

THE SOVEREIGN GRACE PERSPECTIVES SERIES

Who Governs the Church?

**What the Bible Says About the
Roles of Pastors and Congregations**

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*Who Governs the Church?: What the Bible Says About the Roles of Pastors
and Congregations*

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*To the elders of Covenant Fellowship Church—
my brothers, fellow workers, and fellow soldiers in
gospel ministry.*

*Especially to Alan Redrup (1949–2023),
a faithful shepherd after God's own heart
who will surely receive the unfading crown of glory.*

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Who Governs the Church?

Introduction

Anyone who visits Covenant Fellowship Church in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania on a Sunday morning can see what our pastors do during the weekly gathering. People see us greeting by the entrance of the church. They see us calling the congregation to worship. They see us singing, praying, preaching, reading Scripture, and administering the sacraments. They see us raising our hands in praise and lifting our voices to the Lord. At the end of the service, they see us speaking a benediction over the church. They also see, to varying degrees, what we do throughout the week, in discipleship, counseling, and setting an example for the flock.

What people don't see is what pastors do in elders' meetings. There we pray for the church family we dearly love and give updates on church members. We celebrate where God is at work and consider where we need to grow. We learn from one another, encourage one another, and strive to set an example of gracious and peaceful communication. We play foosball during breaks. We laugh and enjoy each other's company. We discuss theology and ministry, make decisions

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on matters of governance, conduct business, and set direction for the church.

Elders' meetings are where authoritative decisions are made. This decision-making is done by a plurality of elders, with congregational sensitivity, under the supreme authority of Christ, governed by his Word, and for the flourishing of the entire church.

God has commanded elders, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood" (Acts 20:28). The church is the only institution for which Christ shed his blood. This precious, blood-bought church is what pastors are called to lead with humility and govern with selfless love.

A SHARED VALUE

In Sovereign Grace Churches, we have developed what we call our 7 Shared Values.¹ Each of these values has played an important role in our history, and they are biblical values we desire to preserve into the future. These Shared Values are not all equal in importance—some are far more essential to a healthy church than others. But simply because a topic is not of first importance does not mean it is of no importance.

1. The Shared Values are 1) Reformed Theology, 2) Gospel-Centered Doctrine and Preaching, 3) Continuationist Pneumatology, 4) Complementarian Leadership in the Home and in the Church, 5) Elder-governed and Elder-led Churches, 6) Church Planting, Outreach, and Global Mission, and 7) United in Fellowship, Mission, and Governance. <https://www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shared-values>

One of these 7 Shared Values is that our churches are elder-governed and elder-led. We believe Scripture teaches church governance by a plurality of elders. This is different from churches being governed by the congregation as a whole, or by a solo pastor as the ideal, or by a higher office of the church such as a bishop or apostle. Our *Statement of Faith* affirms the biblical reality that, “Elders occupy the sole office of governance.” Our *Book of Church Order* says, “The elders of each local church have sole responsibility to govern its affairs under the Lordship of Christ and the authority of Scripture” (BCO 1.4).

At the same time, our *Statement of Faith* requires a high view of the privileges and responsibilities of the congregation: “Each member belongs to the royal priesthood of believers and is gifted by God to play a vital role in the life and mission of the church.” Our *Book of Church Order* affirms,

Church members do not have an inferior status to elders, but are equal in standing before Christ and fellow members of his body. All members of the church—elders and congregants—are sheep under the authority of the Chief Shepherd, submitted to God’s Word. All possess the same privileges of adoption by God, redemption by Christ, and filling of the Holy Spirit. Church members also have vital responsibilities that contribute to the life and mission of the church (BCO 1.4.9).

Following the New Testament pattern and teaching, we believe a plurality of elders governs the church under the authority of Christ with the active involvement of the members of the

church. Local churches in Sovereign Grace are elder-governed, diaconally-served, congregationally-engaged, and ecclesiastically-connected.

HEALTHY ELDER-GOVERNED CHURCHES

My goal in this short book is to explain plural elder-governance in Sovereign Grace Churches and to show from Scripture that this is the model of governance Christ intends for his church. Since a biblical conviction about elder-governance does not, in and of itself, ensure healthy pastoral leadership or a mature congregation, it is necessary not only to support elder-rule from Scripture, but also to describe what healthy elder-rule looks like in practice.

The Bible has something to say about how the church of Christ is governed. And we want the churches of Sovereign Grace to be filled with faithful pastors and faithful church members who think with biblical clarity about church governance—Christians who know and apply the biblical teaching on the role of elders and the role of the congregation. If it is important for members of a family to know how authority works in the home, and if it is important for citizens to know how authority works in a nation, it is all the more important for church members to know how authority works in the church.

Having spent my entire life in our family of churches, I am grateful to God for all I have learned from those who have gone before me. For some time, I have been eager to take the things I have been taught in Sovereign Grace (and more importantly, from Scripture) and put these doctrines, values,

and practices into writing. My hope in doing so is to serve our churches and preserve our denominational distinctives into the future. Secondly, I hope such writings will serve anyone beyond Sovereign Grace who desires to learn what our beliefs and practices are.

May God use these pages to strengthen our convictions and to promote healthy, humble, gospel-centered, congregationally-vibrant, elder-governed churches for the glory of Jesus Christ.

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God Gave Us Shepherds

When the apostle Paul was on his way to Jerusalem, his ship docked for a few days at Miletus. He was 40 miles south of Ephesus. Paul used this opportunity to gather the elders of the Ephesian church, to instruct them and share his heart with them. The gathering is recorded in Acts 20, and it is filled with emotion. At the conclusion of Paul's exhortation, he knelt down and prayed with this beloved group of pastors. They all wept. Soon they were embracing the apostle and kissing him. Then they accompanied him to the ship for his departure.

The farewell speech Paul gave that day is one of the great descriptions of the nature and importance of pastoral ministry in all of Scripture. It unfolds the pastor's example, the pastor's work, the pastor's message, the pastor's heart, and the pastor's confidence. It presents God's plan for elders until Christ returns.

God's design is for pastor-elders to maintain doctrinal purity and protect the church from false teaching, so that the church remains healthy and is faithful in its witness. The church

in Ephesus was led by a group of elders who were granted spiritual authority by God and appointed by the Holy Spirit to shepherd the flock of God which was bought by the blood of Christ (Acts 20:28).

The immense value of the church is displayed most clearly in the death of Christ for the church. Faithful pastoral ministry is motivated by the description of the church in Acts 20:28, “. . . which he obtained with his own blood.” Richard Baxter said that pastors should hear Christ saying, “Did I die for these people, and will you then refuse to look after them? Were they worth my blood, and are they not worth your labor?” Baxter exhorts pastors, “Every time we look out upon our congregations, let us believingly remember that they are purchased by Christ’s blood, and that therefore they should be highly regarded by us.”²

John Murray writes, “That which elders or bishops [overseers] rule is the blood-purchased possession of Christ, that which cost the agony of Gethsemane and the blood of Calvary’s accursed tree.”³

Those obtained by God are his beloved, blood-bought flock. The church belongs not to any earthly leaders but to God himself. This is the church that pastors are called to govern. This is the church that all Christians are called to love and serve.

2. Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1974), 55.

3. John Murray, *Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume 1* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1976), 265.

SHEPHERD THE FLOCK OF GOD

That day in Miletus, Paul urged the Ephesian elders to pay careful attention to themselves and to all the flock. He warned them to be faithful shepherds, protecting the church from external and internal threats.

This shepherding imagery is the primary metaphor used in Scripture to describe the responsibilities of spiritual leaders. Sheep have no way of defending themselves, and so a flock must be guarded and governed by shepherds who know, love, and feed the flock. Shepherds are charged to teach and admonish the flock, protecting them from wolves who sow division and false doctrine. They must keep the flock from going astray.

In Acts 20, “elder” (v. 17) and “overseer” (v. 28) are used to refer to the same people, occupying the same office—they are pastors. We see this again in Titus 1, where Paul talks about Titus appointing elders in every town (v. 5), and then says in verse 7, referring to the same men, “For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.” Also, Peter in 1 Peter 5:1–2 says, “So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.” The elders are pastor/shepherds and overseers, with all of these titles referring to the same office.

As overseers, pastors are given limited but real authority by Christ to supervise, manage, and govern the church. Commenting on the language of oversight in Acts 20:28, John Murray writes,

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There is, in the New Testament institution, such a thing as rule, regulation, government, oversight, administered by men who are endowed with certain gifts, called to exercise them, and invested by the Holy Spirit with authority to rule. . . . In a word, the church . . . does not rule itself. In that sense it is not a pure democracy. The elders are to rule.⁴

Yet, Murray says, we need to remember that the undershepherds are sheep as well. God's design is for each elder to also be submitted to the leadership of a plurality of elders. He explains,

While the oversight is over the church, it is not something from which the elders themselves are excluded. Elders are not lords over God's heritage; they are themselves of the flock and are to be examples to it. . . . Elders are members of the body of Christ and are subject to the very same kind of rule of which they are the administrators.⁵

THE LORD OF THE CHURCH

The work of undershepherds can only be understood in reference to the work of the great Shepherd and his ongoing rule. Governance in the church begins with the reign of Christ as head of the church. The Savior who loves us and laid down his life for us has risen from the dead and is now exalted as Lord of the church.

4. John Murray, *The Collected Writings of John Murray: Volume 1*, 261–262.

5. *Ibid.*, 262.

The biblical form of church government is Christocracy: rule, oversight, and the exercise of authority by Christ himself. He is the true pastor of the church, the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25).

Paul proclaims Christ as head of the church when he says in Ephesians that God

raised him from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly places, far above all rule and authority and power and dominion, and above every name that is named, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all (Eph. 1:20b–23).

Similarly, Colossians 1:18 says, “And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.”

Christ promised that he would build his church (Matt. 16:18), and his promise has not failed. The Lord continues this work today. In addition to being the head of the body, he is the cornerstone of the building (Eph. 2:20), the chief Shepherd of the flock (1 Pet. 5:4), and the bridegroom of the bride (John 3:29). Guy Waters explains that the church is not only divinely created, but also divinely ruled: “Part of what it means for Jesus to be the head of the church is that he has an exclusive and unique claim of authority upon the church.”⁶

6. Guy Prentiss Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2011), xxiii.

TOOLS IN THE HANDS OF CHRIST

Because Christ cares for the church, he provides undershepherds for our good. Ephesians 4 says that when Christ ascended to the Father's right hand, he gave gifts to the church. Among these gifts are pastor-shepherds who lead and serve under his authority. Ultimate authority belongs to Christ, and he has called pastors to the weighty but joyful task of leading and governing the church under his rule.

John Calvin explains,

He [Christ] uses the ministry of men to declare openly his will to us by mouth, as a sort of delegated work, not by transferring to them his right and honour, but only that through their mouths he may do his own work—just as a workman uses a tool to do his work. . . . Through the ministers to whom he has entrusted this office and has conferred the grace to carry it out, he dispenses and distributes his gifts to the church; and he shows himself as though present by manifesting the power of his Spirit in this his institution, that it be not vain or idle.⁷

This is remarkable. It changes the way we view pastors. There is a small group of men who are my pastors. In God's kindness, I have more shepherds than many other sheep do. The Lord manifests his Spirit as he does his work in me through these men. And in the shepherding of these good and faithful

7. John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, ed. John T. McNeill, trans. Ford Lewis Battles (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1960), 4.3.1–2.

men, I see Christ. In their affection for me, I experience the heart of Christ. In their comfort and care for me in suffering, I experience the comfort of Christ. In their proclamation of the Word, and in their encouragement and reproof, I hear the voice of Christ. In their oversight, I experience the oversight of Christ the great Shepherd.

God's design for all Christians is that we experience the ministry of Christ through those he has given to lead the church. Pastors are ordinary men called to an extraordinary stewardship. The way to view the rule of elders is not that they rule in place of Christ, but that they rule under Christ, as the Lord continues and extends his gracious rule. Pastors are gifts of Christ appointed to do the work of Christ. They are to use their God-given authority to equip the saints for the work of ministry and labor for the maturity of the church (Eph. 4:12–14).

UNDERSTANDING AUTHORITY

There is a great difference between the authority of Christ and the authority of his shepherds. Christ's authority is original, infallible, and ultimate; the elders' authority is derived, fallible, and subordinate. The authority of the elders is not ultimate or unlimited, yet it is genuine and ought to be received with gratefulness to God.

We live in an egalitarian age that is marked by a disdain for authority. The abuse of authority has led to the abandonment of authority. Tim Witmer, in his book *The Shepherd Leader*, talks about the "Authority Continuum," with dangers on both sides. He gives examples: On the one side, some of the

teaching and practices in the Shepherding Movement from a generation ago were marked by a controlling, authoritarian “lording it over” the sheep.⁸ On the other side, the Emerging Church Movement is an example of reluctance to embrace and express authoritative leadership at all.

It is important to acknowledge that authority can be misused. In the Old Testament God rebukes the shepherds of Israel for leading with force and harshness (Ezek. 34:4). Jesus cautioned his disciples against lording it over others (Matt. 20:25–28), and Peter echoes this command when he exhorts elders to shepherd the flock and exercise oversight without domineering (1 Pet. 5:2–3). In keeping with these passages, many Christians have recently given increased attention to the use and misuse of spiritual authority in the church. While this emphasis is welcome, Christians today need to work harder to approach these issues within a biblical framework, and there is a need for greater discernment.⁹ Too often, well-intended teaching on these themes undermines the gift of authority, unhelpfully expands the definition of abuse, creates a distrust of institutions, and sows suspicion toward faithful pastors.

8. Timothy Z. Witmer, *The Shepherd Leader: Achieving Effective Shepherding in Your Church* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010), 93–95. See also Jerram Barrs, “Shepherding Movement” in *New Dictionary of Theology*, ed. Sinclair B. Ferguson and David F. Wright (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1988).

9. For an excellent treatment of authority in every sphere of life, see Jonathan Leeman, *Authority: How Godly Rule Protects the Vulnerable, Strengthens Communities, and Promotes Human Flourishing* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2023). We disagree with Leeman in our understanding of authority in the church, but even those sections of the book are full of helpful insights.

