

PPT>>> 4. Elder Rule Through Congregational Consensus

Introduction:

PPT>>> **Flow Chart.** Christians agree that *Christ is the head of His Church*. The proper form of church government is ultimately **theocratic**, *a divine dictatorship*.

The controversy arises once the organizational flow chart moves down from Christ as Head. One of the few New Testament patterns that modern churches concern themselves about is church government. Yet it is this one pattern where there is the most disagreement among the experts.

PPT>>> G.W. Kirby, lecturer in practical theology at London Bible College, wrote that “The NT does not lay down precise rules either as to the form of ministry or of government of the Church. Over the centuries several different theories of church government have emerged, each of which claims some scriptural basis.”¹

No matter how decisions are made in a church, adopting the attitude of early church leaders can help make the process both unifying and edifying.

PPT>>> This is because an important role of first-century church leaders was to build congregational consensus. The benefits of this are:

- The mind of Christ is more likely found when the leaders guide the whole congregation to wrestle corporately with major decisions.
- The Spirit is given free rein to guide the church.
- Church members are encouraged and fulfilled as they realize that everyone’s thoughts are respectfully weighed in accordance with Scripture.
- Unity is strengthened.

PPT>>> Leadership’s role in this process includes helping to build consensus by teaching what Scripture says on various issues, privately talking with church members about decisions, appealing to those who differ and—after much persuasion—calling on any dissenting minority to yield to the elders along with the rest of the congregation.

PPT>>> **I. A Church Leader’s Authority**

******What did Jesus teach about a church leader’s authority in Luke 22:25-26?** *Rhetorical.*

PPT>>> **ESV Luke 22:25-26** The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.

¹ G.W. Kirby, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 854.

1. What does it mean to exercise lordship over someone or to be in authority over someone (Luke 22:25)? The two ideas are nearly synonymous.

PPT>>> The words “exercise lordship” (ESV) are from *kurieuo* (#2961), “to be master, rule, control” (BAG, p. 458). Thayer said it means “to have dominion over” (p. 365). It is to “boss around”.

PPT>>> The words “in authority” (ESV) are from *exousiazo* (#1850), “the right or power to do with something or someone as one sees fit” (BAG, p. 279). It is *to have someone under your control*.

PPT>>> **2. Jesus declared, “But not so with you” (22:26a)—the disciples were not to be like what?** They were not to be like the rulers of the Gentiles who lord it over people (22:25).

PPT>>> **ESV Luke 22:25-26** The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.

PPT>>> **What does “rather” (ESV) mean (22:26)?**

PPT>>> It means instead. “Rather” is an adverb used as a substitute or equivalent, as an alternative for something else. The actual Greek is *de*, an adversative particle.

PPT>>> Instead of having the authority of a political ruler, church leaders are to have the authority of a child

PPT>>> **Picture of Family with young children.** *How much authority does the youngest person in this family have?*

PPT>>> **ESV Luke 22:25-26** The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves.

3. What does it mean to be like “one who serves” (Luke 22:26)? The Greek here is *diakonos*, a “waiter.” The idea is that of household servant who is a waiter or a butler.

PPT>>> **Waitress/Butler. How much authority do waiters or butlers typically have?**

PPTS>>> Think about that a minute. **How much authority does the youngest person in a family have?**

How much authority does a household servant have? Rhetorical.

Jesus gave examples of those in Roman society who had the least authority—children and slaves. Although it is true that Jesus was a master of overstatement, there is an underlying truth that must not be glossed over. Church leaders are to be servant leaders. Their attitude should be one of humility in leadership, not kingly authority that lords over people.

In harmony with Jesus' words, Peter later instructed elders to:

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Peter 5:2-3** shepherd the flock of God . . . not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

Observation: *The New Testament is not anti-leadership.* The point is that leaders exist for the sake of the church, not vice versa. Leaders are to be great in service.

PPT>>> **ESV Mark 9:35** And he sat down and called the twelve. And he said to them, "If anyone would be first, he must be last of all and servant of all."

4. What literary function does 22:27 serve?

PPT>>> **ESV Luke 22:27** For who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves.

It not only rubs in the point made in 22:26, but it sets us up for the ultimate example of leadership: the Lord Jesus Himself.

PPT>>> **Example of Jesus:** Jesus has authority over the church and all creation. Yet when our God humbled Himself and became a man, He came to earth as a servant (Phlp 2:5-8). Jesus said that "the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve" (Mt 20:28). So too Jesus taught, "whoever would be first among you must be your slave" (Mt 20:27).

PPT>>> **Test: Which person represents the church leader?**

PPT>>> **Foot Washing.** On another occasion, Jesus washed the disciples' feet. **Why did He do this?** It was to make the point that anyone who wants to be a church leader must first learn to be the servant of all. He said:

PPT>>> **ESV John 13:13-17** "You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them."

Application: Do you want God's blessing on you as a church leader? Then do what Jesus modeled and wield your authority with a servant's heart.

Summary: According to Jesus, how much authority should church leaders have (based on Luke 22:24-30)?

Application: The church leader's authority seems to be that of a child and a waiter — precisely those in society who have no authority in the normal sense of the word. Certainly a church leader does not have the same wisdom and understanding as a child. Indeed, he should be among the wisest in the church. Doubtless there is some degree of hyperbole here, yet the application to be gleaned from Jesus' words is that rather than lording over the church, they are to lead by example. This type of "authority" will not work in secular governments nor business, but only in a redeemed community.

