

Christ's Authority through a Congregation

Acts 6:1-7; Ephesians 3:20-21; John 15

The early church in Acts had a problem:

“And in those days, when the number of the disciples was multiplied, there arose a murmuring of the Grecians against the Hebrews, because their widows were neglected in the daily ministrations. Then the twelve called the multitude of the disciples *unto them*, and said, It is not reason that we should leave the word of God, and serve tables. Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business. But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the ministry of the word. And the saying pleased the whole multitude: and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolas a proselyte of Antioch: Whom they set before the apostles: and when they had prayed, they laid *their* hands on them. And the word of God increased; and the number of the disciples multiplied in Jerusalem greatly; and a great company of the priests were obedient to the faith.” (Acts 6:1-7)

The church wanted to care for their widows' daily needs. Some widows spoke Aramaic, others were Greek proselytes. And some people wondered aloud whether one group was receiving preferential treatment. The twelve apostles, acting as pastors/elders in the new church at Jerusalem simply could not keep up with the growing physical needs of the congregation. So they called the disciples together for a meeting. And here is where we see Christ's authority through a congregation.

Congregational Authority

- These disciples were the members of the church at Jerusalem.
 - Disciples were later called “Christians” according to Acts 11:26. They were recognized by their profession of faith as they followed the Lord in believers' baptism (Acts 2:38, 41; 8:12, 36). The Bible shows us that New Testament believers will be baptized; it would be difficult to find an exception to this rule that Jesus laid out in the Great Commission (Matthew 28:19-20).
 - The Scriptures make formal church membership in a local church obvious. For instance, Paul makes a clear distinction between the membership within the congregation at Corinth and those who are outside the congregation (1 Corinthians 5:12-13).
 - The New Testament shows us that normally there are no “churchless disciples.” Being part of a congregation is the way to grow up into the likeness of Jesus Christ. As Paul wrote to the congregation at Ephesus, *“Till we all come in the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, unto a perfect man, unto the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ:”* (Ephesians 4:13)
- These pastors instructed the church as to their priorities. These spiritual leaders needed to be free to invest their time in ministering the Word of God and prayer. (That way, they can lead disciples to carry through on the commands of Jesus in John 15. See below.) These elders were probably thinking of the lesson that Jesus taught in Luke 10:38-42. There Jesus commended Mary for sitting at His feet and listening to His words rather than being constantly distracted by serving in other ways.

As we learned in the last message, the pastors/elders rule in the congregation. But what does that mean? 1 Peter 5:3 makes it plain that the pastors are not “lords over God’s heritage.” So how do they rule? Here is the key: the elders only real source of authority is the Word of God. They lead by shepherding the congregation in what the Bible teaches. This is expressed in Hebrews 13:7-9

“Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation. Jesus Christ the same yesterday, and today, and forever. Be not carried about with divers and strange doctrines ...” (Hebrews 13:7-9)

As one author noted, “The leaders of the church are described here less by their office and more by their function of preaching and teaching the Word of God. Their leadership authority derives from the authority of the Word.”ⁱ As Paul instructed the congregation at Corinth, “**Be ye followers of me, even as I also am of Christ**” (1 Corinthians 11:1).

■ So, the pastors asked the congregation of disciples to make a choice in order to advance the ministry. This approach pleased all the disciples and advanced the ministry.

- The pastors/elders knew that the members of the congregation (many of whom were new believers) were spiritually competent to make decisions. This is part of normal Christian living enabled by God’s Holy Spirit in each believer (Romans 8:9).
- They asked the church to make decisions as a group (which undoubtedly involved voting). These disciples had to make choices: passing over some (such as Barnabas) while choosing others.
- These spiritual leaders taught the congregation Biblical standards for making their decisions: choose “seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business.” As one author put it, “Elders rule but congregations decide.”ⁱⁱ
- The New Testament teaches that church members in every congregation are spiritually competent to make decisions in several significant areas. As one author noted,

“The authority to exercise church discipline is assigned to the local church body rather than to regional elders or bishops (Matt. 18:15–17; 2 Cor. 2:6). The New Testament local church chose qualified men to meet practical needs (Acts 6:1–6), commissioned Paul and Barnabas (Acts 13:1–3), and was involved in the discussions and decision of the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:4, 12, 22).”ⁱⁱⁱ

And they were responsible to act together as a congregation. You can see this in 1 Corinthians 5:4-5, “In the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, when ye are gathered together, and my spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus Christ, to deliver such a one unto Satan for the destruction of the flesh, that the spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord Jesus.” The congregation also decides whom to receive into its membership and chooses its spiritual leaders: pastors/elders.

- In Acts 6, the men who were chosen were later called “deacons” a word that means “servants.” Note the interesting connection between pastoral authority and congregational authority: the church was to choose men whom the pastors could appoint. The deacons were specifically given the task of assisting the pastors to help meet the needs in the congregation. Some of these deacons later became preachers and evangelists themselves. Of course, these were not the only servants of God in the congregation, but the deacons did administrate significant areas of service.

These are just a few examples of congregational authority.