In Scripture, authority is a gift. It comes from the Lord and is exercised on his behalf for the good of others. “When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth” (2 Sam. 23:3–4). In order for the church to flourish, the gift of authority must be neither abused nor abandoned. Authority is to be grounded in the Word and directed by the Word. Elders are accountable not only to each other and to the flock, but chiefly to the One who has given them authority. They will give an account to the Lord for how they have governed and cared for the flock. Likewise, the flock is responsible to eagerly follow and submit to the elders, as they govern according to Scripture.

MISCONCEPTIONS ABOUT ELDER-GOVERNANCE

In my reading, I have come across a number of inaccurate understandings of elder-ruled or elder-governed churches. Misconceptions of elder-governed churches include the following:

- The only responsibility of the congregation is submission.
- There is no place for the congregation to meaningfully confirm good decisions or constrain a wayward eldership.
- Elders are not meaningfully accountable to the congregation.
- Pastors exclude members’ input and evaluation of pastoral decisions.

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- The members are instructed to be inactive and to leave the work of ministry to the pastors.
- The members have no part to play in the evaluation and confirmation of elder and deacon candidates, the addition of new members, or the removal of members through church discipline.

Again, these are wrong ideas about elder-governed churches. Elder-governed churches do not believe that the role of the congregation is unqualified submission. In healthy elder-governed churches, the affirmation of the congregation carries great weight, the elders are accountable to the congregation, and the congregation has the ability and responsibility to challenge and constrain unfaithful leadership. To deny this is to promote a kind of hyper elder-rule that falls short of the biblical model of leadership and governance in the church.

HEALTHY ELDERSHIP

A church's health is to a large degree dependent on the health of its elders. This is why Sovereign Grace is committed to strengthening elders and training future elders. God gives shepherds to his people. And local churches thrive as elders fix their eyes on the great Shepherd and govern with wisdom and love—setting an example, teaching sound doctrine, and equipping the church for ministry.¹⁰

10. For more on healthy eldership, see Murray Capill, *The Elder-Led Church: How an Eldership Team Shepherds a Healthy Flock* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R Publishing, 2024).

Pastors must return again and again to the truth of Acts 20:28. “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” And every Christian must remember: the church that elders govern and serve is the blood-bought possession of our Savior.

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A Few Thoughts on Polity

Bad polity can spoil the gospel. Consider, as one example, the times prior to the Protestant Reformation of the sixteenth century. The hyper-hierarchical government of the Roman Catholic Church, with the enormous power of the papacy over all Christian churches, was a structure of church governance that was unfaithful to Scripture and brought much damage upon the church and the name of Christ. The Reformation focused primarily on reclaiming the great doctrines of the faith such as the authority of Scripture and the doctrine of justification by grace alone. But the Reformers also saw the need for changes in church governance and leadership structures.

In Germany, Martin Luther criticized Roman Catholic structures of authority. He established churches in which pastors preached the Word, administered the sacraments, and exercised church discipline. In Geneva, Switzerland, John Calvin aimed to structure the church according to the New Testament. He focused on reclaiming the role of a group of

elders, or overseers, who ruled the church under the authority of Christ. The Reformation was, in part, a reform of polity, or church governance.

Christians everywhere should care about polity, because God cares about polity.

THE BIBLE AND POLITY

When it comes to church governance, what direction does God provide? Thankfully, God does not leave his people to themselves, to resort to pragmatism or to emulate the business and political models of the world. The Word of God is sufficient for determining the government of the church, the role of elders, the role of the congregation, the relationship of churches to each other, and the proper exercise of power and leadership in the church. The New Testament is not silent on matters of church governance, but teaches that churches should be governed by a plurality of elders.

At the same time, when we talk about polity it is important to acknowledge that Scripture does not prescribe every detail of governance. In fact, it doesn't come close. The Bible is not a Book of Church Order or a polity manual. (And for this, we should thank God.) God did not intend to give us every detail relating to church governance. In many matters of church order and organization, God has given us principles rather than prescriptions.

We desire for our polity practices to be based on the wise application of biblical principles, but we do not claim that every polity detail is commanded by God. Attempting to support every polity practice as a divine mandate tends to push biblical texts beyond their meaning.

STRENGTHS OF THE PRIMARY MODELS

Gregg Allison says that few theological topics have the ability to induce sleepiness among so many, while at the same time also generating heated debate among others, as does the issue of church government.¹¹ I want to help Christians find a middle way between apathy and combat. I believe every Christian should care about polity. This is because healthy church governance contributes to the joy of the church and the preservation of the gospel. While there are some forms of polity that plainly undermine the gospel and are incompatible with a healthy church, there is no single form of polity that can be narrowly equated with faithfulness and health.

Generally speaking, there are three categories of Protestant church government: Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Each of these contains a spectrum of views within it, and a degree of overlap is possible.

In Sovereign Grace Churches, our approach to polity has sought to appreciate and learn from the strengths of each of these primary models of governance. About 10 years ago when our polity was being formalized, I had the privilege of serving on a Polity Committee with a number of other pastors. It was actually more exciting than it sounds. We were tasked to study the topic, to receive input from our elderships, and then to create a polity proposal that would be voted on by a pastoral delegate from each of the churches in Sovereign Grace.

During our study, I grew to appreciate the biblical insights and strengths of each of the primary approaches to polity.

11. Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 249.

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Each of these main streams sees something in Scripture, and they are seeking to be faithful to express that biblical principle in their approach to governance. Since each is driven by a particular biblical priority, we should be able to glean from the best that each has to offer.

CATEGORIES OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Episcopal polity honors the extra-local gifting God gives some men to serve more than one church. This approach to church governance has an additional church office of Bishop, who serves multiple congregations and has final authority for decision making on certain matters. At times, bishops are subject to a higher archbishop. The Episcopal model was seen in the early centuries of the church, and was in some ways a natural transition from the apostles. Specifics vary between traditions, but in general these men oversee the health of the churches, approve the doctrine of the churches, care for pastors, and maintain unity. In some cases, bishops ordain ministers and are involved in pastoral placement. Many of the strengths of Episcopalianism can be seen in the ways apostles and apostolic delegates loved and nurtured churches in the New Testament.

Presbyterian polity values governance through a plurality of elders and connections among churches. Presbyterians have a government by elders. The most basic governance structure is located in the local church, called a session. Elders from various local churches join together to form a presbytery (on a regional level) and a general assembly or synod (on a national level) that has limited authority over the churches

in a region or over the denomination. Each level of authority has a circumscribed jurisdiction. There is no office higher than elder, although some Presbyterians distinguish between teaching elders and ruling elders. In Presbyterianism, local churches benefit from the gifts of more than just local men. There is a strong oversight provided for local churches, which promotes accountability. The interdependence that exists among Presbyterian churches through their shared governance is designed to display unity in the broader body of Christ.

A *Congregational polity* honors the authority of the local church, and takes seriously the weighty responsibilities and expectations Scripture places upon every member. This approach holds that final governing authority rests with the local congregation as a whole, expressed through voting by church members. There are two basic principles: congregational autonomy, which says that the local congregation is independent in the sense that it is self-governing, and congregational authority, which says that every member of the church is responsible for its governance—through democratic processes, the entire congregation rules over the doctrine, discipline, and direction of that particular church. Congregational churches champion the corporate priesthood of all believers and the presence of the Holy Spirit in all God's people. This leads them to prioritize congregational involvement in the life of the church.

My goal in presenting the strengths of the primary models is not to ignore the real differences between these approaches, or to say that these differences are inconsequential. Our polity in Sovereign Grace differs from each model in some ways, and some of those ways are important. But what we appreciate

about our polity is that it benefits from the insights of each of these primary streams. In this way, we have sought to learn from the broader body of Christ and from the history of the church.

We have benefited from the strengths of Episcopalian polity in the extra-local leadership roles given to Regional Leaders and members of the Leadership Team. Where we differ is that we have no higher office than elder, and no extra-local leader exercises authority over any local church. We have benefited from the strengths of Presbyterian polity in elder-rule and having churches that are interdependent and accountable to each other. Where we differ is that we carve out roles for extra-local leaders to exert significant influence among the churches. We have benefited from the strengths of Congregational polity in taking a high view of the privileges and responsibilities of church members, and prioritizing their involvement and affirmation. Where we differ is that we do not believe the congregation has governing authority. This approach to the broader body of Christ promotes unity with other churches and denominations by highlighting the positive contributions of each historic Protestant polity position.

A LESSON FROM THE WESTMINSTER ASSEMBLY

In the early 1640s, English puritans gathered to debate church government at the Westminster Assembly. What is so interesting about those deliberations is that there was not so much a polarity of two polities (Presbyterian versus Independent/Congregational) as there was a spectrum of various polities that don't always fit neatly into binary categories.

Hunter Powell has documented this at length in his scholarly book, *The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–44*. Powell observes, for example, “The point at which a congregationalist crossed over to presbyterianism (or vice versa) was by no means a static line of demarcation.”¹² It is true that the assembly was overwhelmingly presbyterian, and that there were some congregationalists known as The Dissenting Brethren, or Apologists—among them were Thomas Goodwin, Jeremiah Burroughs, and Philip Nye. These distinctions were real and should not be ignored. But is it also true that “The [Westminster] assembly repeatedly recognized that the congregationalists favoured a *type* of presbyterian church government.”¹³

An important lesson to learn from Westminster is that we should avoid exaggerating polity differences or over-hardening categories. Presbyterians and congregationalists are not monolithic in their positions, and are at times very close to each other in their convictions.

It may surprise us to learn, for example, that the early congregationalists at Westminster affirmed that elders rule over the congregation, and held convictions in favor of the association of churches. These beliefs distinguished them from other more extreme congregationalists, who believed rule and governance belong to the entire congregation alone, and that churches are entirely independent in all governing decisions. The congregationalists at Westminster placed special emphasis

12. Hunter Powell, *The Crisis of British Protestantism: Church Power in the Puritan Revolution, 1638–44* (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2015), 8.

13. *Ibid.*, 10.

on the unique power the elders had over the congregation, given to them by Christ. Some of them believed that elders alone, and not the congregation, had authority, which they distinguished from the power that belonged to the congregation. Some believed that elders alone have the authority to ordain new elders. Some held biblical convictions on the association of churches, believing churches ought not be entirely independent in their governing decisions. Again, the striking thing is that these were congregational positions.

In light of this history, it is no surprise that a few centuries later, in the 1800s, the congregationalist William B. Johnson (1792–1863), the first President of the Southern Baptist Convention, wrote,

In every well regulated society, rulers are necessary for the management of its affairs. The King in Zion has, therefore, provided such for his churches, whom he clothes with authority, and to whom he requires that obedience and respect be rendered.¹⁴

James L. Reynolds (1812–1877), another distinguished Southern Baptist leader, says that the language of overseer implies the right to rule and the exercise of authority in its government.¹⁵

The Baptist pastor Joseph S. Baker (1798–1877) represented popular Baptist or Congregational views at the time when he taught that churches are dependent upon a council

14. Mark Dever, ed. *Polity: Biblical Arguments on How to Conduct Church Life* (Washington, D.C.: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), 189–190.

15. *Ibid.*, 356.

or presbytery from other churches for their ordinations and the discipline of pastors, and that the local church “ought neither modify her articles of faith, nor expel nor depose her ministers without the presence and concurrence of a presbytery or council.”¹⁶

The point is *not* that there is no legitimate distinction between Presbyterian and Congregational polities, but that historically these distinctions have been far more subtle, with broader agreement on important biblical principles. Given the wide range of views in each system, there has not always been a clear line of demarcation between the two.

A GRACIOUS POLITY

What I am seeking to promote is a gracious approach to polity among Christ-centered, gospel-loving churches. The bride of Christ today consists of churches that are Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian. I have pastor-friends who are serving in each of these contexts. Our fundamental posture toward others should not be a critique of their polity, but a gratitude for their devotion and faithful service to Christ.

Presbyterian pastor Bryan Chapell speaks of the need for humility in how we view other forms of church government. He says that painting the three categories of church government with broad strokes of explanation that highlight differences is problematic because it fails to “reflect the nuanced practices within each separate form of government that enable denominations to function with the strengths of the other

16. *Ibid.*, 288. Baker here is favorably quoting the Baptist pastor Thomas Meredith (1795–1850).

forms of government they claim to reject.”¹⁷

Chapell gives the example of Southern Baptists, who affirm the autonomy of the church but through their cooperative mission efforts are actually more connectional than many Presbyterian churches and more hierarchical than some Episcopal ones. After commending other denominations for their strengths, Chapell humbly and wisely concludes, “While I believe Presbyterian polity most nearly reflects the biblical principles of church government, I do not believe that I must declare all other denominations unfaithful because they do not mirror mine.”¹⁸

Congregationalist Gregg Allison says that Congregationalists can learn important lessons from other polities: From Episcopalianism, important lessons include “a clear and well-structured system of authority, a leadership that is dedicated to the care of pastors, a national or even worldwide communion that offers a visible sign of unity, and an office that champions orthodoxy.”¹⁹ From Presbyterianism, important lessons include “a plurality of elders serving a local congregation, a cooperative ministry of interdependent churches, and a system of checks and balances.”²⁰

While there are many disagreements and debates around church government, it is good to emphasize the aspects of ecclesiology and polity that gospel-centered churches and

17. Anthony L. Chute, Christopher W. Morgan, and Robert A. Peterson, ed. *Why We Belong: Evangelical Unity and Denominational Diversity* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2013), 202.

18. *Ibid.*, 202.

19. Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 302.

20. *Ibid.*, 302.

denominations all agree on. There is immense common ground, since we all share these beliefs: Christ is the only Savior and head of the church; he gave elders and deacons to the church; the church is governed through the Word, sacraments, and discipline; every Christian is called to committed membership and responsibility in the local church; churches should enjoy fellowship with each other and partner together in mission. These and other points are ones we have in common across denominational lines, despite any differences.

Mark Dever writes,

Polity disagreements may preclude planting churches together, but it does not preclude partnering for pastoral fellowship, education, evangelistic work, Bible translation, or various social ministries. Certainly it is never appropriate for churches to remove their affections from one another over differences in polity.²¹

WHAT POLITY CAN AND CAN'T DO

There are sound theologians and faithful pastors who arrive at Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational forms of government. Those who say that churches can only be healthy if they adhere to their own preferred form of government are mistaken. There are mature, gospel-centered churches with various polities. Wayne Grudem says,

21. Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville, TN: B&H Publishing Group, 2012), 61.