Transition: The words of Jesus here must be the primary frame of reference for all else that the New Testament says about church leaders.

PPT>>>

II. Shepherds Are Sheep Too

5. It is critical to properly assess the relationship that existed in the New Testament era between local elders and their churches. By examining the following texts, what can be gleaned about the prominence of elders in the various New Testament churches? See Romans 1:7, 1 Corinthians 1:2, 2 Corinthians 1:1, Galatians 1:1-2, 11, 3:15, 4:12, 28, 31, 5:13, 6:1, Ephesians 1:1, Philippians 1:1, Colossians 1:1-2, 1 Thessalonians 1:1, 5:12-13*, 2 Thessalonians 1:1, Hebrews 13:24, James 1:1, 5:14, 1 Peter 1:1-2, 5:1-3*, 2 Peter 1:1, Jude 1, Revelation 1:4.

It is a fact that church leaders were given little prominence in the letters to the churches:

Paul's highly theological epistle to the Romans was addressed simply to the "saints" in Rome (1:7), with no special mention of the shepherds.

PPT>>> **ESV Romans 1:7** To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints

In Romans 13, Paul brought up submission to the civil government, but never mentioned the church submitting to its elders.

In Romans 15, Paul expressed to the whole church his intent to visit. *Can you imagine the indignation that would take place today if someone like Billy Graham wrote to an entire church that he was soon to visit, rather than writing specifically to its leaders?*

The two letters to the Corinthian congregation were addressed to the entire "church" (1Co 1:2, 2Co 1:1), with no mention of its leaders in the greetings or anywhere else throughout the entirety of the letters.

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Corinthians 1:2** To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints . . .

This omission is all the more remarkable when one considers that 1 Corinthians deals with many leadership matters: church discipline, marriage, divorce and remarriage, abuse of the Lord's Supper, giving, and how to conduct a worship service. Yet elders are never mentioned, never referred to.

PPT>>> ESV **2 Corinthians 1:1b** To the church of God that is at Corinth, with all the saints who are in the whole of Achaia

The greeting in Galatians 1:2 was to all the “churches” in the region of Galatia, with no mention of any leadership. The readers were addressed throughout the book simply as “brothers.” This is because shepherds are sheep, too.

PPT>>> ESV Galatians 1:2b To the churches of Galatia . . .

The “saints in Ephesus” were the designated recipients of that letter (Ep 1:1).

PPT>>> ESV Ephesians 1:1b To the saints who are in Ephesus

The pastors were mentioned in 4:11, but they were not written to directly.

PPT>>> Furthermore, if ever there was an appropriate place to instruct the church to submit to and obey its elders, it would arguably have been in Ephesians 5-6, where Paul instructed women to submit to their husbands, children to obey their parents, and slaves their masters. Yet it is missing. *Could this be in keeping with Jesus’ words that a church leader has the same authority as a child and slave?*

PPT>>> Philippians 1:1 breaks the pattern of leadership neglect: the deacons and overseers were greeted along with the saints.

PPT>>> ESV Philippians 1:1b To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons . . .

However, no other mention was made of these leaders, nor was anything written directly to them in the letter.

The salutation of Colossians 1:2 was simply to “the saints and faithful brothers.”

PPT>>> ESV **Colossians 1:2** To the saints and faithful brothers in Christ at Colossae . . .

PPT>>> Nothing was written directly to or even *about* the leaders. Chapters 3-4 deal with the relationship between man and wife, parents and children, and slaves and masters. It would have been a logical place to write about the submission of a congregation to its leaders, yet nothing was written.

This ignoring of the leadership is also seen in the salutations of the letters to the Thessalonians:

PPT>>> ESV **1 Thessalonians 1:1b** To the church of the Thessalonians . . .

PPT>>> ESV **2 Thessalonians 1:1b** . . . To the church of the Thessalonians . . .

Paul did express appreciation for church leaders, but did not write directly to them:

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Thessalonians 5:12** We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you,

The leadership is also ignored in the greetings of James' letter to the twelve scattered tribes, Peter's and John's epistles, and Jude. All of this implies that the elders were themselves also sheep. The elders were a subset of the church as a whole. There was no clergy/laity distinction.

In the very last chapter of Hebrews, the readers were asked to:

PPT>>> **ESV Hebrews 13:24** Greet all your leaders . . .

Not only did the author not greet the leaders directly, *he assumed they would not even be reading the letter!*

Much may be gleaned from the way that New Testament writers appealed directly to entire congregations. They went to great lengths to influence all believers, not just those in leadership. The apostles did not simply bark orders and issue injunctions (as a military commander might do). Instead, they treated other believers as equals and appealed directly to them as such. No doubt local church leaders led in much the same way. An elder's primary authority was in his ability to influence with the truth. The respect they were given was honestly earned. It was the opposite of military authority wherein soldiers respect the rank but not necessarily the man.

Hebrews 13:7 reflects the fact that the leadership style employed by church leaders is primarily one of direction by example:

PPT>>> **ESV Hebrews 13:7** Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.

