (be they pastors, elders, or deacons). These congregations elect leaders to determine governance, doctrine, staffing, and ministries. Submission to leaders is required even in political democracies “of the people, by the people, and for the people” (Abraham Lincoln). The alternative is chaos. “Early church government [was] a combination of the congregational and the presbyterial [elder] forms.”⁸ Elders will account to God whether they listened to the concerns of the people. As servant leaders, they must act in the congregation’s best interests rather than lord it over them (1 Pet. 5:2-3). However, the people must also submit to their leaders. Submission to leadership is not contradictory to congregational authority since the people themselves ultimately choose their leaders.

⁴ This takes congregational authority to its logical extreme and is critiqued by Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 935-36.

⁵ Earl D. Radmacher, “The Question of Elders” (Portland, OR: Western Baptist Press, 1977), 13; cited by Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 3 vols. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994), 3:256.

⁶ Baptist theologian Millard J. Erickson, *Christian Theology*, one vol. ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983-85), 1078 notes that autonomy and democracy are key. I have added leadership not because this is unique to Baptist polity, but because all Baptist churches also have leaders in addition to congregational authority.

⁷ Erickson, 1078.

⁸ Henry C. Thiessen, *Lecturers in Systematic Theology*, rev. Vernon D. Doerksen (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1979), 322; cf. Enns, 359.

VII. Conclusion

- A. A helpful summary of the above is provided in the following five points, to which I have added a sixth point:⁹
1. “A biblical view would seem to include elements of elder rule and congregational rule. The apostles had authority over local churches but they never established a system of [rule where the leaders were not accountable to their congregation].
 2. “The model for church government must come from Scripture not from examples of civil government (i.e. the church is not to be a democracy just because America is). The goal of church decision-making is not to determine the will of the majority but to determine the will of God.
 3. “God has designed His spiritual ‘organism’ – the church – to be led by spiritually qualified leaders (see qualifications). They do indeed direct the church’s ministry toward God-given goals. Spiritual leaders are initiators.
 4. “The congregation as a whole was gathered to decide on some very significant issues... so it seems that a local congregation today would also be involved in weighty matters [such as the selection of pastors, elders, and deacons, exercise of church discipline, etc.].
 5. “Each church has to decide how much decision-making is done at the leadership level and what is done at the congregational level. Some issues are of such a nature that it would be unwise to involve the whole congregation. Some issues are of such a nature that it would be unwise not to involve the whole congregation. But godly qualified leadership is key. When spiritual leaders have courage to lead and sensitivity to the needs of the congregation, God is free to produce harmony and effective spiritual ministry.”
 6. Although congregations have a voice and vote, they are not the supreme authority in church matters, except in the sense that the people themselves choose their leaders; it is their leaders that will bear the greatest responsibility before God.
- B. God’s will for all believers, even those in congregational churches, is simple: “Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Heb. 13:17).
- C. Here is the main point of this study: God will hold all Christians accountable to live under the authority of their leaders, even when they disagree with the decisions of these leaders. The only exception is when these leaders clearly violate the Bible’s teachings. In such cases, even following them is a sin as the Word of God must remain our highest authority.

Approved by the elders of Crossroads International Church on 12 January 2009

⁹ Adapted from Sid Litke, “Survey of Bible Doctrine: The Church” (http://www.bible.org/page.asp?page_id=424), section IV, B, 1, d.