At the outset it must be said that the form of church government is not a major doctrine like the Trinity, the deity of Christ, substitutionary atonement, or the authority of Scripture. . . . And church history attests that several different forms of government have worked fairly well for several centuries. . . . It seems to me, then, that there ought to be room for evangelical Christians to differ amicably over this question, in the hope that further understanding may be gained.²²

A tempered approach to polity understands what polity can and can't do. It is not uncommon to find overstated views of what polity can accomplish. I've heard it said that polity is what disciples and matures Christians, and that a very particular form of polity is crucial for the growth of God's kingdom on earth. I have also seen pastors with an excessive zeal for polity. When a pastor is too passionate about a Book of Church Order, it could be a warning sign that the more important values of humility, unity, and love are being replaced with a passion for procedure, rules, and restrictions.

Alan Strange, in his preface to Charles Hodge's book on polity, says that this was Hodge's constant emphasis: "Elevate the polity of the church to the level of the doctrine and morals

22. Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine*, Second Edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1114. Grudem helpfully adds that we should be willing to live and minister within any of several different Protestant systems of church governance.

and you will bring down the doctrine and morals.”²³

What *can* polity do? Polity provides clarity on who is governing the church. It can protect church members and pastors. It can help establish theological standards, wise practices, and discipline procedures that promote godliness and justice. In a denomination, polity can express institutionally the unity that the church is called to spiritually. It can facilitate shared mission, promote gifted leadership, and increase accountability for leaders.

What *can't* polity do? Polity cannot guarantee fidelity to the gospel. It cannot create consensus or automatically preserve unity and peace. It cannot guarantee Christian maturity, or maintain the fruit of the Spirit. Alan Strange cautions against “the mistake of believing that sin can be eliminated by adopting the right forms.” Moreover, “We must not imagine that holiness and faithfulness can be achieved by constantly tweaking our church order so as to eliminate all of our problems.”²⁴

Ed Clowney writes, “Better by far are imperfect structures in the hands of devoted servants of Christ than the most biblical form of church government practiced in pride or in a loveless and vindictive spirit.”²⁵ Yes and amen. And this is why, in Sovereign Grace Churches, we spend far more time talking about devotion to Christ, the pursuit of humility, and the priority of love than we do talking about church government. Obviously, we want to pursue and practice the most biblical

23. Alan D. Strange, printed in Charles Hodge, *Church Polity* (Seoul, NY: Westminster Publishing House).

24. Ibid.

25. Edmund P. Clowney, *The Church* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity Press, 1995), 202.

form of church government. But it will benefit no one to be right about polity while proud and loveless in spirit.

GOSPEL-CENTERED, NOT POLITY-CENTERED

When the polity of Sovereign Grace Churches was first affirmed by our pastors, we had brothers from a range of polity convictions who expressed an eagerness to work within our polity to plant and build churches. Some pastors held views that emphasized the governing autonomy of local churches and the value of church members voting to affirm particular elder decisions; some pastors held to various forms of Presbyterian polity; some would have preferred a third and higher level of authority in the form of apostles (with much less authority than Paul and the Twelve) to lead, care for, and unify the churches.

Yet despite a range of polity perspectives, we were all willing to function within our new polity, and we all signed on to gospel partnership in Sovereign Grace Churches. How was that possible? I think it's partly because of how our polity honors the insights of each of the main polities. I think it's also partly because our pastors—a remarkable group of men, whom I deeply love and respect—were humbly willing to make compromises for the sake of the whole, rather than insist on their own way.

Our polity does not perfectly express any one man's desires at every point. Pastors throughout our family of churches displayed humility, love, and commitment to unity—our polity was forged in those virtues.

But above these considerations, deep down our pastors and churches knew that we are united around something more important than polity. We are united by the good news of a Savior crucified for sinners. While a broad likemindedness in polity is important in partnership among churches, even more important is a zeal for Christ that binds our hearts together in a shared mission. Polity is not the center—Christ is, and always will be.

There is a reason that our first Shared Value is “Reformed Theology” and our second is “Gospel-Centered Doctrine and Preaching.” We are committed to defining ourselves theologically, with the gospel at the center. We never want to derive our identity from our differences with other Christians, or define ourselves primarily by the way we are not like others. What excites us the most is preaching the gospel of Jesus Christ, who died as our substitute and rose victorious over sin and death.

We also need to keep in mind that one of our Shaping Virtues²⁶ is humility, and such humility is the fruit of the gospel that God requires. This pursuit of humility informs the way Christians should express any polity disagreements and how we view those who hold differing opinions on church governance. We should continue to celebrate where God is at work in the broader body of Christ, learning from them and being eager to walk in unity and love. If the gospel is faithfully preached, we join Paul and say, “Christ is proclaimed, and in that I rejoice” (Phil. 1:18).

26. <https://www.sovereigngrace.com/7-shaping-virtues>

Who Governs the Church?

The Case for Elder-Governed Churches

It is our shared conviction in Sovereign Grace Churches that the Bible teaches elder-governance and that this system of governance promotes health and flourishing in the church. This view is not unique to us. In his excellent book *Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch says,

The authority to govern and teach the local church resides in the plurality of elders—Christ’s undershepherds, God’s household managers. . . . The New Testament does not indicate that the congregation governs itself by majority vote, and there is no evidence that God has granted every member one equal vote with every other member. Rather, the New Testament congregation is governed by its own congregational elders. The elders, according to the express instruction of the New Testament, have the authority to

shepherd the congregation.²⁷

Elders lead and govern, and congregations—far from being on the sidelines—are active in their participation in ministry and mission. This model of church life and leadership is grounded in the teaching of the New Testament. While elder-governance can also be supported through its prevalence in church history, through appeals to human nature and creational norms, and through its practical benefits, the case for elder-governance should depend ultimately on the teaching of Scripture and that will be our focus.

The Bible teaches and supports elder-governance in at least the following six ways: 1) The biblical titles given to pastors; 2) The commands to pastors and the congregation; 3) The constant New Testament pattern of elder governance; 4) The governing authority of elders in Israel; 5) The analogy of authority in the home; 6) The authoritative proclamation of the Word.

1. THE BIBLICAL TITLES GIVEN TO PASTORS

Pastors are described with titles that necessarily include the idea of authority and governing power. An overseer (*episkopos*) is one who is given charge of something—he is an official supervisor or guardian. This title was often used to refer to

27. Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Colorado Springs, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 291, 293. My Congregationalist friends obviously object to this quote, and point to specific texts as evidence. I examine Congregational arguments in the next chapter.

those who have civil or military authority. Scripture says “The Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28), the beginning of Philippians addresses “the overseers” (Phil. 1:1), and the pastoral qualifications say that an overseer must be above reproach (1 Tim. 3:2; Titus 1:7). An overseer in the church with no governing authority is a misnomer, like a gardener with no garden, a painter with no paint, or a mail carrier with no mail.

Pastors are also called elders (*presbuteros*), which, while at its root speaks of age or maturity, commonly denoted rank or rule, especially within a community (1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Pet. 5:5). The language of elders is used in the Old Testament with reference to authority figures in households, cities, and nations, both in Israel and beyond. The people of God were often governed by the elders who sat and judged at the gate of a city. In the New Testament church, elders were specifically charged with the authoritative tasks of “ruling” (1 Tim. 5:17) and “overseeing” (Titus 1:5–7).

In Ephesians 4:11, elders are also called pastors or shepherds (*poimēn*). In the ancient near east, this functional term was commonly used to refer to those who exercised the highest human authority over a group or nation. Fundamental to the shepherding imagery is the exercise of authority. Alexander Strauch writes, “In biblical language, to shepherd a nation or any group of people means to lead or to govern.”²⁸ And Archibald Alexander writes, “No word is more common with classic writers, to express the whole duty of a king in governing and

28. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 25.

providing for his people.”²⁹ Shepherds have governing authority, and in the church of Christ it is elders and not the congregation as a whole who shepherd the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Pet. 5:2).

Shepherding imagery provides an important point of continuity between leadership and governance in the old covenant and the new covenant. When the shepherds of Israel failed in the exercise of their authority by ruling with force and harshness, God promised that he himself would be the shepherd of the sheep (Ezek. 34:1–24). And rather than removing the authority of earthly shepherds or distributing that authority equally among his people, God would instead give his people shepherds after his own heart (Jer. 3:15).

While there are certainly points of discontinuity with old covenant leaders (pastors today are not rulers of a nation or a civic body, special mediators of God’s presence, or members of a distinct priestly class), shepherding relationships of authority and submission are presented in Scripture as a significant point of continuity between the covenants.

In the New Testament, these various titles refer to the same office, but each word contains a distinct nuance. *Overseer* emphasizes direction and governance, *elder* emphasizes maturity and stature, and *pastor* emphasizes nurture and care. Yet each of these designations involves authority and provides strong support for elder-rule as the biblical model of church governance. These terms would be emptied of essential aspects of their meaning if such men do not govern the church, or if their authority were subject to a higher earthly authority in the church.

29. Archibald Alexander, *The Pastor: His Call, Character, and Work* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 2021), 95.

2. THE COMMANDS TO PASTORS AND THE CONGREGATION

It is essential to consider and give special weight to those texts that are given by God to explicitly delineate the roles of elders and the congregation. Such passages appear in the New Testament epistles, after the establishment of the new covenant church.

The commands given to elders in the church describing their duties require them to have the highest governing authority under Christ. Pastors are not only commanded to teach and advise, or to exercise what is sometimes called an “authority of counsel,” they are commanded to “exhort and rebuke with all authority” (Titus 2:15). They are to shepherd the flock and to exercise oversight (1 Pet. 5:2), to oversee (Acts 20:17), to manage or rule well (1 Tim. 5:17). Scripture very directly and plainly speaks of the God-given authority of elders to rule.

The reason pastors are commanded to not domineer over those in their charge (1 Pet. 5:3) is because their governing authority is over the congregation that has been entrusted to their care by God. Congregations are nowhere exhorted to avoid domineering over pastors, or cautioned to avoid the misuse of their governing authority, precisely because they do not have governing authority or “authority of command.” Instead congregations are called to submission.

God has also made clear how authority and submission are to function in the church, through the commands he gives to the congregation. Hebrews 13:17 says, “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as

those who will have to give an account.” This is certainly not the only thing to be said about congregational responsibilities, and the commands to obey and submit require biblical qualification, but it is an important aspect of what God commands of us all in relation to our pastors. 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 says, “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”

Such passages are explicitly governmental, intended by God to describe the lines of authority and submission that exist between pastors and the congregation. And in the New Testament, these lines are never reversed. These passages reveal the government of the early church that God intends for his church today. Note that the congregation is not called to be subject to spiritual leaders outside the church, nor are members anywhere commanded to obey, follow, and submit to the entire church. Rather, they are to obey, follow, and submit to the elders God has placed over them in their local church.

3. THE CONSTANT NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN OF ELDER GOVERNANCE

Throughout the New Testament, the apostles of Christ appointed local elders to lead congregations, establishing a clear pattern of elder-governance in every church. The original apostles were given the keys of the kingdom in a unique and primary way, and exercised an authority unique to them. By these keys they wrote authoritative Scripture, preached an authoritative message as eye-witnesses to Christ, and established an authoritative governance for future generations of the church.

In Matthew 16:18–19, Jesus said to Peter,

And I tell you, you are Peter, and on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it. 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.

With this language, Jesus establishes his disciples as servants or stewards in God's household. Guy Waters draws this insight from Jesus' words: "Christ has expressly entrusted authority to his apostles to order the life of the people of God under the New Testament."³⁰ And, "Jesus entrusted his apostles with conveying his teaching to the church."³¹

Prior to establishing the new covenant community, Jesus had announced that his apostles would play an authoritative role in establishing the governance of the church. The New Testament then shows us the government Christ establishes through the writings and ministry of the apostles. He promised they would write down, with the authority of God, what was taught through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit. Again, Guy Waters explains, "It is in this apostolic and inspired record of teaching—the New Testament—that we find Jesus's provision of a government for his church."³² This government is repeatedly explained in the New Testament. "We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly

30. Waters, *How Jesus Runs the Church*, 39.

31. *Ibid.*, 46.

32. *Ibid.*, 47.

in love because of their work (1 Thess. 5:12–13). “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17).

In Acts 14:23, we read that the apostles “appointed elders for them in every church.” It is especially important to note that this was the practice in every church. The apostolic strategy for oversight was a plurality of elders. The reason the apostles appointed elders is because the churches needed to be governed in the absence of the apostles. Commenting on Acts 14:23, Waters says, “Jesus is providing, through the apostles, government to his church. Notice that this was Paul and Barnabas’s pattern for ‘every’ church they had visited. Each and every congregation of believers was to be governed by a group of elders.”³³

It was also the apostles who gave qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, because there was a concern that churches be governed well. And, this is to be passed off as the model of governance to future generations: “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also” (2 Tim. 2:2).

4. THE GOVERNING AUTHORITY OF ELDERS IN ISRAEL

The way in which eldership in Israel and first century Judaism provided a pattern for the New Testament church also supports elder-rule. This is not to say that elders in Israel and in the new covenant church are identical—they are not.

33. Ibid., 47.

Elders in Israel were involved in governing the nation. And, elders were not the only ones with governing roles in the old covenant, since there were also priests and kings ruling over the people of God. And yet, there is evidence that New Testament church governance (elder-rule) is informed by the Jewish synagogue system, and continues in that basic pattern of authority that God in his wisdom had established.

An important point of continuity throughout salvation history is that ever since the days of Moses, elders were involved in leading and governing the people of God.³⁴ The term “elder” first signified an older person, but in time became a title and position, an office of authority over the people. The authority of elders in Israel was not limited to the civil realm, but included the religious realm also.

In Exodus, the Lord commanded Moses to gather the elders of Israel (Exod. 3:16), and said that Moses and the elders shall go to the king of Egypt and ask him to let them journey in the wilderness to worship the Lord (Exod. 3:18). At times God called out “seventy of the elders of Israel” (Exod. 24:1). In

34. For the Old Testament origins of eldership, see Cornelis Van Dam, *The Elder: Today's Ministry Rooted in All of Scripture* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2009), especially Chapter 4, “Elders as Leaders in the Old Testament,” and Chapter 5, “Elders as Judges in the Old Testament.” Van Dam writes, “As the new Israel, the church has retained the use of the office of elder. That the Christian eldership is rooted in the Israelite and Jewish office need not be doubted. . . . Continuity with the past was maintained. That the old office of elder became a Christian office indicates its abiding significance. At the same time, this continuity also shows that the eldership as it now functions in the church cannot be properly understood without the Old Testament background” (9).