PPT>>> This ignoring of the leadership is also seen in the salutations of James' letter to the twelve scattered tribes,

PPT>>> Peter's letters

PPT>>> In 1 Peter 2-3, Peter dealt with a believer's submission to the government and a wife's submission to her husband, but, like Paul, wrote nothing about the church's submission to its leaders. In all the letters to the churches, it is not until 1 Peter 5 that elders are written to directly.²

PPT>>> John's epistles, and Jude. All of this implies that the elders were themselves also sheep. The elders were a subset of the church as a whole. There was no clergy/laity distinction.

² Timothy and Titus were not local pastors. They were apostolic workers, sent by Paul to various places to organize the churches and then to move on to other locations. The letters to Timothy and Titus are called "pastoral epistles" because of their emphasis on elders, their qualifications, and their duties.

This is all consistent with what Jesus said:

PPT>>> ESV **Matthew 20:26-28** . . . whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave, even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.

PPT>>> **III. Understanding Elder Rule**

PPT>>> ESV **1 Timothy 5:17** “elders who rule well”

It is clear that ruling is part of an elder’s duties.

PPT>>> Word Study: “Rule” (1Ti 5:17) is from *proistémi*. It certain can mean to “rule”, but understanding all its meanings is insightful. *Pro* means before and *istemi* means to stand; thus, to stand in front of (like the director of a orchestra). It is the idea of leadership. However, it also means to care for or to give attention to (like a nurse or attending physician).

PPT>>> ESV **Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.³

Hebrews 13:17 is one of the most often quoted texts on church government, especially in support of the idea of elder rule (as opposed to congregational rule).

Rhetorical: Why does Hebrews 13:17 not totally overturn what Jesus said?

6. Do word studies on “obey” and “submit” as found in Hebrews 13:17. What do these words mean and how are they different in meaning from *hupakouo* (“obey,” used in Ep 6:1, 5) and *hupotassomai* (“submit,” used in Ro 13:1, Col 3:18, 1Pe 2:13)? See also Acts 5:40, Galatians 5:7-8.

PPT>>> “Obey”: The common, garden-variety Greek word for “obey” is *hupakouo*. It is used with reference to children and slaves:

PPT>>> ESV **Ephesians 6:1** Children, obey your parents in the Lord, for this is right.

PPT>>> ESV **Ephesians 6:5** Slaves, obey your earthly masters with fear and trembling, with a sincere heart, as you would Christ . . .

PPT>>> X Very Important: However, the word behind “obey” in **Hebrews 13:17** is different from the normal Greek word. The word here is:

PPT>>> *peitho* (Hebrews 13:17)

³ The word “authority” in 13:17 is found only in the NIV, and is absolutely not in any known Greek manuscript. The word “leaders” is from the root *hegeomai*. The KJV renders it, “Obey them that have the rule over you.” However, it fundamentally simply means “leaders” or “guides” of any kind. Though it is used to refer to government leaders in some contexts, no dictatorial powers are necessarily implied by the word in and of itself.

PPT>>> “to persuade, to convince.” Also found in:

PPT>>> **ESV Acts 5:40** So they took his advice . . .

PPT>>> **ESV Galatians 5:7-8** You were running well. Who hindered you from obeying the truth? This persuasion is not from him who calls you.

It can mean to obey, but the feel of the word is an obedience born of persuasion.

PPT>>> “Peitho” was the goddess of persuasion, seduction and charming speech and a close companion of the goddess Aphrodite.

PPT>>> Found here in the middle or passive form, it still does mean to obey, but technically it can be translated, “allow yourselves to be persuaded by your leaders.”

PPT>>> The expositor Vine stated that with *peitho*, “the obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.”⁴ Lenski’s comment on this text is that if one allows oneself to be convinced by someone, one obeys him.⁵

Nuance: the author’s use of *peitho* may suggest that dialog will take place, teaching will be given, and arguments will be made in order to bring about this obedience. When someone is persuaded of something, he will act on it and, in that sense, obey it with joyful conviction. The church is not to simply mindlessly obey its leaders. Instead, there is to be discussion, dialog, reasoning, and persuasion. The church is to be open to being persuaded by what the leaders have to say, rather than responding in robot-like obedience. The words of the leaders are to be given extra weight in the discussion.

PPT>>> “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others: this is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided. . . his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.” — Aristotle in *Rhetoric*

PPT>>> “Leadership is the art of getting someone else to do something you want done because he wants to do it” — Dwight Eisenhower

PPT>>> “I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone.” — Dwight Eisenhower

PPT>>> “My definition of a leader . . . is a man who can persuade people to do what they don’t want to do, or do what they’re too lazy to do, and like it” — Harry Truman

⁴ W.E. Vine, *An Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Iowa Falls, IA: Riverside Book and Bible House, 1952), 124.

⁵ R.C.H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis, MN: Augsburg Publishing, 1966), 490.

PPT>>> ESV **Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

PPT>>> “**Submit**”: The common Greek word for “submit” is *hupotasso*. It is found in:

PPT>>> ESV **Romans 13:1** Let every person be subject to the governing authorities.

PPT>>> ESV **Colossians 3:18** Wives, submit to your husbands, as is fitting in the Lord.

PPT>>> NIV **Ephesians 5:21** Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ.

PPT>>> ESV **1 Peter 2:13-14** Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors . . . Be subject for the Lord’s sake to every human institution, whether it be to the emperor as supreme, or to governors . . .