About the New Testament church, the Apostle Paul wrote, **“Now unto Him that is able to do exceeding abundantly above all that we ask or think, according to the power that works in us, Unto Him be glory in the church by Christ Jesus throughout all ages, world without end. Amen.”** (Ephesians 3:20-21)

To the glory of God the Father, Jesus Christ lived a perfectly righteous life here on the earth. No one who knew the Jewish Law or the Roman law could find any fault in Him. But then the Son of God gave Himself into the hands of cruel torturers who put Him to death – for confessing to be God’s Son! But in the plan of God the Father, Jesus gave Himself as the only possible substitute for sinners. He died for you; He died for me. To the glory of God, Jesus paid the penalty for sin, but three days later He rose from the dead. Now He alone can bring forth justice on the earth, to the glory of God the Father.

So many people in this world demand justice, but without understanding the glory of God, they really don’t understand justice. A recent opinion piece in the *Chicago Tribune* highlighted this lack of understanding. Writing about the untimely death of a violent man, Clarence Page questioned whether justice would ever be done: “Considering the circumstances, there’s a good chance that the outcome won’t satisfy very many of us, regardless of which side we’re on. As a lawyer friend of mine put it, ‘Justice? You’re not going to have any real justice as long as there’s no way to bring that dead man back to life.’”^{iv}

But the Christian view of justice is based on the fact that every dead man will come back to life. The Scriptures teach that the resurrections will come. The real problem is that unjust men are fervently hoping that there will be no resurrections. But they are mistaken. But when will justice come? Wait for it!^v God will be glorified. But how can this lost world see the glory of God today?

Please turn in your Bibles to John chapter 15.

Spiritual Competence

To the glory of God, how do we know that believers are spiritually competent? What gives them this ability? In what is commonly called “The Upper Room Discourse,” Jesus taught,

“If ye abide in me, and my words abide in you, ye shall ask what ye will, and it shall be done unto you. Herein is my Father glorified, that ye bear much fruit; so shall ye be my disciples.” (John 15:7-8)

- Jesus taught that God the Father would prune every fruit-bearing believer. Why? It was in order that each believer would bear more fruit. This pruning takes place in close

connection with God's Word. (Another way of saying that is that God will explain His chastening work in His Word. So each believer must study the Scriptures to make sense of his circumstances.) John 15:1=3

- No believer (no branch) can bear fruit by himself. John 15:4-5
- By drawing near to Christ (abiding in His presence) and continually recalling His words, we cling to His promise to answer our prayers. John 15:7 This is God's way of enabling us to endure the pressures of life and still produce fruit for Him.
- This is how God is glorified: by our abiding in Christ, meditating on His words and praying, we will produce a great deal of fruit. John 15:8. By faithful prayer, we produce fruit.
- In fact, this is the key test of discipleship: enduring chastening and bearing fruit to the glory of God the Father. John 15:8. See Hebrews 12:11

Here is a common problem: believers have been brainwashed. They think that, if they try a little bit harder, they might become Christ's disciples. (It is sort of like the story of "The Little Engine that Could," huffing and puffing all the while saying, "I think I can; I think I can.") But this is not the way that disciples (who were later called "Christians") are to think. No, we begin with the understanding that we are already **"blessed us with all spiritual blessings in heavenly places in Christ"** (Ephesians 1:3). It's not a question of working up anything. It is a matter of acting upon what we already are in Christ.

How would we see in practice? In a congregation, some members will be more gifted in speaking God's Word; others will be more gifted in serving in practical ways (1 Peter 4:10-11). But in all these things, it is **"...that God in all things may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom be praise and dominion for ever and ever. Amen."**

This is how we can see Christ's authority in a Congregation.

Discussion Questions:

1. How do people view Christianity differently than the way that the Scriptures portray it?
2. How should our church function to meet the needs of those who cannot help themselves?
3. What are some of the ways that congregational authority can be seen in the Scriptures?
4. Who would like to give a testimony of how they came to know the Lord?
5. How can each disciple take advantage of God's blessings in order to function in the local church?

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ⁱ David L. Allen, *Hebrews*, The New American Commentary (Nashville, TN: B & H Publishing Group, 2010), 611–612.

ⁱⁱ Kevin Bauder, "Elders Rule! But Congregations Decide," Central Baptist Theological Seminary, June 14, 2019 accessed at <https://centralseminary.edu/elders-rule-but-congregations-decide/>

ⁱⁱⁱ Andreas Köstenberger, "Church Government: Congregationalism" Biblical Foundations, citing Köstenberger's entry in "Church Government" in the Encyclopedia of Christian Civilization (ed. George T. Kurian; Blackwell), accessed at <https://www.biblicalfoundations.org/church-government-congregationalism/>

^{iv} Clarence Page, "Justice dies when politicians turn vigilantism into a campaign stunt," Chicago Tribune, May 17, 2023, accessed at <https://www.chicagotribune.com/columns/clarence-page/ct-column-ron-desantis-daniel-denny-subway-vigilante-page-20230517-n5sjaugyqwhijekcnvxpix2n7a-story.html>

^v In the words of Habakkuk 2:4. The prophecy went on to make God's way of righteousness plain: "Behold the proud, his soul is not upright in him; but the just shall live by his faith."