Numbers 11, elders are appointed to aid Moses in leading the people: “Then the Lord said to Moses, ‘Gather for me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them, and bring them to the tent of meeting’ (Num. 11:16). Moses gathered seventy men of the elders, and then “the Lord came down in the cloud and spoke to him, and took some of the Spirit that was on him and put it on the seventy elders” (Num. 11:25).

In the sacrificial system, God said “the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on the head of the bull before the Lord” (Lev. 4:15). In teaching the law, “Now Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people, saying, ‘Keep the whole commandment that I command you today’” (Deut. 27:1).

These passages and others demonstrate that when the people of God were in slavery in Egypt and wandering in the wilderness, elders were those who led, taught, and governed them. Samuel Miller, who served as Professor of Ecclesiastical History and Church Government at Princeton Theological Seminary from 1813 to 1849, observes that throughout the Old Testament,

there is every reason to believe that the body of the people never, themselves, exercised governmental acts; but chose their Elders, to whom all the details of judicial and executive authority, under their divine Legislator and Sovereign, were constantly committed.³⁵

35. Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder: The Warrant, Nature, and Duties of the Office in the Presbyterian Church* (Toccoa, GA: Sola Fide Publishers, 2015), 26. In Sovereign Grace Churches we make no distinction between Teaching Elders and Ruling Elders.

Miller says this is a clear and indubitable fact in Jewish antiquity.

During the earthly life and ministry of Jesus, a government of elder-rule continued among the people of God. Jews met in synagogues, which were governed by “the rulers of the synagogue” (See Mark 5:22; Luke 13:14). Acts 13:15 says, “After reading from the Law and the Prophets, the rulers of the synagogue sent a message to [Paul and Barnabas].” In the synagogues, it was the elders who watched over the people and governed them, admitted new members, administered discipline when necessary, and made theological rulings.

Samuel Miller explains that the office of elder or ruler as it is used in the new covenant community was adopted from the synagogue:

If we compare the titles, the powers, the duties, and the ordination of the officers of the Christian church, as well as the nature and order of its public service, as established by the Apostles, with . . . [the synagogue system], we shall find the organization and service of the church to . . . resemble the synagogue in almost everything. . . . Could we trace a resemblance only in one or a few points, it might be considered as accidental; but the resemblance is so close, so striking, and extends to so many particulars, as to arrest the attention of the most careless inquirer.

. . . Accordingly, as soon as we begin to read of the Apostles organizing Churches on the New Testament plan, we find them instituting officers of precisely the same nature, and bestowing upon them, for the most part, the very same titles to which they had been accustomed

in the ordinary sabbatical service under the preceding economy.”³⁶

That is, a plurality of elders, who are overseers and rulers, were appointed by the apostles in every church, and members were commanded to obey and submit to them.

Bible scholar G. K. Beale similarly explains:

In general, it appears that the office of elder in the church is the continuation of the position of elder in Israel. Whereas elders in Israel had both civil and religious authority, elders in the new covenant have full religious authority over the sphere of the new Israel, the church. Several observations point to this equivalence. Besides the use of the same word, “elders” (*presbyteroi*), the book of Acts repeatedly juxtaposes the phrase “rulers and elders” of Israel (4:5, 8) or “chief priests and elders” (4:23; 23:14; 25:15), or “elders and scribes” (6:12) with “apostles and elders” of the church (15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4). Just as the Jewish “rulers and elders and scribes were gathered together in Jerusalem” to judge the validity of the emerging Christian movement

36. Ibid., 41–43. Miller also states, “Any that will impartially read the New Testament, will find that when the forms of government or worship are treated of, it is not done with such architectonical exactness, as was necessary, if a new thing had been instituted, which we find practiced by Moses. But the Apostles rather speak as those who give rules for the ordering and directing of what was already in being. From all which it seems well grounded and rational to assume, that the first constitution of the Christian Churches was taken from the model of the synagogue” (33).

(4:5–23), so too in “Jerusalem . . . the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter” about the Jewish-Christian teaching that new gentile converts had to keep the law of Moses (15:1–6). The function of the Jewish elders in Acts 4 and the Christian elders in Acts 15 appears virtually identical. Both are in an official position in their respective covenant communities to adjudicate whether a new theological teaching is valid.³⁷

There is not biblical support for the idea that elders in the new covenant no longer possess ruling authority among the people of God, or that Jews who were converted to Christianity in the first century adopted a fundamentally and radically different model of governance from what they had been accustomed. Rather, the biblical evidence points to elder-governance as a point of continuity in the leadership of God’s people. Although eldership in the new covenant underwent a number of changes from its old covenant counterpart, the New Testament clearly attributes governing authority to the office in Christ’s church. The wisdom of shepherd-leaders governing the people of God is not confined to the old covenant.

5. THE ANALOGY OF AUTHORITY IN THE HOME

In Scripture, the church is a family, and the shepherd leadership of the pastor in the church corresponds to the shepherd leadership of a husband and father in the home. The

37. G. K. Beale, *A New Testament Biblical Theology: The Unfolding of the Old Testament in the New* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2011), 822.

household provides the basic model for ecclesiastical leadership and authority. In 1 Timothy 3:4–5, Paul says, concerning an elder candidate, “He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?”

To manage is to govern and care for—“to exercise a position of leadership, rule, direct, be at the head of.” It is because shepherds have managing, governing responsibility in the church that they must first demonstrate the ability to manage and govern their homes well. “Manage” is the same word Paul uses later in 1 Timothy when he refers to elders who “rule well” (1 Tim. 5:17). This word is also used of an elder’s management of the church in 1 Thessalonians 5:12. So the Bible draws a parallel between authority in the home and authority in the church as the household of God.

Vern Poythress is very helpful here. He observes that in 1 Timothy in particular, the theme of family relationships is prominent, and family relationships are used to describe church order. “Paul repeatedly invokes the analogy of a family in order to enable Timothy better to understand the appropriate order and responsibilities within the Christian church.”³⁸

Poythress says, “The order of the church is analogous to the order of a human household.”³⁹ “The central use of the

38. Vern Poythress, “The Church as Family: Why Male Leadership in the Family Requires Male Leadership in the Church,” in *Recovering Biblical Manhood and Womanhood: A Response to Evangelical Feminism*, ed. John Piper and Wayne Grudem (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 309.

39. *Ibid.*, 310.

household analogy naturally points toward inferences regarding authoritative leadership in the church.”⁴⁰ Families have a God-ordained structure of leadership and authority, in which husbands have a unique role and responsibility. There are also “irreversible relations of leadership and submission within the church.”⁴¹ “The structure of family leadership is to be carried over into God’s household: qualified men are to be appointed as overseers, that is, fathers of the church.”⁴²

Where does ultimate human authority reside? Poythress explains,

The analogy between the natural family and God’s household therefore suggests the same procedures for God’s household. Responsibilities for management may, in a broad sense, be delegated and distributed throughout God’s household. But the overseers, as fathers in the household, possess more ultimate authority. . . . Fathers are to exercise overall authority in both family and church.⁴³

Complementarians are well-positioned to understand the nature, function, and limits of authority, through their understanding of marriage. While the comparison is not exact and authority comes in varied forms (there is no call for husbands to “command your wives with all authority”), the authority of elders in the church is comparable to the authority of husbands in marriage.

40. Ibid., 313.

41. Ibid., 313.

42. Ibid., 315.

43. Ibid., 322–323.

Husbands and pastors alike must avoid lording it over those they lead (Col. 3:19; 1 Pet. 5:3). A godly husband will cherish his wife, wash her in the Word, lead through service, value her counsel, encourage the use of her skills, and live with her in an understanding way. This is how his godly authority finds expression. The same is true of the pastor in relation to the flock. Just as a husband does not submit to a wife, but serves her and leads her with the gentleness of Christ, so elders do not submit to the congregation, but serve and lead with the gentleness of Christ.

Church government corresponds to family government. The highest earthly authority in the home is the father, and the highest earthly authority in the church is the eldership. Yet, very real responsibilities can and do exist among all members of the family, even if those family members do not possess the highest authority in the home. One way to answer the objection that a congregation can't have meaningful responsibility without the highest governing authority is to ask if the same holds true for a wife in the home.

Some egalitarians say that complementarianism creates women who are marginalized and infantilized. Likewise, some Congregationalists say that elder-governance creates Christians who are marginalized and infantilized. The argument they make is very similar, which is that people cannot truly thrive if they do not have a share in the highest earthly authority in that particular institution. However, this argument fails to understand the nature and beauty of God's design for authority, how submission to godly authority contributes to flourishing, and the tremendous scope of meaningful responsibility that can be carried by those called to submission.

God's good design is that the highest authority in the church correspond to the highest authority in the family, and that this authority be exercised in a similar manner to the authority a husband has over a wife, for the sake of the thriving of those who are led and served. The nourishing, cherishing, initiating, serving, protecting leadership of a husband is a picture of how a pastor is to exercise authority and lead the church. Healthy leadership in both contexts requires solidarity, humility, and affection. Pastors are to exercise authority in a familial manner—leading by example and persuasion, with hearts of affection, and always with the recognition that theirs is a subordinate authority, derived from the perfect authority of the great Shepherd.

The important point here is that according to Scripture, and 1 Timothy in particular, elders exercise a role of leadership and authority that is analogous to a father in a family, which further supports the pattern of elder-governed churches.

6. THE AUTHORITATIVE PROCLAMATION OF THE WORD

Authority in the church is preeminently expressed in the authoritative, public proclamation of the Word of truth, and secondarily through the administration of the sacraments and church discipline. In Matthew 16:19, Jesus tells Peter "I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven." To exercise these keys is, first and foremost, to authoritatively preach the Word of truth, as Peter does in the book of Acts.⁴⁴ But if the keys

44. We will examine Jesus' teaching on the keys in chapter 4. On the relationship between the keys and preaching, John Calvin says,

involve authoritative preaching, it is not simply that elders lead in the use of the keys, but that this particular use of the keys and exercise of authority is properly restricted to them.

This is what we see in the New Testament, where ecclesiastical teaching is explicitly and repeatedly connected with the exercise of ecclesiastical authority, in passages such as Acts 20:28, 1 Peter 5:1–5, 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, and Hebrews 13:7, 17. 1 Timothy 5:17 connects ruling with laboring in preaching and teaching, because such proclamation of the Word is how rule is expressed.

“We conclude that the power of the keys is simply the preaching of the gospel, and that with regard to men it is not so much power as ministry. For Christ has not given this power actually to men, but to his Word, of which he has made men ministers.” John Calvin, ed. John T. McNeill, *Institutes of the Christian Religion* (Philadelphia, PA: Westminster, 1960), 4.11.1, 1213. D. A. Carson writes, “Peter, on confessing Jesus as Messiah, is told he has received this confession by the Father’s revelation and will be given the keys of the kingdom: i.e., by proclaiming ‘the good news of the kingdom’ (4:23), which, by revelation he is increasingly understanding, he will open the kingdom to many and shut it against many. Fulfillments of this in Acts are not found in passages like 15:10 but in those like 2:14–39; 3:11–26, so that by this means the Lord added to the church those who were being saved (2:45), or, otherwise put, Jesus was building his church (Matt. 16:18). But the same gospel proclamation alienates and excludes men; so we also find Peter shutting up the kingdom from men (Acts 4:11–12; 8:20–23). . . . Peter accomplishes this binding and loosing by proclaiming a gospel that has already been given and by making personal application on that basis.” *Matthew*, in ed. Frank E. Gaebelin, *The Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Volume 8* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1984), 373.

Who, in the New Testament, do we see exercising the keys of the kingdom through the authoritative proclamation of the Word in the gathering of the church? Is it the congregation as a whole? It is not. Certainly, the church as a whole is the pillar and buttress of truth, defending and declaring an authoritative message. And there is an important sense in which power is given by Jesus to the church collectively. But the stewardship of preaching apostolic doctrine is one that consistently and repeatedly falls to elders. Beginning with Peter's sermon in Acts 2 and throughout the New Testament, it is pastors and elders who are specifically charged with the authoritative preaching of God's Word to the church.

The Pastoral Epistles emphasize authoritative preaching. Such exercise of authority is not the work of the many but the work of the few. In 1 Timothy, some desire to be teachers but shouldn't be (1 Tim. 1:7). Timothy must command and teach (4:11), devoting himself to exhortation and teaching (4:13), paying close attention to the teaching (4:16). Elders must be able to teach (1 Tim. 3:2).

In 2 Timothy, Paul charges Timothy to hold on to the pattern of sound teaching (2 Tim. 1:13), and to commit this sound teaching to faithful men who will teach others (2 Tim. 2:2). He must be diligent in correctly teaching the word of truth (2:15). The Lord's servant must be "able to teach" and skilled at "correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2:24–25). Paul writes to Timothy, "I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching" (4:1–2).

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In Titus, churches are put into order through the appointment of elders (1:5). Such elders “must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that they may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (1:9). Titus must teach what accords with sound doctrine (2:1), encouraging and rebuking with all authority (2:15).

Benjamin Gladd and Matthew Harmon have not overstated the matter when they say,

One of the primary ways in which the NT combats the spread of false teaching is the establishment of church government. Though all believers are end-time priests before God, elders are appointed as end-time priests in an official capacity to teach God’s Word and guard against false teaching.⁴⁵

We see plainly in the New Testament that the guardians of authoritative teaching and sound doctrine are the leaders of the church (1 Tim. 1:10; 6:3; 2 Tim. 1:7, 13; 4:3; Titus 1:9, 13; 2:1–2, 8). Authority, governance, or rule in the church is deeply connected with preaching sound doctrine and finds expression through such preaching. When pastors stand in the pulpit and preach the Word of God, they are exercising the keys of the kingdom by proclaiming an authoritative message. It is contrary to a biblical view of preaching to say that when a pastor stands in the pulpit to proclaim God’s Word, he is doing

45. Benjamin L. Gladd and Matthew S. Harmon, *Making All Things New: Inaugurated Eschatology for the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2016), 94.

so merely with “authority of counsel” and not with a higher and greater “authority of command.” To suggest otherwise is to undermine the authority of Scripture and to abandon a biblical understanding of preaching.