PPT>>> X However, this is **not** the word used in **Hebrews 13:17** for “submit.”

PPT>>> Instead, *hupeiko* is used —

PPT>>> This word that occurs only here in the entire New Testament.

PPT>>> It still means submit, but outside the New Testament, *hupeiko* refers not to a structure (like to the government) to which one submits, but to a process or battle after which one yields (surrenders).

PPT>>> It was used of combatants.

PPT>>> Thus, to surrender or yield

PPT>>> Submission still occurs, but the picture is one of serious discussion and dialog prior to one party giving way.

PPT>>> **Example:** “After four years of arduous service, marked by unsurpassed courage and fortitude, the Army of Northern Virginia has been compelled to yield to overwhelming numbers and resources.” (**Robert E. Lee**, General Order Number 9, April 9, 1865, Appomattox Court House).

7. In Hebrews 13:17, believers are encouraged to “obey” and “submit” to church leaders.

PPT>>> ESV **Hebrews 13:17** Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

What would this suggest about congregational rule? It appears that the elders have the final say in decision making. However, it is their duty to seek to persuade the congregation to buy into a certain decision. It is to be expected that part of the process is a wrestling through issues, a back and forth and healthy dialog.

8. What types of people and situations is Hebrews 13:17 is designed for? (*For context, read all of Hebrews 13*). Prominent in Hebrews 13 is the critical role that church leaders play combating false teaching. Rather than listen to the varied and strange teachings about food, the Hebrew Christians were to listen to their own local church leaders. The author seemed to bracket his warning against false teaching between two verses on looking to their leaders for direction (13:7, 17).

F.F. Bruce: “There would always be a tendency throughout the churches for visitors who came purveying new and esoteric doctrines to be regarded as much more attractive and interesting personalities than the rather humdrum local leaders, who never taught anything new, but were content with the conservative line of apostolic tradition. Nevertheless it was those local leaders, and not the purveyors of strange teaching, who had a real concern for the welfare of the church and a sense of their accountability to God in this respect” (p. 408).

What we are dealing with in the final analysis is a delicate balancing act. The church is to be open to being “persuaded” by its leaders. There is to be discussion and teaching, argument and persuasion. The picture is not that of mindless, unquestioning obedience. Yet after a battle (wrangling over ideas), the church should ultimately “submit” (yield) to its leaders. This is especially true in matters of doctrine. The elders should offer substantial evidence as to why a certain teaching should or should not be believed (such as the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the Gospel message, the reality of hell or gender roles in the home and church). Yet the elders are the final line of defense against error and if push comes to shove, the those disagreeing with the elder are called up to yield to the elders’ judgment.

Church government is to include the consensus of all the brothers, with elders given special consideration in the consensus process. The elders’ arguments are to be given extra weight. At the end of the day, if an impasse arises, the church (or more likely, a few holdouts*) is to yield to its elders (Hebrews 13:17).

*There will always be tares among the wheat, hidden reefs in our love feasts, wolves in sheep’s clothing, those who are carnal or not walking in the Spirit, the immature, those with brain damage due to previous drug use, those who are scarred emotionally.

IV. The Church As Congress

Our understanding of Christ's church will be impoverished if we fail to factor in the dynamics of the original Greek word for church, *ekklésia*. With so much emphasis today on the separation of church and state, the last thing people associate church with is government. Yet *ekklésia* was a government word in its original, secular setting. In Jesus' day, *ekklésia* was used outside the New Testament to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions.⁶

PPT>>> 9. The Greek word for “church” is *ekklésia* (#1577). To what did the Greek word *ekklésia* originally refer? Outside the New Testament, *ekklésia* was used almost without exception to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions.

PPT>>> Thayer. According to Thayer's lexicon it was “an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberating.”

PPT>>> BAGD. The lexicon of Bauer, Arndt, Gingrich, and Danker defines *ekklésia* as an “assembly of a regularly summoned political body.”

PPT>>> Lothan Coenen. In Colin Brown's *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, *ekklésia*, in the time of the New Testament, is said to have been “clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken . . . the word *ekklesia*, throughout the Greek and Hellenistic areas, always retained its reference to the assembly of the *polis*.” In the *ekklesia*, “every citizen has the right to speak and to propose matters for discussion . . .”⁷

PPT>>> Parliament. When you think of *ekklésia* (“church”), you should think of this: a political body such as a Parliament.

PPT>>> Congress. When you think of *ekklésia* (“church”), you should think of this: a political body such as Congress.⁸

⁶ Within the Scriptures, *ekklésia* was also used to simply refer a gathering (of Israel or the church), to the church as the totality of Christians living in one place and to the universal church to which all believers belong.

⁷ Women were not allowed to speak at all in the secular Greek *ekklésia* (Piper & Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood*, p. 150). The *Encyclopedia Britannica Micropaedia*, Volume 3, states that “the ecclesia became coterminous with the body of male citizens 18 years of age or over. . .” (p. 771).

⁸ The word *ekklésia* is used other ways in the New Testament besides as a regularly summoned political body. For example, it was used in the Greek translation of the Old Testament (the LXX) to refer to gatherings of the Israelis, especially when gathered for religious purposes. The word can also simply refer to an assembly, gathering or meeting in general (such as a church meeting). Further, it can refer to the totality of Christians living in one place (that is, it can refer to the people who attend the meetings). Finally, it can be used to refer to the universal church, to which all believers belong (BAGD, p. 240-241). Unlike our English word church, *ekklésia* was never used to refer to a building.

