

1 **Polity**

Who is Authorized to Do *What* in the Church?

2 **Who's In Charge of What Around Here?**

◇ Polity: Who cares?

◇ The fundamental question of polity: who possesses the final, *earthly* authority for decision-making in the church, and who possesses final, *earthly* responsibility to promote and guard the work of the church?

A Host of Historical Answers

◇ Church Officers

- Catholic – the pope in conjunction with the teaching Magisterium
- Greek/Eastern Orthodox – local church bishops appropriately appointed through apostolic succession
- High-Church Anglican/Episcopalian – bishops, individually and collectively in the hierarchy up to the archbishop of Canterbury

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3 **Who's In Charge of What Around Here?**

◇ The Universal Church

- Independent/Fundamentalist Churches
 - Because of the priesthood of all believers, the visible expression of the church—individuals collected as congregations—have exclusive, final authority over, and responsibility for, the church on earth. Pastors/elders play a specific role in the ministry of the church, but do not have any “more” official authority than anyone else.
- Some Southern Baptist Churches
 - Many Southern Baptist Churches don't have elders at all and rely on deacons to functionally run the church. They may function authoritatively, but out of pragmatism and not a theology of diaconal authority.

4 **Who's In Charge of What Around Here?**

◇ Officers though Congregational Deputizing (sometimes called “elder rule”)

- Possession vs. Exercise
 - A long line of thought locates authority in the whole church, but the exercise of that authority is done by the officers. This has been compared to how the power to see lies within the brain but is exercised by the eye.
 - “For whoever comes out of the water of baptism can boast that he is already consecrated priest, bishop and pope, though it is not seemly that everyone should exercise this office. Nay, just because we are all like manner priests, no one must put himself forward and undertake, without our consent and election, to do what is in the power of us all. For what is common to all, no one dare take upon himself without the will and the command of the community.” – Martin Luther

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5 **Who's In Charge of What Around Here?**

- “The power resides in the body as to its *being*; in the officers as to its *exercise*.” – Thomas Peck
- “The power which Christ has committed to His Church vests in the whole body, the rulers and those ruled, constituting it a spiritual commonwealth. This power, as exercised by the people, extends to the choice of those officers whom He has appointed in His Church.” PCA BCO 3-1

- “The exercise of ecclesiastical power, whether joint or several, has the divine sanction when in conformity with the statutes enacted by Christ, the Lawgiver, and when put forth by courts or by officers appointed thereunto in His Word.” PCA BCO 3-6
- “The officers of the Church, by whom all its powers are administered, are, according to the Scriptures, teaching and ruling elders and deacons.” PCA BCO 1-4
 - In all of these views, authority “ascends” instead of “descends” and is generally identifiable when people refer to officers as “representing” the congregation. The authority structure in these arrangements mirrors the authority structure of republican forms of government where legitimate authority comes from the governed governing themselves through representatives.



6 Who’s In Charge of What Around Here?

- Hierarchical – Presbyterians/some low-church Anglicans
 - Session, Presbytery, Synods (PC USA only) General Assembly (PCA, OPC)
- Non-hierarchical - many Reformed Baptists
- Officers and Congregations in Overlap (sometimes called, “elder led, congregationally ruled”)
- ◇ This view rejects the idea that there is one kind of authority that is either held by, or delegated to, church members or officers. Instead, it recognizes two different kinds of authority—one for elders, one for members—that do not stand in an ‘ascending from’ or ‘descending to’ relationship.
- ◇ The whole church—officers and members—exercises the keys to the kingdom by identifying and regulating—particularly through the ordinances—the “what” and “who” of Gospel faithfulness.



7 Who’s In Charge of What Around Here?

- ◇ The elders have binding authority to lead and instruct the church in its use of the keys through their *Spirit-given* and *congregationally-affirmed* authority to teach. They give counsel on and make recommendations on matters pertaining to the “what” and the “who” of Gospel faithfulness.
- ◇ The congregation submits to this counsel and recommendation unless it has biblical grounds for not doing so, in which case it rejects the teaching of the elders and potentially removes them from office. Functionally, then, membership, is understood as an office with qualifications (primarily, being a Christian) and responsibilities (primarily, maintaining personal and communal holiness and growth while making disciples).
 - The distinction between the two authorities is not between *possessing* and *exercising*, but between *possessing* and *leading in the use*, which means the exercise of authority is shared by both elders and congregation.



8 Who’s In Charge of What Around Here?

- ◇ Congregationalists
 - Because congregationalism is not hierarchical, any church can be structured by congregationalist polity. Examples include many Bible Churches, elder-led SBC churches, elder-led denomi-network churches (e.g., Acts 29, Sojourn Network et al), community churches and others.
 - What follows will be a theological, exegetical and practical defense of biblical congregationalism. But first...



9 **Clearing up Misconceptions about Congregationalism**

- ◇ Congregationalism is Representative/Reflective Government
 - "In congregationalism, elders don't lead, they just walking in front. We need real authority and leadership."
- ◇ Congregationalism Breeds Isolationist Autonomy
 - "In congregationalism, insular churches are disconnected from the larger body of Christ, have no accountability and can grow stagnant and sick in their own echo chamber."
- ◇ Congregationalism Allows Unqualified Voices Undue Influence
 - "In Congregationalism, the authority and responsibility for protecting the bride of Christ and carrying out the mission of the church is largely placed in the hands of new believers, weak believers, immature believers and untrained believers."
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