Any one of these six points would stand as strong evidence for elder-governed and elder-led churches. Taken as a whole, they demonstrate that the New Testament teaches, through both command and example, governance through a plurality of elders, under the authority of Christ, for the flourishing of the church until Christ returns.

THE PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF ELDER-GOVERNANCE

I have intentionally emphasized the biblical case for elder-rule rather than outlining its practical benefits. Efficiency is not a sufficient reason to adopt a model of governance, since the path of wisdom is not always the most efficient. Yet, in addition to the biblical reasons to embrace elder-governance, it is worth highlighting some of the practical benefits.

If Christ is the one who calls and provides pastors for his church (Eph. 4:11; Acts 20:28), then elder-governed churches place decision-making in the hands of those most qualified and gifted for governance, and avoid giving undue influence to less mature believers. As such, elder-rule keeps governance closely linked with authoritative teaching, promotes the gift of leadership and submission to godly authority, establishes clear lines of authority, and best avoids democratic tendencies in the leadership and decision-making of the church. When applied wisely and biblically, faithful pastors are less likely to

be driven from their churches by politics, slander is less likely to happen in church meetings, and a church's culture will likely tend more toward unity and joy than toward disagreement and power struggles.

Are elder-rule churches more vulnerable to the misuse of authority? Perhaps, but not necessarily. What best prevents the abuse of authority is the faithful application of elder qualifications on the front end, healthy accountability among elders, and giving appropriate recourse to a congregation when an elder sins flagrantly. In other words, biblical faithfulness and wisdom in the application of elder-rule is God's design for guarding it against abuses. Assigning governing authority to the entire congregation is not an effective strategy for preventing the misuse of authority. As Joseph Hellerman writes,

It might seem that dispersing power throughout the whole congregation would dilute the potential for the misuse of authority. Experience, however, suggests otherwise. The wholesale democratization of local church authority . . . has been tried and found wanting . . .⁴⁶

Hellerman observes, "In too many churches, the parliamentary solution to the abuse of pastoral authority simply transfers the dysfunctional exercise of power from the shepherds to the sheep."⁴⁷

46. Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2013), 263.

47. *Ibid.*, 265.

One practical benefit of elder-governance is the way it promotes a number of biblical values less central to other forms of polity.

Neither the business model, consisting of a CEO pastor with his board of deacons, nor a democratic, congregational system of church government, does much to encourage the biblical values and qualities [of maturity, transparency, and community among leaders]. In fact, . . . these common approaches to church organization and power relations exhibit systemic shortcomings that too often lead us in precisely the opposite direction.⁴⁸

Hellerman's proposal is simply a return to the biblical model we have examined:

The way back to Paul's cruciform vision for authentic Christian leadership is to be found in a community of pastor-elders who relate to one another first as brothers in Christ, and who then lead their church family out of the fullness of that robust relational solidarity.⁴⁹

This certainly rings true in my own experience of pastoral ministry, and has contributed to the joy, encouragement, and camaraderie I have known over the years.

Yet, none of the practical benefits are determinative. I know there are congregational churches that avoid the potential

48. Ibid., 287.

49. Ibid., 265.

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dangers of their polity and experience many of these blessings and benefits within a different governance. At the end of the day, our case rests on the biblical factors outlined here, and the model of plural elder-governance presented in Scripture. There is solid evidence that elder-rule is taught by God, and such rule is important for the order of Christ's church. God's good design is that his church is governed by elders.

Examining Congregationalism

One of the less helpful ways that people criticize church governance views with which they disagree is by telling church horror stories drawn from the worst experiences of that governance. Someone might critically decree: “If your church is Congregational, you’re going to fire Jonathan Edwards, get in fist fights in members meetings, and split over the color of the carpet.”

The problems with this approach are numerous. First, it is merely pragmatic in that it fails to consider the biblical merits of the position. Second, it is uncharitable, in that it tends to draw examples from the most distorted and unhealthy expressions of that polity. And third, it is wrongly focused in that it tends to blame polity over bad character and poor leadership when polity is frequently the far lesser problem.

When a prominent pastor leads others astray or abuses his power, or when we hear of a church that is mired in conflict and scandal, we naturally hope the pastor or church in view does not share our polity. This allows us to score polity points

and say (or at least think to ourselves), “My polity would have prevented this nightmare.” But polity does not eliminate the presence of sin. And with a bit of humility and honesty, we all have to admit that there have been plenty of awful things that have taken place or could take place within every polity under the sun, including our preferred polity.

Congregationalism has been on the receiving end of many stereotypes and inaccurate representations. The congregational straw man is easy to attack, but attacking a straw man is never fruitful. The truth is, Congregationalism in its healthy form is not mob rule. It is not a recipe for division and disaster, or a denial of the importance of pastoral leadership. There are many healthy, gospel-centered, congregational churches, and some of them are led by good friends of mine. I thank God for them and have learned from them.

HEALTHY CONGREGATIONALISM VERSUS HYPER-CONGREGATIONALISM

According to congregational polity, final earthly authority for decision making belongs to the entire gathered congregation. The final court of appeal in matters of doctrine, discipline, and decisions is the whole assembly.

Some Congregationalists say that every church should be a democracy because, they claim, the apostolic churches of the New Testament were democracies. Accordingly, all ecclesiastical authority without exception resides in the members jointly. It is not elders who rule, but the congregation. Members jointly are ultimately responsible for the preaching and teaching of the Word, the doctrine of the church, the administration of

the sacraments, and the leadership and direction of the church.

However, what I have just described is not the position of all Congregationalists. What is often criticized as Congregationalism is better designated Hyper-Congregationalism. Many Congregationalists wisely avoid the language and practice of “democracy” in the church, because they do not want to flatten leadership or import secular ideas into the church. In fact, healthy Congregationalism insists that the church is not a straightforward democracy.⁵⁰ There is a distinct authority possessed by the elders that is not “of, for, and by the people,” but comes from God. The congregation is only the final court of appeal in particular matters, not in everything. Many Congregationalists believe it is possible for the congregation to undermine and usurp the elder’s God-given authority over the congregation by making decisions that properly belong to the elders.

Healthy Congregationalism insists that elders must rule in order to be faithful to Scripture, and that congregations must submit to their authority.

50. Paul Alexander, “Is Congregationalism a Democracy?” <https://www.9marks.org/article/congregationalism-democracy/> Alexander, a Congregationalist, believes the gathered congregation should not function as a deliberative body, since “Multiple deliberative bodies in the church only serve to complicate the decision-making process and breed disunity.” Moreover, “There is a significant sense in which a congregationally governed church is also an oligarchy [rule by a few] or aristocracy [rule by the fittest], overseen by a plurality of Christ’s qualified under-shepherds, the body of elders.” The church that feels like a pure democracy is not a good representation of Congregationalism.

Phil Newton writes,

Our lives are best regulated and governed when we walk in submission to the authorities that God has placed in our lives. In the church, that authority is found in those whom God raises up as spiritual leaders.⁵¹

The best and healthiest forms of Congregationalism acknowledge that “Governance structures should be lean and efficient.”⁵² They teach that “absolute congregational government is unwieldy in practice,”⁵³ that the public assembly cannot literally run the church,⁵⁴ and that “the congregation at large must focus on mobilizing for ministry rather than spend time worrying over governance. That responsibility is entrusted to the smaller body of elders.”⁵⁵

Congregationalism can also be highly connectional, and is at its best when churches are in close cooperation. Congregational and Baptist pastors of the past were often advocates of churches formally uniting in associations of churches, with pastoral delegates in a region meeting as a presbytery

51. Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Recovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2014), 135. Baptist leaders of the past were generally clearer on these points than Baptists are in our day.

52. John Piper, “Rethinking the Governance Structure at Bethlehem Baptist Church.” <https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/rethinking-the-governance-structure-at-bethlehem-baptist-church>

53. Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church*, 77.

54. Ibid., 77.

55. Ibid., 78.

or council. The authority of this council was representative and advisory, and did not interfere with the governing autonomy of the church since the association was voluntary and the council could not coerce or interfere with local governance. Associations of churches, they believed, were commended in Scripture and served to promote fidelity to the gospel. At times these councils or presbyteries tested and approved elder candidates for ordination, and provided protection and recourse for mistreated church members. They were involved in the discipline and removal of pastors, and they admitted and removed churches from the association.

It is worth noting that in practice, the elder-led congregational church with hardy pastoral leadership and the elder-governed church with a hardy congregational responsibility can be quite similar to each other. The elder-governed church looks at such a congregational church and considers it to be essentially elder-governed in practice, because the leadership of the elders is so strong, and the congregational church looks at such an elder-governed church and considers it to be essentially congregational in practice, because the congregation is so active and their confirmation so highly valued. The best congregational churches believe in pastoral authority, and the best elder-governed churches have a rich understanding of congregational participation and responsibility.

ARGUMENTS FOR CONGREGATIONAL GOVERNMENT

Congregational churches are generally distinguished by two features: One is *governing autonomy* (a belief that the church is not governed externally by a higher office or body outside the local church), and the other is *democratic processes* (a belief that governing authority is located in the entire gathered assembly).⁵⁶ It is this second aspect of congregationalism that I want to assess in this chapter.

Congregationalism should not be assessed primarily on pragmatic and experiential grounds, but according to its biblical merits. Three of the primary biblical arguments for Congregationalism are: 1) The nature of the new covenant; 2) The keys of the kingdom; and 3) Various New Testament inferences.⁵⁷

56. For example, the Baptist Faith and Message says the church is “an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers . . . [that] operates under the lordship of Christ through democratic processes.” (Baptist Faith and Message, VI.)

57. For support of congregationalism, see *Baptist Foundations* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), edited by Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman; Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012); Dever, *The Church* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2012); Leeman, *Don't Fire Your Church Members* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2016). *Polity* (Washington, D.C.: Nine Marks Ministries, 2001), edited by Dever, includes valuable insights on the importance of synods and the connections among churches, and *Elders in the Life of the Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2014) by Newton and Schmucker includes valuable insights related to the leadership and rule of elders. These last two resources are especially helpful in avoiding caricatures of Congregationalism.

1. The nature of the new covenant.

In *Baptist Foundations*, Stephen Wellum and Kirk Wellum argue that “the redemptive developments of the new covenant necessitate a new leadership paradigm.”⁵⁸ They make the case that church government is part of the larger discussion involving the continuity and discontinuity in the covenants. Drawing from Jeremiah 31:29–34 and the promise of a new covenant in which all God’s people shall know him, they highlight the newness of the church in its structure and nature. The Spirit now indwells all believers and there is no need for special mediators—all have access to God and are priests of God. Leaders do not function as they did in the old covenant.

This new covenant, Congregationalists argue, necessitates a leadership paradigm and structure that reflects these realities and places governance in the hands of the entire Spirit-indwelt, new covenant, priesthood of believers. The leadership of elders plays an important role in that church and they have some authority, but to locate the highest governing authority in the elders is to return the church to old covenant categories. “The nature of this people requires a leadership structure that is compatible with who they are and where they are in redemptive history.”⁵⁹

There is much to affirm in this point. The new covenant does indeed bring changes to the leadership of God’s

58. Stephen J. Wellum and Kirk Wellum, “The Biblical and Theological Case for Congregationalism,” in *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*, ed. Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015), 49.

59. *Ibid.*, 75.

people. The church is not, like Israel, divided into priests and non-priests. There is no special class of people who mediate the knowledge and presence of Christ to other believers. All believers have the privilege of access to God through Jesus Christ, all believers have the privilege of reading and interpreting Scripture for themselves, all believers belong to the royal priesthood and are called to use their gifts for ministry in the church. So important is this point to our churches that the first heading in the Sovereign Grace Churches *Book of Church Order* under the role of the congregation is “Congregational Equality.”⁶⁰

The question remains: Do the greater privileges of believers in the new covenant and the equal standing of all believers in Christ require that all Christians have responsibility for

60. The Sovereign Grace Churches BCO 4.2 states, “Church members do not have an inferior status to elders but are equal in standing before Christ and fellow members of his body. All members of the church—elders and congregants—are sheep under the authority of the Chief Shepherd and possess the same privileges: adoption by God, redemption by Christ, and sealing by the same Holy Spirit.

Therefore, there is no fundamental distinction among believers in Christ’s body. All Christians—elders and congregants alike—have equal access to God through Christ (Gal. 3:28), are “priests” of God (1 Pet. 2:9), possess the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts (Acts 2:17–18; 1 Cor. 6:19; 2 Cor. 1:22), receive illumination from the Spirit (1 Cor. 2:6–16), and enjoy all other spiritual blessings in Christ (Eph. 1:3ff.). All believers—elders and congregants alike—have access to God’s Word and stand under its authority. As a result, the historical distinction between “clergy” and “laity” is an unbiblical idea that creates an illegitimate dichotomy within the body of Christ.”

governance in the church? Does it require all Christians to have an equal share of the highest earthly authority in the church? What about all the biblical commands for elder rule and congregational submission?

This particular Congregational argument is similar to the argument egalitarians have made to advocate for the removal of authority and submission in marriage—the priesthood of all believers, and the equal value and privileges of believers, it is claimed, requires the democratization of authority. However, the evidence of the New Testament runs counter to this conclusion, both in the home and in the church. The New Testament does not view roles of authority and submission as inconsistent with the nature of salvation and our privileges in Christ.

2. The keys of the kingdom.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus says to Peter, “On this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.” Jesus also says “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” (v.19).

Matthew 18:18 is a particular application of Matthew 16:19. There, in the context of correcting a brother in sin and outlining the process of discipline, Jesus says that if the person in sin is unrepentant it should be told to the church, and if he refuses to listen to the church, he should be treated as an unbeliever. Jesus then repeats his statement on binding and loosing, this time in the plural. This is significant, first

because the authority to declare the terms of divine forgiveness extends beyond Peter, and second, because of the role of the entire church in the process of removal. Finally, in the Great Commission of Matthew 28:18–20, Jesus announces that his authority is given for the mission of the church.

From these passages, Congregationalists conclude that every Christian is called to participate in the exercise of governing authority in the church, and that the assembled congregation as a whole is the highest earthly authority in ruling the church.