PPT>>> Donald Guthrie observed, “When decisions were made, they were made by the whole company of believers, not simply by the officials . . .”⁹

PPT>>> 10. Why do you suppose that Jesus chose such a politically loaded word as *ekklésia* to describe His followers?¹⁰ Had He merely wanted to describe a gathering with no political connotations, Jesus could have used *sunagogé*, *thiasos* (troupe) or *eranos* (banquet). Perhaps Jesus intended His followers to function together with a purpose somehow parallel to that of the political government. If so, believers have the responsibility to decide things together and experience the consensus process. God’s people have a decision-making mandate. A church is a body of Kingdom citizens authorized to weigh major issues, make decisions, and pass judgments on various issues.

PPT>>> Thus, according to the *Baptist Faith and Message* of 2000, “Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.”¹¹

The first occurrence of the word “church” (*ekklésia*) is found in **Matthew 16:18-19**, and it seems to be used in its political sense.

PPT>>> **ESV Matthew 16:18-19** . . . on this rock I will build my church (*ekklésia*) . . . 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.”

PPT>>> **Key & Lock.** Immediately after referring to the *ekklésia*, Jesus spoke about keys to the kingdom. Keys represent the ability to open or close something. A key permits you to lock or to unlock. “Kingdom” is a political term.

PPT>>> The idea of binding and loosing are rabbinical terms that involve the authority to make decisions (to permit or to deny).

God’s people (organized in each local church) have a **decision-making mandate**. A church is fundamentally an assembly (or meeting) of qualified (i.e., believers) Kingdom citizens who are authorized (and expected) to make decisions, pass judgments, and weigh issues. The church is to function as a citizen-judiciary (or city council). Understanding that the church has the authority as well as the obligation to settle things is important. Any church that never grapples corporately with problems and resolves issues is failing to fulfill its full purpose as an *ekklésia*.

⁹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1981), 741.

¹⁰ Matthew 16:13-20 & 18:15-20. In the Septuagint, the wilderness gatherings of the ancient Israelites were called an *ekklesia*.

¹¹ Article VI, “The Church.”

A look at **church history** also serves to confirm this political idea behind *ekklésia*. For centuries, the church actually controlled the state government (i.e., the Holy Roman Empire or Calvin's Geneva). Though the wrong application of *ekklésia*, it suggests that people throughout the years have understood the political nature of this word.

Practical Observation: The process of achieving of consensus will mostly occur *apart* from 1 Corinthian 14 participatory church meetings. Certainly, focused teaching times or perhaps special meetings may be called to explore an issue, but for the most part consensus will be built one on one during private discussions or in such times as the fellowship of the Lord's Supper. Communication and relationships should be such that at any given point in the process of building consensus, every church member should know what every other member is thinking. The matter may not even be brought up in a church meeting until it is time to announce that consensus has finally been reached.

Examples of Congregational Involvement

11. What are some examples in the New Testament of God's people making decisions as a body? See Matthew 18:17-18, 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, 12, 6:1-4.

The above texts illustrate that the responsibility for making decisions resides in the church as a whole, rather than solely with its elders.

In Matthew 18:15-20, binding and loosing authority was conferred by Jesus on the whole *ekklésia*:

PPT>>> ESV **Matthew 18:15** 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.

PPT>>> ESV **Matthew 18:16** But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses.

PPT>>> ESV **Matthew 18:17a** If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church.

PPT>>> ESV **Matthew 18:17b** And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

PPT>>> ESV **Matthew 18:18** Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.

In **Matthew 18:15-20** we see that binding and loosing authority is conferred upon the *ekklésia*. Notice that no mention is made of any church leader here. Church discipline involves the whole church, not its leaders in isolation. Notice, however, that no decision was made by the church; there was no question of the man's sinfulness. It was merely a matter of the whole church bringing pressure to bear on the sinful man in an effort to get him to repent.

In **1 Corinthians 5** we see Paul call upon the assembled church to could put a sinning brother out of fellowship:

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Corinthians 5:4-5** When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

12. Why didn't Paul unilaterally put this man out (1Co 5:4-5)? First, Paul was not there, but also because only the church as a whole could effectively do it. Paul did not direct the elders to do it, nor were the elders even mentioned. And as with Matthew 18, no decision had to be made about the sinfulness of the situation, the only decision was to obey Jesus' teachings from Matthew 18 and withdraw fellowship from the man.

The Importance of Consensus

PPT>>> What does the word "consensus" mean?

PPT>>> General agreement or accord.

PPT>>> It is an opinion or position reached by a group as a whole.

PPT>>> It is related to the word "consent" or "consensual".
Another word for consensus might be unity, oneness, harmony, or mutual agreement.

13. What is the difference between majority rule and consensus? Majority rule is a 51% dictatorship and tends to work against unity. Consensus works toward unity. Individual church members must be in fellowship with the Lord, put the interests of others ahead of themselves, and be willing to love each other despite any differences and until those differences are resolved. You must *build* consensus.

What is the difference between consensus and unanimity? Consensus is over-whelming agreement. Unanimity is 100% agreement. The argument here is for consensus, not unanimity.

14. What do 1 Corinthians 1:10, 2 Corinthians 13:11 and Philippians 2:2 imply about majority rule (democracy) versus consensus in decision making? See also Psalm 133:1.

PPT>>> **Psalm 133:1** How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in **unity!**

PPT>>> **1 Corinthians 1:10** I appeal to you brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you **agree** with one another so that there may be **no divisions** among you and that you may be **perfectly united** in mind and thought.

PPT>>> **ESV 2 Corinthians 13:11** . . . Aim for restoration, comfort one another, agree with one another, live in peace; and the God of love and peace will be with you.

PPT>>> **Philippians 2:2** . . . make my joy complete by being **like-minded**, having the **same** love, being **one** in spirit and **purpose**.

PPT>>> **Test: Which size church is most likely to be able to achieve consensus?**

Practical Concern: Some feel government by elder-led consensus is too utopian, that it would never work. It is important to remember that the process a church goes through in achieving consensus is often just as important as the consensus that is finally achieved. It takes time, commitment, mutual-edification, and a lot of brotherly love. It truly can work in a smaller church. We must love each other enough to put up with each other! **Do we really trust in the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and churches?**

15. What provisions has God made to help a church to achieve consensus? See John 17:11, 20, 22-23, 1 Corinthians 10:17, Ephesians 4:11-13.

A. The Prayer of Jesus

PPT>>> **ESV John 17:11** And I am no longer in the world, but they are in the world, and I am coming to you. Holy Father, keep them in your name, which you have given me, that they may be one, even as we are one . . .

PPT>>> **ESV John 17:20** I do not ask for these only, but also for those who will believe in me through their word, that they may all be one, just as you, Father, are in me, and I in you, that they also may be in us . . .

PPT>>> **ESV John 17:22-23** The glory that you have given me I have given to them, that they may be one even as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become perfectly one . . .

B. Lord's Supper

PPT>>> **NIV 1 Corinthians 10:17** Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf.

C. Church Leaders

PPT>>> **ESV Ephesians 4:11-13** And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith . . .

— Summary —

PPT>>> G.W. Kirby, lecturer in practical theology at London Bible College, wrote that "The NT does not lay down precise rules either as to the form of ministry or of government of the

Church. Over the centuries several different theories of church government have emerged, each of which claims some scriptural basis.”¹²

PPT>>> We advocate Elder rule through congregational consensus.

The benefits of this are:

- The mind of Christ is more likely found when the leaders guide the whole congregation to wrestle corporately with major decisions.
- The Spirit is given free rein to guide the church.
- Church members are encouraged and fulfilled as they realize that everyone’s thoughts are respectfully weighed in accordance with Scripture.
- Unity is strengthened.

—Extra Background Material—

How is the secular usage of *ekklésia* seen in its use in Acts 19:23-41 (translated “assembly” (19:32, 41) and “legal assembly” in 19:39)?

PPT>>> ESV Acts 19:24-25 . . . a man named Demetrius, a silversmith, who made silver shrines of Artemis, brought no little business to the craftsmen. These he gathered together, with the workmen in similar trades, and said, "Men, you know that from this business we have our wealth."

PPT>>> ESV Acts 19:26-27 . . . Paul has persuaded and turned away a great many people, saying that gods made with hands are not gods. And there is danger not only that this trade of ours may come into disrepute . . .

Here we have a gathering of a trade union, called together by Demetrius, to deal with the problem of lost business due to the preaching of the Gospel.

PPT>>> ESV Acts 19:28 When they heard this they were enraged and were crying out, "Great is Artemis of the Ephesians!"

PPT>>> ESV Acts 19:29 . . . and they rushed together into the theater . . .

The craftsmen agreed there was a problem. They were worked up over it. *Why did they go into the theater?* This is where political decisions were made by the civil government. This was the public place to convene (BAGD, p. 353).

PPT>>> ESV Acts 19:32 Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly (*ekklésia*) was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.

Luke described this confused meeting as an *ekklésia*. They, as a trade union of sorts, intended to decide what to do about the Gospel.

¹² G.W. Kirby, *The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1982), 854.

PPT>>> **ESV Acts 19:35-41** . . . when the town clerk had quieted the crowd, he said, "Men of Ephesus . . . you ought to be quiet and do nothing rash. For you have brought these men here who are neither sacrilegious nor blasphemers of our goddess. If therefore Demetrius and the craftsmen with him have a complaint against anyone, the courts are open, and there are proconsuls. Let them bring charges against one another. But if you seek anything further, it shall be settled in the regular assembly (*ekklésia*) . . . And when he had said these things, he dismissed the assembly (*ekklésia*).

Here we see the local civil authority appeal to them, stating that they have overstepped their jurisdiction. This, he said, was a matter not for the trade union *ekklésia*, but for the "regular" (ESV) or "legal" (NIV) or "lawful" (NAS) *ekklésia*.