There are certainly truths to affirm in a Congregationalist reading of these passages. First, there are vital responsibilities and activities that belong to the church as a whole, related to membership and mission. I doubt that “tell it to the church” should be taken to mean “tell it to the elders.” Second, there is a power that Christ bestows upon the church that is given to no other organization, institution, or social group. And third, there is a sense in which this church power is given to the entire body of believers. Many Congregationalists and Presbyterians agree with James Bannerman when he writes, “The proper and primary depositary or subject of Church power is not the office-bearers exclusively, nor the whole body of believers exclusively, but both equally, although in different ways and for different purposes.”⁶¹ Members of the

61. James Bannerman, *The Church of Christ: A Treatise on the Nature, Powers, Ordinances, Discipline and Government of the Christian Church, Volume 1* (Birmingham, AL: Solid Ground Christian Books, 2009), 273. Louis Berkhof writes, “ecclesiastical power is committed by Christ to the Church as a whole, that is to the ordinary members and the officers alike.” However, he adds, “in addition to that the officers receive such an additional measure of pow-

congregation have responsibilities in relation to the keys, and are involved in the use of the keys.⁶²

It is important to distinguish between the power of the church in general and the specific issue of church government. The former asks, “What kind of authority does the church have?,” while the latter asks, “Who governs the church?” Among those who affirm the power of the church, there remain disagreements on the governance of the church.

To give an example: in an army, there are often certain rights, privileges, powers, and liberties given to each member. It is one thing to affirm that an army as a whole has been authorized and given power for its mission. But it is another issue to consider how an army is governed or ruled in terms of its internal authority structure. Conflating church power and the question of governing authority has led to much confusion.

There are several exegetical challenges with the approach Congregationalists take to these passages in Matthew. First, in the immediate context, Jesus is speaking to Peter and the apostles—not to an eldership, and not to a gathered church, but to the apostles who possessed unique authority in salvation history. The keys belong uniquely to Jesus, the Lord of

er as is required for the performance of their respective duties in the Church of Christ. They share in the original power bestowed upon the Church, and receive their authority and power as officers directly from Christ.” *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1982), 583. Berkhof adds that this position is also held by Herman Bavinck and Geerhardus Vos (584).

62. “The elders have special leadership responsibilities in the use of the keys of the kingdom of heaven, but the congregation is also full engaged.” Van Dam, *The Elder*, 136.

the Church (Rev. 3:7), and secondarily to the apostles, who exercised the keys by writing Scripture through the inspiration of the Spirit, preaching the gospel, performing signs and wonders, planting churches, appointing elders, and baptizing new converts. Jesus does not, in these passages, explain who governs the church in the post-apostolic age. There is much debate around who Peter represents in these passages. This is because the type of power given to apostles, elders, and believers differs in each case, but none of these distinctions are found in the text.

Second, Jesus is speaking prior to the establishment of the new covenant church. We are wise to avoid importing later New Testament understandings of the church into Jesus' statements about the Messianic community. Kevin DeYoung explains,

When Jesus spoke of discipline in Matthew 18 the reference point for the disciples would have been the Jewish synagogue. There were no churches as such. The only instances they understood of “telling it to the *ekklesia*” were the disciplinary procedures in Judaism which were carried out by the Sanhedrin and not by a vote of the worshipers gathered at the synagogue. It's more plausible to think the apostles inherited the system of discipline-through-office-bearers they were familiar with than that they heard Jesus telling them to practice a form of Congregationalism that hadn't existed, in congregations

that didn't exist yet.⁶³

Third, Jesus does not, in Matthew 18:17, tell the church to remove the individual, but directs the church to be told and to treat him or her a particular way ("as a Gentile or tax collector"). Such dynamics of church discipline by definition involve the action and participation of the church community, but this says nothing about the role of the church's leaders in the process. The passage is not explicit about who does the authoritative removing.

Fourth, Jesus is not directly concerned in these passages with answering the polity questions we may bring to the table. He does not specify who has the highest earthly authority to govern the church, and he does not explain the authority and submission relationship between elders and the congregation. He is speaking to the apostles, and he is not concerned to outline the distinctions between the responsibilities of elders and the congregation. This will come later, as the Spirit of Christ instructs his people through the apostles teaching.⁶⁴

These factors caution us against importing our polity burdens into these passages, and invite us to place greater weight on other passages that speak far more directly to the

63. Kevin DeYoung, "Putting in a Good Word for Presbyterianism." <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/putting-in-a-good-word-for-presbyterianism/>

64. As one eminent New Testament scholar who is a Baptist acknowledges, "Jesus does not explain how we should air our grievances before the church; after all, he has not yet given any teaching on church structure." Craig L. Blomberg, *Matthew: New American Commentary* (Nashville; Broadman, 1992), 279.

question of rule and authority in the church.⁶⁵ However we interpret Matthew 18, we are obligated to account for the New Testament's teaching on specific church officers and their authority in governing the affairs of the church.⁶⁶

3. Various New Testament inferences.

There are certain passages that give final say to the entire congregation, according to Congregationalists. In Acts 6:2–6, when the Hellenists complained that their widows were being overlooked in the distribution of food, the leaders told

65. When the pastor-theologians who wrote the Westminster Confession of Faith took this approach, the clearer and more explicit passages influenced their understanding of the Matthew passages, and they concluded, "The Lord Jesus, as King and Head of His Church, hath therein appointed government, in the hand of Church officers, distinct from the civil magistrate. To these officers the keys of the kingdom of heaven are committed, by virtue whereof, they have power, respectively, to retain, and remit sins; to shut that kingdom against the impenitent, both by the Word, and censures; and to open it unto penitent sinners, by the ministry of the Gospel; and by absolution from censures, as occasion shall require." (Chapter 30, Westminster Confession of Faith).

66. John Owen makes this comment about Matthew 18: "This excommunication, as we have proved before, is an act of church authority exerted in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ: and if so, then it is the act of the officers of the church . . . for there is no authority in the church, properly so called, but what resides in the officers of it." In *The True Nature of a Gospel Church*, abr. and ed. John Huxtable (London: Camelot, 1947), 113. Cited by L. Roy Taylor in *Who Runs the Church?*, ed. Steven B. Cowan (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 166.

the community to select men for the job. It was the church members, not the leaders, who selected the seven men. The congregation is certainly involved in finding a solution, although it is sometimes overlooked that the entire process—the number of men to be picked, the work they will do, their appointment, and their commissioning (v. 6)—takes place under the governance of the leaders of the church.

In Galatians 1:3–10, the church as a whole was responsible for the removal of false teachers. As with many other New Testament letters, it is notable that the letter is not written to leaders but to the congregation as a whole. It has been observed that nowhere in Scripture do we have a letter written to a group of elders or a pastoral team. Paul expects them (every member) to have the theological discernment to recognize when a false gospel is preached. Therefore, Congregationalists conclude, the congregation has primary responsibility and final authority for guarding sound doctrine and opposing error.

In 1 Corinthians 5:12, the church is responsible to judge and take action in a matter of excommunication. Some have pointed out that the elders are not mentioned, and are not presented as being involved in the process in any way. In 1 Corinthians 6:5, the congregation as a whole is responsible for resolving disputes. In 1 Corinthians 11 and 14, the congregation as a whole is responsible for how they order the Lord's Supper and what happens in corporate worship.

These and other passages are presented as evidence for the authority of the assembled congregation. 2 Corinthians 2:6–7 is considered to provide precedent for voting, because Paul references the “majority.” It is implied that a minority opposed the decision, and that there was some way of knowing there

was a majority.

What do we say in response? Congregationalism is right to recognize that the entire congregation has responsibilities related to the appointment of leaders, the addition of new members, the practice of church discipline, the maintenance of sound doctrine, the removal of unfaithful pastors, and the ministry and witness of the church. Congregationalism is incorrect, however, in assigning ultimate earthly authority to the congregation in these matters. The church participates in many things, and in some matters their affirmation is crucial, but participation and affirmation does not imply governance.

It is difficult to imagine that Paul, who commands that elders be appointed in churches and that such elders are to rule and govern, would deny those elders a governing role in the situations mentioned above. Moreover, basing the principle of congregational rule on texts that do not mention elders makes a fundamental mistake: it draws inferences on polity structures from these texts and elevates them to a level of hermeneutical control, while marginalizing the very clear texts and explicit statements about elder governance. Are we to imagine that elders charged with governing authority are not to exercise that authority in circumstances of such critical import?⁶⁷

67. I am grateful for Jeff Purswell's insights here. At several places he gave input that improved the original manuscript, and this paragraph is one of those places.

THE STRENGTHS OF CONGREGATIONALISM

Elder-governed churches and other non-congregational forms of government should learn from the strengths of healthy congregational churches. We disagree with their polity, but there is still much to learn from their biblical insights and pastoral practices. Such strengths include the following:

- Congregationalism affirms that every Christian plays a crucial role in the health of the church.
- Congregationalism places a high value on the privileges and responsibilities of church membership.
- Congregationalism lends itself to congregations being involved and informed on important matters.
- Congregationalism recognizes the importance of members taking ownership of the church.
- Congregationalism appropriately expects and cultivates maturity among members.
- Congregationalism tends to promote a culture of delegation and discipleship.
- Congregationalism provides accountability for elders and guards against the abuse of pastoral authority.
- Congregationalism values the voice of each member of the church.
- Congregationalism avoids a consumer mentality and places the work of ministry in the hands of all believers.

The Sovereign Grace *Book of Church Order* includes the vital role of the congregation, and in this way seeks to reflect the strengths of Congregationalism. Section 4 on “The Role of

the Congregation” is introduced this way:

The congregation has an important role in the polity of Sovereign Grace Churches. A healthy church will enjoy robust communication, cooperation, interdependence, and respect among all its members, including elders, deacons, and other congregants. It is a noble biblical desire to ensure that all members of a church are properly exercising their gifts and contributing their voice to the life and decision-making of a church. However, accomplishing the goal of full biblical participation of the entire congregation does not mean that final governing authority must be handed over to the entire congregation (BCO 4).

The introduction is followed by four headings summarizing the role of the congregation in our churches: 1) *Congregational Equality*, which celebrates the prerogatives and liberties given to all who are in Christ; 2) *Congregational Solidarity*, which provides informative communication, seeks to win the congregation’s glad affirmation, and deploys members in their gifts; 3) *Congregational Responsibility*, which highlights the participation of the congregation in the life and mission of the church; and 4) *Congregational Submission*, which highlights God’s call to submit to godly authority and submit to the eldership as they lead according to Scripture.

To say that elder-governed churches teach that the congregation’s role is only and always to submit to the elders is a doubly-inaccurate caricature. “Only” defines their responsibilities far too narrowly and “always” fails to recognize the limits of elder authority.

THE WEAKNESSES OF CONGREGATIONALISM

There is no joy to be found in outlining the weaknesses of other polities, but it may serve Christians and churches in Sovereign Grace to understand what we see as the shortcomings of the congregational system.

1. Congregational-rule arrives as its position indirectly and by inference, whereas elder-rule is directly and explicitly taught in Scripture.

Though there are many commands and instructions given to the entire congregation in the New Testament, we search in vain for a single verse that directly commands the church as a whole to rule or oversee, that cautions them against the misuse of church power, or that plainly states (or even implies) the authority they have over elders. In fact, in relation to the eldership, the exact opposite is true: members are commanded to submit rather than rule, and the elders are commanded to exercise loving authority over them.

2. A congregational framework involves considerable complexity in the relationship between elder authority and congregational authority.

There is a complex distribution of authority in the congregational system. They say there is a sense in which the entire congregation submits to the elders, yet there is also a sense in which the elders submit to the entire congregation. This teaching tends to confuse the clear lines of authority Christ gave to the church, lacks simplicity and clarity, and runs contrary

to a biblical understanding of the unidirectional nature of authority and submission within a particular sphere. That the congregation and elders have differing types of authority is not confusing. That they each possess *governing* or *ruling* authority over each other in various ways is confusing.

3. A great weakness of Congregationalism is that it not only allows but insists that the highest governance in the church and the exercise of ecclesiastical authority be placed in the hands of the least experienced and least wise Christians in the church, thereby neglecting biblical requirements for this work.

In a congregational polity, the only requirement for governing, ruling, or overseeing the church of Christ at the highest level is that one be a member of the church. Indeed, all who join the church are required to have a share in its government and ruling. In this way, Congregationalism has a tendency—we could even say it is a commitment—to expand the influence of the most immature Christians.

In the congregational system, those brothers and sisters who are recent converts or who don't manage their own lives and households well are automatically and necessarily given responsibility for managing the church of God at the highest level. This indiscriminately makes everyone a ruler in the church, to the detriment of the church.

The New Testament, however, in direct contradiction to the congregational system, is emphatic in its insistence that such tasks only be given to qualified men with mature

character, wisdom, and the ability to teach. Scripture says that not many should become teachers, and gives criteria to ensure those who teach, lead, and govern are qualified to serve. The New Testament repeatedly assumes that not all Christians are qualified to govern and to guard sound doctrine. Otherwise, the biblical qualifications would be meaningless: evidently, some Christians are not yet “able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it” (Titus 1:9). That is why qualified elders are necessary.

To be clear, we certainly desire a doctrinally mature congregation. And we labor to that end. But the teaching of Scripture is that it is elders, not the congregation as a whole, who are the guardians of doctrine in the church and authoritative teachers of the truth. Congregationalism, however, in effect marginalizes and removes the explicit biblical requirement for those who govern and rule, by placing governance equally in the hands of all members. It places the highest standards of qualification upon those who do not possess the highest governing authority, and has no qualifications (beyond membership) for those who possess the highest governing authority. This is contrary to reason and to Scripture.

4. Congregationalism has a tendency to undermine the authority of elders and deprive pastors of the power to make decisions.

It does so simply by locating decision-making authority in the hands of the congregation. How can elders truly exercise authority, if the congregation they are leading has the final say in those matters? That is not how authority works. James

Who Governs the Church?