Summary: These occurrences of *ekklésia* (rendered "assembly," "regular assembly," and "assembly") refer to a decision-making meeting of "craftsmen" (19:24). They were "called" (19:25) together by Demetrius into the town theater (19:31). The idea was to decide what to do about Paul (19:25-27, 38), though there was so much confusion the majority did not know why they had been summoned (19:32). This is an example of *ekklésia* where it is used to refer to a regularly summoned political body (in this case, silver craftsmen and those in related trades, 19:25). They convened (as a sort of trade union) to decide what to do about a damaged reputation and lost business (Ac 19:27). As it turns out, they overstepped their jurisdiction in wanting to deal with Paul, so the city clerk suggested that the matter be settled by the "legal" (civil) *ekklésia*, Acts 19:37-39 (rather than by the trade union *ekklésia*).

From **1 Corinthians 6:1-4** we learn that ordinary believers are declared competent to judge disputes:

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Corinthians 6:1** When one of you has a grievance against another, does he dare go to law before the unrighteous instead of the saints?

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Corinthians 6:2a** Or do you not know that the saints will judge the world?

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Corinthians 6:2b** And if the world is to be judged by you, are you incompetent to try trivial cases?

PPT>>> **ESV 1 Corinthians 6:3** Do you not know that we are to judge angels? How much more, then, matters pertaining to this life!

Truth: Ordinary believers are declared competent to judge disputes.

PPT>>> **NIV Job 34:4** (Elihu's advice to Job): Let us discern for ourselves what is right; let us learn together what is good.

What are some other examples in the New Testament where the whole congregation is involved in making decisions? *Acts 1:15-16a, 21, 23, 6:2-3a, 5a, 6a, 14:23 (see margin translation), 15:1-4, 5-35.*

The above texts illustrate that the responsibility for making decisions resides in the church as a whole as led by its elders, rather than solely with its elders.

In Acts 1:15-26, Peter charged the Jerusalem church as a whole with finding a replacement for Judas.

PPT>>> ESV Acts 1:15 In those days **Peter** stood up among the brothers (the company of persons was in all about 120) and said . . .

The Point: In, Acts 1:15ff, Peter identified the problem (Judas needs to be replaced) but it was to the Jerusalem church itself that Peter looked to find a replacement. Peter didn't act unilaterally. Thus we see:

PPT>>> ESV Acts 1:23 . . . **they** (the church) put forward two, Joseph called Barsabbas, who was also called Justus, and Matthias.

Later, the apostles looked to the church corporately to pick men to administer the church's food program:

In **Acts 6:1-4**, the apostles identified a problem (Greek widows neglected) and suggested a solution (pick deacons).

PPT>>> ESV Acts 6:3 Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.

The church approved of their solution and it was the church that selected men to administer the church's welfare system (**6:3, 5**).

PPT>>> ESV Acts 6:5 . . . what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose . . .

The Jerusalem Council: If ever there were a proper time and place for the Apostles to make a decision alone, apart from the church, it was at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15). The original Apostles were the standard for doctrine and practice. They had been hand-chosen, and personally trained, by Jesus Himself. They were eye-witnesses of the resurrection. In Acts 15, the very nature of the Gospel had been called into question. Yet even here, the amazing fact is that the Apostles not only included the local Jerusalem elders, but also the whole church!

The purveyors of the false Gospel had come to Antioch from Jerusalem. They caused quite a controversy. Now, in Acts 15:1-2, the church of Antioch decided to send the matter back to Jerusalem for arbitration:

PPT>>> ESV **Acts 15:2** Paul and Barnabas . . . were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

PPT>>> ESV **Acts 15:4** When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the **church** and the apostles and the elders . . .

PPT>>> ESV **Acts 15:6** The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. << It sounds as if only the apostles and elders were gathered together.

PPT>>> ESV **Acts 15:7** . . . much debate . . .

PPT>>> ESV **Acts 15:12** . . . all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul . . .

PPT>>> ESV **Acts 15:22-23** Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, with the following letter: “The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings . . .”

Note: The whole church in Jerusalem was in on the resolution of the conflict, agreeing with the deliberations of the leaders (**15:4, 6, 12, 22, 23** in KJV).

PPT>>> ESV **Acts 15:23** The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings . . .

KJV **Acts 15:23** And they wrote *letters* by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren *send* greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia:

The Greek here can go either way. Note how strongly the KJV shows congregational involvement.

PPT>>> In Colin Brown’s *Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, under ‘Apostle’, volume 1, page 135, Brown wrote, “. . . in the council’s decision-making they are accorded no special preeminence . . . It is consistent with the non-authoritarian, collegiate character of church leadership which Acts consistently depicts (1:13-26; 6:2ff; 8:14ff; 11:1ff; 13:1-4).”

Optional: **Acts 14:23** (NIV marginal translation) indicates that the church elected its own elders (though in other passages the apostles appointed them).¹³

¹³ “Paul and Barnabas had elders elected” (footnoted alternative translation, NIV).

— For Further Study —

How should both local congregational consensus and universal church consensus apply to interpreting the Bible? The Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer. As we survey the beliefs of the church around the world today, and also back throughout the past two millennia of church history, various fundamental agreements can be readily observed concerning the correct interpretation of Scripture. This has to be more than coincidence. It is the work of the Spirit. Some of these general agreements are about such matters as the Virgin Birth, the Trinity (One God in Three Persons), the deity of Christ, the propitiatory nature of Christ's death on the cross, the bodily resurrection of Christ and the future bodily return of Christ, the future bodily resurrection of the dead, and the inspiration and canon of Scripture. When the entire church universal has arrived at consensus regarding a doctrine, it becomes authoritative. *Does one lone congregation have the right to defy the consensus of the whole church in the world and throughout history?* We think not. These basic agreed upon doctrines constitute a *regula fide*, the rule of faith. We need a good dose of historical humility!

Certainly we should study the Bible as individuals, but we should not study the Bible individualistically. We need to weigh our interpretations against the consensus of the whole church, not just our local church, but the church universal. Historical humility is called for. To reject the time tested conclusions of millions of our fellow believers over thousands of years is to effectively make one's self into a little Pope.

G. K. Chesterton: "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."

— Young Men —

What special instructions did Peter have for young men in the consensus process (1Pe 5:5a)?

NAS 1 Peter 5:5a You younger men, likewise, be subject to your elders . . .

Church government is generally to be by elder-led consensus of the whole church. In particular, however, younger men are specifically instructed to submit (*hupotasso*) to the elders.

Young men: Don't be a **blockhead!** :) Sometimes young men can be rather head strong, unreasonable, unyielding, a little too full of vim and vigor.

— Objections —

How would you answer the following objection? “It is a fact of apostolic history that the churches to whom Paul wrote were newly planted. They were in the incipient stage of development. It was one of the apostle’s axioms that an elder should not be a recent convert and that a man must be tested for some time before assuming that office and function. Far too much is made of that early situation. Government was by consensus then, but out of necessity, not out of principle. Paul’s instruction to Titus to amend what was defective in the churches and appoint elders in every place rather debunks the argument for government by consensus. It was a passing stage of ecclesiastical development. Babies wear diapers for a time and that is normal. But hopefully they outgrow that stage. Maturity in the *ekklésia* must also come and that means the appointment of elders, which is a shift away from rule by consensus. We must not build a paradigm of church life from what was a peculiar and passing stage in the progress of the fledgling church.”

Answers:

1. The Lord Jesus’ words of Matthew 18 cannot be avoided. We are to tell it to the “church,” not the elders.
2. The fundamental meaning of *ekklésia* refers to a decision making body.
3. Further, the Jerusalem church had both elders and apostles, yet the whole church was in on the decision making process (Ac 15).
4. The groundwork laid by the apostles was foundational. To replace that with something else is dangerous ground, especially when that something else is based on a supposed expectation of development beyond the New Testament texts. Jesus choose *ekklésia* as His preferred word for the church. Each church is its own legislature! And this is the great protection against hierarchical structures, which by definition turn churches from being families into organizations.

— Inquiring Minds Wants to Know —

In the consensus process, exactly who is it that makes the decisions? Men and women both? Or only the men? *1 Corinthians 11:1ff, 14:33-35, 1 Timothy 2:11-15.* Everyone’s thoughts are important. Within the Trinity, though God the Father and God the Son are equal Persons, the Son voluntarily submits to the Father’s will. Human family order mirrors this. Even though men and women are absolutely equal in God’s sight, wives are called upon to submit to their husbands. God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the church, and the husband is the head of his family. One way this order is expressed within the church is that only men are to serve as elders and Bible teachers. This order is further expressed in that the men, as the heads of their homes, are ultimately to represent their wives’ opinions in the consensus process. Certainly the wives have valid opinions and insights. These concerns may be expressed directly by the women to various men in private conversations and or to and through their husbands. Yet in the final analysis, it is the brothers who must make decisions that are binding on the church. The husbands are to duly consider their wife’s views, but it is the brothers who have the last say.

In matters of mere preference, being considerate of the women and yielding to their desires is the proper course to take. However, in matters of theology or the application of theological or sin issues, the men must make the final decisions. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:33-35, R.C.H. Lenski quotes from an *Opinion of the Theological Faculty of Capital University*, Columbus, Ohio: "How the granting of voice and vote to women in all congregational meetings can do anything but place women completely on a level with men in all such meetings and gravely interfere with their divinely ordered subjection and obedience, we are unable to see." (*The Interpretation of I and II Corinthians*, p. 617).

What if there are some folks involved with the church who are uncommitted or who are new converts? Do their voices "count" in the consensus process? This is precisely where **Hebrews 13:17** comes into play. They are to listen to and yield to the wisdom of the elders.

What if people begin coming to the church after consensus is reached on an issue? Must the process begin all over again? No, they would be coming with the understanding that the church is already moving in a certain direction. They would be free to try to persuade the church differently, but otherwise must "submit" to the previous decision of the church. This is another example of where **Hebrews 13:17** would be important to remember.

What if consensus is reached by all but one man? Should he be allowed to throw a monkey-wrench into the whole process? Remember that the goal is consensus and not necessarily unanimity. Certainly, stubborn, in-the-flesh, socially maladjusted, rebellious, or contentious people should not be allowed to derail the church. Ultimately, this would be another occasion for **Hebrews 13:17** to be applied. After all the discussion is over, and time has passed for the various arguments to be considered, the elders have the last word.

**** = Ask this question before having someone read the text aloud.

Next Lesson: E-mail the next set of discussion questions out to the class (or print them up and hand them out at the end of this lesson). Ask them to consider the issues, answer the questions and be prepared to discuss them at the next meeting.

Teacher Preparation: To help you prepare to teach this, go to sermonaudio.com/ntrf, go to our series on *Early Church Practice* and find this lesson.

Stephen E. Atkerson
NTRF.org
Revised 11/11/2018