Bannerman writes,

An authority so conditioned and checked by the necessity of the consent of the parties over whom it is exercised, cannot, in the proper sense of the word, be authority at all. It is advice, or it is counsel, administered by one party to another; but it cannot be authoritative power, exercised by one party over another.⁶⁸

Similarly, Kevin DeYoung, after affirming that it is “everywhere in keeping with a biblical theology of eldership to have the elders of the church exercising the authority of the keys through preaching and discipline,” adds this: “In fact, it’s hard to imagine how the elders are to shepherd, govern, and protect as the New Testament commands if the final authority rests with the congregation and not with the officers who represent Christ in their midst.”⁶⁹

There is a tendency in some congregational churches to have the center of power or influence in the church be located in a group other than the elders—those with the most history in the church, or those who have invested the most in the church, or those who complain the most or are most persuasive. Consequently, these individuals, whether informally or formally as a Board, can functionally end up exerting more governing influence, leadership, and control over the direction of the church than the elders.

68. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ*, Volume 1, 239.

69. Kevin DeYoung, “Putting in a Good Word for Presbyterianism.” <https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/kevin-deyoung/putting-in-a-good-word-for-presbyterianism/>

At the same time, Congregationalism not only undermines elder-rule, it undermines God's design for the congregation's submission and followership. Congregationalists are correct to observe that in every church, the congregation will have their say—either with a vote, or with their funds and feet. They are wrong, however, to imply that every matter over which a congregant would vote with his or her feet is a matter in which that person should be given a governing vote. Such teaching has a tendency to deprive the church as a whole of the opportunity to grow in humility by cultivating a posture of joyful and informed submission to the rule of their leaders. In some cases, congregations are tempted toward micromanaging their pastors, which can rob pastors of joy and does not benefit the church.

5. Congregationalism is generally unworkable when its principles are consistently applied.

This is a practical consideration related to how Congregationalism actually functions. The entire congregation is often unable to make final decisions on matters of admitting members, ordaining elders, and exercising discipline in a manner that is meaningful and informed. That the congregation is necessarily involved in these things, we agree. That their opinions are to be weighed and their consent sought out, we agree. But to responsibly make final, governing decisions requires each member to be informed and involved to a degree that is unreasonable and unworkable in most churches. Practically speaking, in many congregational churches, the vote of the congregation in these matters is not based on their own

knowledge and involvement, but on the recommendation of elders.

6. Congregationalism sometimes overstates the positive practical impact of their system and the negative practical impact of all other systems.

Some arguments for congregational government say that all non-congregational polities automatically weaken Christians, deplete fellowship, undermine discipleship, teach members to be weak and complacent, and more. Proponents of Congregationalism have said that the non-congregational church and the congregational church are like two different exercise classes. In the congregational church, the instructor demonstrates the exercises and walks around the room observing and helping others as they exercise. But every noncongregational church, they say, is like an exercise class where the instructor is working out while everyone sits passively and watches in recliners, doing nothing!

I have heard Congregationalists say that in every form of church government other than Congregationalism, no training or equipping of the congregation occurs. In elder-governed churches, we are told, the congregation is taught to be complacent and is effectively “fired.” Of course, many thoughtful Congregationalists would never make such claims, but where such judgments exist, they are wildly inaccurate and fail to take into consideration how the gospel bears fruit in systems beyond one’s own.

The overwhelming majority of the ministry and work that all members do in congregational churches will also be done

by the members of a healthy elder-governed church. Our church covenants outlining the commitments of members will be virtually identical. The topics covered in our regular members meetings will be comparable. The range of ministry for which members are equipped will be similar.

Elder-governed churches do not “fire” congregants from any of the work God has called them to do, because the only work they restrict members from is that exercise of authority and governing leadership which is presented in Scripture as being given only to elders. All of the biblical work commanded of Christians throughout all of the New Testament epistles, and all of the commands of Christ in the gospels, remain the responsibility of all church members.

While some elder-governed churches might be congregationally passive and uninvolved, this is an unhealthy distortion of elder-governance. Advocates of elder-governance should not accuse healthy congregational churches of firing their pastors, and advocates of congregationalism should not accuse healthy elder-governed churches of firing their church members. There are much better ways to frame the disagreement.

HUMILITY AND CONVICTION

In sum, Congregationalism has its strengths. It is important for Sovereign Grace churches to seek to learn what we can from what congregational churches do well: congregational involvement, a culture of discipleship, every-member ministry, and more. We should also thank God for congregational churches that are healthy and gospel-centered.

At the same time, we should maintain clear convictions

that Congregationalism is not taught in Scripture, and that its shortcomings outweigh its strengths. Non-congregational polities that appropriately value the role of the congregation maintain the greatest strengths of Congregationalism, while avoiding an unbiblical arrangement that grants governing authority to all members and places the elders in submission to the congregation.

Priorities for Pastoral Teams

I joined Covenant Fellowship Church, in Glen Mills, Pennsylvania, as a pastoral intern in 2006. I was ordained and placed on the pastoral team in 2008. The majority of our elders have been there longer than me—some of them have been there much longer. For me, one of life's great joys is serving alongside a group of men who take seriously the call to lead and govern, and to do so in a denomination that cares for pastors, pastoral teams, and pastors' wives.

When we say that having elder-led and elder-governed churches is one of our shared values in Sovereign Grace Churches, we are referring to more than a polity position. We include in this value our desire to have biblical pastoral leadership, to care for pastors, to cultivate healthy pastoral teams, and to raise up future pastors. Churches can have a biblical polity while failing to have healthy pastoral leadership.

What contributes to healthy elder-governance? The following priorities will help pastoral teams lead well: 1) Watch your life and doctrine; 2) Embrace shared ministry;

3) Cultivate denominational distinctives; 4) Value congregational solidarity.

1. WATCH YOUR LIFE AND DOCTRINE

Our desire is for pastors in Sovereign Grace to be men of zeal for Christ and the gospel—men filled with the Holy Spirit and with joy, who know Christ as the greatest treasure of our souls. We are commanded to keep watch over the souls of those entrusted to our care, and to do so “with joy and not with groaning” (Heb. 13:17). The way to serve with joy is to remember the difference between what we deserve and what we have received, to have Christ himself be the source of our satisfaction, to cultivate a heart of thankfulness, and to be aware of God’s grace in the lives of those we serve.

Such pastors are gospel men. Their entire approach to life and ministry is controlled by the good news of a crucified, risen, and reigning Savior. Derek Tidball says, “The gospel determines everything about the pastor—his motives, authority, methods and character are all governed by the good news of Jesus Christ.”⁷⁰

Pastors lead by example. They are to be holy, hospitable, and helpers of the weak. They remember that those called to be pastors are marked by the character descriptions in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. They are interested not only in public ministry but in shepherding individual Christians. They can say with Paul, “You yourselves know how I lived among you” (Acts 20:18). And they follow the apostolic injunction, “The

70. Derek Tidball, *Skillful Shepherds: An Introduction to Pastoral Theology* (Leicester: Apollos, 1986), 120.

Lord's servant must not be quarrelsome but kind to everyone, able to teach, patiently enduring evil, correcting his opponents with gentleness" (2 Tim. 2:24–25).

Humility is a requirement for pastors. The humble leader will boast in his weakness, be quick to confess his sins, encourage others, learn from others (including critics), spread out the work, and thank God for churches beyond his own.

Because we take character seriously, the practice of meaningful accountability is non-negotiable. Such accountability is essential in light of the significant authority God has entrusted to elders. First, elders are accountable primarily to the Lord, to whom they will give an account. Second, elders are also accountable through ordination—the qualifications of Scripture and the process required by our *Book of Church Order*. Third, elders are accountable to each other in plurality. Our *Book of Church Order* explains,

Some of this accountability will be more structured, as elders ask about specific areas of obedience and speak into one another's lives. Accountability will also occur as elders serve together with a healthy awareness of each other's behavior, tendencies, and temptations, and relate to one another with an expectation of receiving input and observations from each other (BCO 2.7.3).

Fourth, every elder is accountable to the congregation, as members may bring observations and concerns. "Just as the man to be qualified as an elder must have a general openness to input, so must the elder remain open to the observations of those in the church." (BCO 2.7.4). This accountability to the

congregation also includes the ability members have to bring charges against an elder, in keeping with 1 Timothy 5:19 and section 17 of our BCO. Fifth and finally, elders are formally accountable within Sovereign Grace. “Regional Assemblies with their Judicial Review Committees and the Council of Elders, along with the Sovereign Grace Court of Appeal, provide accountability for the life and doctrine of elders in Sovereign Grace” (BCO 2.7.5).

Provisions such as these are not simply the mechanics of polity or organizational details, but they position us to honor important biblical principles regarding the elder, especially the integrity of his life and the soundness of his doctrine.

2. EMBRACE SHARED MINISTRY

New Testament churches were led by a plurality or team of pastors rather than a solo pastor. “Elder” repeatedly appears in the plural, even in churches that are not large or mature. In Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas “appointed elders in every church,” and Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders in every town (Titus 1:5). There were numerous pastors in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:12). Corinth was led by a plurality of elders (1:3). There was a plurality of elders in the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet. 5:1, 1:1), and there was a plurality of elders in the churches of the Diaspora (James 5:14). After Paul labored in Ephesus for nearly 3 years, he gathered a plurality of elders to say farewell (Acts 20:17, 28). In Philippians 1:1, Paul addresses the overseers. In each one of the churches Paul worked with, there was appointed a plurality of elders to lead and govern according to God’s Word.

Elders have equal governing authority and function as a plurality in leadership. In every church we observe in the New Testament, the leaders are all referred to by the same title and hold the same office. In addition, the qualifications for the office apply equally to each elder, further pointing to their equality. This is one reason that in Sovereign Grace, we do not make a distinction between pastors and elders—every pastor is an elder, and every elder is a pastor. Nor do we distinguish between ruling elders and teaching elders. While elders have differing gifts, every elder is called to the work of ruling and teaching. We do not refer to one elder as “*the* pastor” while others are “*a* pastor.” When pastors serve bi-vocationally—a sacrifice for which they are to be honored—we take care to not create an alternate ordination standard or a separate tier of pastor. We also avoid the practice of eldership terms, agreeing with John Murray that “being ordained to office for a limited period of time is without warrant from the New Testament, and is contrary to the implications of election and ordination.”⁷¹

The practical benefits of plural leadership are many. It spreads out the work of ministry. It allows the work to benefit from broader gifting and perspective. It promotes care and accountability. It guards against the misuse of authority, since there is no one man who stands above the rest, unaccountable, uncorrectable, uncontrollable, and unsubmitted to the elders. It provides a context for pastors to model gospel culture and Christian community for the church. It maximizes the strengths of each pastor. It increases joy, encouragement, and longevity in service.

71. John Murray, “Arguments Against Term Eldership,” *Collected Writings of John Murray, Volume 2* (Carlisle, PA: Banner of Truth, 1977), 351–356.

Phil Newton describes the protection afforded by plurality when he writes,

Leadership by a plurality of godly men who are accountable to one another reduces the temptation for one man to wield excessive authority or to use the church to satisfy his ego. Each man's weaknesses are complemented by the strengths of his fellow elders. Think of Paul's warning to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:17–38). Paul did not put one man on notice of the dangers awaiting their church, but a group of men. One man might cave in to the pressure of persecution. One man might fall prey to false teachers. One man might be overwhelmed by a variety of problems. In contrast, plural leadership increases the church's ability to stand firm regardless of impediments to the faith.⁷²

Here are a few additional points of counsel related to shared ministry:

Don't rush plurality.

There are ways for a church plant or a smaller church to honor the principle of plurality, even with a single pastor. While a sole pastor is not ideal, and there should always be the desire to establish plurality as soon as possible, this should never lead to being hasty to ordain additional elders. Such an approach tends to do more harm than good. This is reflected in our BCO: "While the precedent of plurality in the New Testament is important, it cannot be an excuse to overlook

72. Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church*, 52.

the requirements of the man who is to be an elder. A church will likely suffer more from unqualified elders than it will from having too few elders in office” (BCO 2.4).

Phil Newton wisely counsels, “The goal of a church should not be to establish plural eldership at any cost, but to elevate the standards of spiritual leadership in the church at any cost.”⁷³ The standards of eldership must not be minimized for the sake of plurality. Alexander Strauch is right when he writes, “A plurality of unqualified elders is of no benefit to the local church.”⁷⁴

Appoint a senior pastor.

Although the New Testament doesn’t contain examples of “senior pastors,” elderships will be strengthened and served by selecting a gifted preacher and leader from among themselves to serve as senior pastor or lead pastor. This pastor does not possess greater authority, nor does every decision of the elders go his way. Care should be used to ensure that this role promotes and does not undermine a true and healthy plurality.

The senior pastor is often responsible to lead the way in publicly ministering the Word of God to the people of God, and to provide leadership to the pastoral team. He works to make other pastors a success by encouraging them, honoring them, and deploying them in their gifts. He will often be involved in providing care and training for the eldership.

A senior pastor does not occupy a distinct office, and the role is not required by Scripture. However, our churches and

73. Ibid., 76.

74. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 83.

teams have historically benefited greatly from this practice. We believe it is “supported by the biblical principles underlying a first among equals and the wisdom of having such a role among the elders of a church” (BCO 2.6.1).⁷⁵

Cultivate healthy teams.

Affirming plural elder governance does not guarantee team health. Rather, healthy team dynamics must be intentionally pursued and maintained. Healthy teams bring great blessings and joy to pastors and congregations, while unhealthy teams are detrimental to the mission of the church. God’s design is for pastors to serve together in unity and with joy. Each pastor must take responsibility for the relational environment on the team. Sin and conflict are inevitable, unity is fragile, and love is not always easy.

God’s will for the relationships among pastors is this:

Put on then, as God’s chosen ones, holy and beloved, compassionate hearts, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience, bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the

75. There is a consistent biblical pattern of a primary leader among other leaders. This is seen with Moses in the Old Testament (Exod. 18:17–22; Num. 11:17), with Peter, James, and John in the ministry of Jesus (Mark 5:37; 9:2; 14:33), with Peter among the Twelve (Matt. 10:2–4; Mark 3:16–19; Luke 6:14–16) and in his prominent leadership role in Acts 1–12, and later with James (Acts 15:13–21; cf. Gal. 1:19; 2:9, 12). These examples are not necessarily normative, but they are suggestive. See Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 45–50.

Lord has forgiven you so you also must forgive. And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony (Col. 3:12–14).

Pastors must “walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:1–3).

To cultivate healthy teams, elderships should consider:⁷⁶

- What structures are in place to facilitate governing, mission, and relationships? Are there elders’ meetings, meetings for care and encouragement, and retreats?
- How are decisions made on the team? Are decisions made with the input of the entire eldership, in an atmosphere of grace, patience, and humility? Are all opinions welcomed? How are disagreements worked through?
- Is the culture on the team marked by relational harmony, mutual encouragement, and the appreciation of the gifts, calling, and ministry aspirations of each team member? Do we enjoy each other?
- Are there any relational tensions or conflicts on the team? Are conflicts dealt with honestly, humbly, and thoroughly? Are there any unresolved conflicts or offenses? Is there unity in theology and philosophy of ministry?

76. The following questions are drawn from the Sovereign Grace Team Health Evaluation, a tool that elderships are encouraged to walk through with help from a Regional Leader or other outside counselor.

Who Governs the Church?

Alexander Strauch writes,

“When it functions properly, shared leadership requires a greater exercise of humble servanthood than does unitary leadership. In order for an eldership to operate effectively, the elders must show mutual regard for one another, submit themselves one to another, patiently wait upon one another, genuinely consider one another’s interests and perspectives, and defer to one another. Eldership, then, enhances brotherly love, humility, mutuality, patience, and loving interdependence—qualities that are to mark the servant church.”⁷⁷

Care for pastors wives.

The wives of pastors play a vital role in the health of the church. Every pastoral team should consider what it looks like to care for and encourage them. In Sovereign Grace, our annual Pastors and Wives Conference has proven to be a context that refreshes and envisions our wives in the sacrifices they make, and reminds them that their labors are not in vain.

Delegate to deacons.

Deacons occupy a non-governing role of service to meet the practical needs of the church in support of its mission. Deacons should have a high profile in the church—not just servant-hearted people, but serious gifts of organization, large-scale service, and capacity that has great impact. In Sovereign Grace,

77. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 114.

some churches reserve this role for men only, while other churches have both men and women serving as deacons. Both positions are welcome.⁷⁸

Raise up future pastors.

Our convictions about shared ministry compel us to identify and train future pastors. 2 Timothy 2:2 says, “What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also.” Pastors and churches should have a posture that desires to see others develop their gifts, entrusted with pastoral responsibility, and mobilized in mission.

3. CULTIVATE DENOMINATIONAL DISTINCTIVES

Each denomination has its own beliefs and values that help unite the churches in their shared mission. Elders in each church should model and lead their church into a love for partnering with other churches. This includes valuing our shared history, thanking God for extra-local workers, praying for other churches, giving generously to the mission, and celebrating God’s activity throughout the denomination.

A passion for partnership is best expressed within the context of a love and appreciation for the broader body of Christ in other denominations, networks, churches, and ministries. The one bride of Christ in the world today is much larger

78. See BCO 3.2.9, “Women and the Diaconate.” Churches with and without female deacons must both ensure that biblical principles concerning the appropriate roles of men and women are taken into account, and that the principles of 1 Timothy 2:12 are not violated.

than any one denomination. What makes our churches Christian is more important than other denominational distinctives. These reminders will help us avoid a proud sectarianism that falls into thinking our own denomination is superior to others.

And yet, within this broader kingdom-mindedness, it is good for Christians and churches everywhere to be a part of something they love—whether that is Sovereign Grace or another union of churches. Our desire is not for everyone to love Sovereign Grace as much as we do, but for everyone to value partnership where God has placed them.

Here are a few ways churches in Sovereign Grace can cultivate some of the doctrines and values we hold dear.

Celebrate the doctrines in our *Statement of Faith*.

Sovereign Grace is a confessional family of churches. This means pastors are accountable to the doctrines in our *Statement of Faith*. We want our churches to be nurtured on sound doctrine and protected against false teaching.

Our *Statement of Faith* reinforces the identity of the church as a pillar and buttress of truth, guards against wrong ideas, produces praise, and unites us around what's most important. Carl Trueman writes,

Creeds and confessions focus the church's mind on the main thing. . . . The church with a creed or confession has a built-in gospel reality check. It is unlikely to become side-tracked by the peripheral issues of the passing moment; rather it will focus instead on the great theological

categories that touch on matters of eternal significance.⁷⁹

Yes, we are focusing on the great theological truths of the faith. We are focusing on God and his character and his Word, creation, the person and work of Christ, redemption and salvation, the church, the hope of Christ's return and the consummation. And as we do this, it promotes harmony and unity in our churches—it reminds us that we are of one accord and of the same mind because we hold these truths in common. And every time we read these truths or declare them together in our church gatherings, it demonstrates our unity and calls us away from the periphery and back to the center.

We want our *Statement of Faith* to shape our churches, to educate and inspire. We must not allow the great doctrines of Scripture to become peripheral in our hearts or in our lives. We want our churches to be full of theologically mature believers, valuing Bible doctrine for the purposes of doxology (the praise-filled response of the heart) and devotion (the practical godliness in our lives).

Give attention to our 7 Shared Values.

Everyone in Sovereign Grace Churches should be aware of our 7 Shared Values, and seek to maintain these values in the church.

79. Carl R. Trueman, *The Creedal Imperative* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 167–168.

Who Governs the Church?

- *Reformed Theology*. Does the church have a joy-filled knowledge of the triune God and his sovereignty in salvation and over all things? Does this belief produce humility, gratitude, worship, and evangelism?
- *Gospel-Centered Doctrine and Preaching*. Does the gospel enjoy functional centrality in the life of the church and the hearts of members? Are gatherings marked by singing the gospel and preaching the gospel?
- *Continuationist Pneumatology*. Is there a passion for God's empowering presence and a pursuit and practice of the gifts of the Spirit? Is the full range of spiritual gifts practiced in the church?
- *Complementarian Leadership in the Home and in the Church*. Does the church have strong convictions about the complementary roles of men and women? Are these differences celebrated and do they inform the home and the church?
- *Elder-Governed and Elder-Led Churches*. Are there biblical convictions about the role of pastors and the congregation? Does the church understand and embrace God's plan for elder-governance? Is the leadership of the church healthy?
- *Church Planting, Outreach, and Global Mission*. Is there a culture of evangelism in the church? Does the church have a commitment to church planting and mission both locally and throughout the world?
- *United in Fellowship, Mission, and Governance*. Does the church function interdependently with other churches, moving toward partnership in the gospel? Does the church have biblical convictions about the importance of cooperation among churches?

Cultivate gospel culture through our Shaping Virtues.

The gospel of Jesus Christ creates a particular kind of culture. Churches that have been deeply shaped by the grace of God will prioritize and pursue those qualities that are the fruit of the gospel. In Sovereign Grace, we call these Shaping Virtues. They are: Humility, Joy, Gratitude, Encouragement, Generosity, Servanthood, and Godliness. Keeping these virtues in front of us inspires us to ensure that we are applying the gospel to our lives and experiencing the fruit it is intended to produce.

The practice of these virtues begins with pastors and pastoral teams. They should be evident in private living and in public ministry. Relationships between pastors and the congregation, as well as all relationships in the church, should reflect these qualities. These qualities also inform how we relate to other churches in Sovereign Grace, and how we relate to Christians, churches, and ministries outside of Sovereign Grace. This happens as we posture ourselves in humility to learn from others, express gratitude for God's activity in various denominations, encourage others, and give generously to support ministry and mission across denominational lines.

Value interdependent governance.

It is a Shared Value of Sovereign Grace, distinct from the shared value of elder-governed churches, that our churches are united in fellowship, mission, and governance. While each Sovereign Grace church is independently governed by its own eldership, there are some carefully delineated aspects of shared governance among our churches, in matters of doctrine,

ordination, discipline, and mission. This is to reflect the interdependence of churches we see in the New Testament, and serves to promote doctrinal fidelity, mutual accountability, and cooperative ministry.

Our Regional Assemblies of Elders are similar to regional presbyteries, and our Council of Elders similar to a General Assembly. However, we do not believe that governing authority has been given immediately from Christ to a multi-church entity. Governing authority is given immediately by Christ to local elders, and flows outward to representative committees consisting of men who are appointed by local elderships.⁸⁰

80. Among the various forms of Presbyterianism, this is most similar to the connectional views of Bannerman, Berkhof, and Hodge. Berkhof writes, "The power of the church resides primarily in the governing body of the local church. It is one of the fundamental principles of Reformed or Presbyterian government, that the power or authority of the Church does not reside first of all in the most general assembly of any Church, and is only secondarily and by derivation from this assembly, vested in the governing body of the local Church; but that it has its original seat in the consistory or session of the local Church, and is by this transferred to the major assemblies, such as classes (presbyteries) and synods or general assemblies. Thus the Reformed system honors the autonomy of the local church, though it always regards this as subject to the limitations that may be put upon it as the result of its association with other churches in one denomination, and assures it the fullest right to govern its own internal affairs by means of its officers. At the same time it also maintains the right and duty of the local church to unite with other similar churches on a common confessional basis, and form a wider organization for doctrinal, judicial, and administrative purposes, with proper stipulations of mutual obligations and rights. Such a wider organization undoubtedly im-

The connections among our churches are not primarily governmental, but familial and missional. What we experience in Sovereign Grace is a family of like-minded pastors and churches who love the Lord, enjoy rich relationships, and realize we can accomplish far more together than we can on our own.

4. VALUE CONGREGATIONAL SOLIDARITY

It is possible for elder-governed churches to unhelpfully minimize the vital role of the congregation, or to neglect the importance of a healthy relationship between pastors and the rest of the church. When I talk about congregational solidarity, I am referring to a cohesiveness, unity, agreement in action, a sense of common responsibilities and shared mission between the pastors and the rest of the congregation. God's will is for pastors and all members to be "standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving side by side for the faith of the gospel" (Phil. 1:27).

Here are some ways pastors can pursue this solidarity in the church:

Love and pray for those you serve.

A study of the apostle Paul's pastoral heart reveals the passion for people that ought to mark true gospel ministry. In

poses certain limitations on the autonomy of the local churches, but also promotes the growth and welfare of the churches, guarantees the rights of the members of the Church, and serves to give fuller expression to the unity of the Church." Louis Berkhof, *Systematic Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1996), 584.

Philippians 1:3, Paul says, "I thank my God in all my remembrance of you." And in Philippians 1:7–8, "It is right for me to feel this way about you all, because I hold you in my heart, for you are all partakers with me of grace . . . For God is my witness, how I yearn for you all with the affection of Christ Jesus."

In 1 Thessalonians 2:8, Paul says, "So, being affectionately desirous of you, we were ready to share with you not only the gospel of God but also our own selves, because you had become very dear to us." And in 1 Thessalonians 3:9, "For what thanksgiving can we return to God for you, for all the joy that we feel for your sake before our God?"

It is also evident from Paul's ministry that he frequently prays for those he serves. We are to be devoted to the ministry of the Word and prayer. And our prayers, like Paul's, are to focus on people. Paul writes, "We give thanks to God always for all of you, constantly mentioning you in our prayers, remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ" (1 Thess. 1:2–3). "May the Lord make you increase and abound in love for one another and for all, as we do for you, so that he may establish your hearts blameless in holiness before our God and Father, at the coming of our Lord Jesus with all his saints" (1 Thess. 3:12–13).

Such genuine affection and consistent prayer for individuals in the church will greatly deepen the bonds of unity and contribute to a sense of solidarity.

Teach the vital role and responsibilities of every member.

At our church, as in many other churches, we have a Membership Covenant that summarizes how we seek to carry out our responsibilities as members. A healthy church member is not passive, but active, and takes responsibility for the health of the church.

The biblical job description of every member includes:

- *Attends regularly.* Hebrews 10:24–25, “And let us consider how to stir up one another to love and good works, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near.”
- *Walks in love.* John 13:34, “A new commandment I give to you, that you love one another: just as I have loved you, you also are to love one another.”
- *Maintains unity.* Ephesians 4:1–3, “Walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace.”
- *Serves others.* 1 Peter 4:10, “As each has received a gift, use it to serve one another, as good stewards of God’s varied grace.”
- *Follows humbly.* 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.”

Who Governs the Church?

- *Pursues community.* Romans 12:10, 13, 15, “Love one another with brotherly affection. Outdo one another in showing honor. . . . Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality. . . . Rejoice with those who rejoice, weep with those who weep.”
- *Gives generously.* 2 Corinthians 8:2, “For in a severe test of affliction, their abundance of joy and their extreme poverty have overflowed in a wealth of generosity on their part.”
- *Prays faithfully.* Acts 1:14, “All of these with one accord were devoting themselves to prayer.”

Involve the congregation in decision making.

In healthy churches, church members participate in welcoming new members and the excommunication of unfaithful members. They bear responsibility to reject false teaching and ensure the fidelity of their leaders. Our Sovereign Grace *Book of Church Order* says the roles and responsibilities of the congregation may be worked out in Sovereign Grace churches by the following pursuits:

- Seeking input from the congregation for any pastoral candidate for ordination.
- Seeking input from the congregation for any deacon candidate for installation.
- Creating a church environment where there are vital relationships, active discussion, and cooperation between the elders and the whole church with a clear, comprehensive, and welcoming feedback system.

- Providing regular forums of communication and interaction as appropriate.
- Establishing and training the church in the use of the channels for feedback and redress outlined by local church policy and by the policy and procedures of the Sovereign Grace *Book of Church Order*.
- Utilizing a formal and public affirmation process for key church decisions such as installing elders and deacons, approving an annual budget, making major changes in church by-laws, implementing major changes in church ministries, enforcing church discipline, and accepting church members. Such affirmation is permissible as long it is not technically binding (see BCO 5), and it does not nullify the authority of the elders to govern the church nor contradict this *Book of Church Order*.

The way this is done will vary based on context, church culture, and church size. But the principle is to meaningfully involve the congregation in important decisions. Regular members' meetings are one helpful way to ensure regular and open communication, and to invite input. We often end members' meetings by saying that if anyone has any questions or input on the items we presented, we would love to hear from them. On some items, we explain that their input is essential.

In a healthy church, as in a healthy marriage, authority will rarely, if ever, be exercised without the concurrence of the submitting party. James Bannerman writes, "Those in office are bound to give all due weight to the opinions of the

membership.”⁸¹

J. W. Marriott Jr., known as Bill, was the founder and chairman of Marriott International. When he was a young man, he came home from school for Christmas, to the family farm in Virginia. His Dad’s best friend at the time was the U. S. Secretary of Agriculture. They invited President Eisenhower over to shoot some quail. However, the weather was miserable—it was cold and windy. Bill’s Dad said, “Should we go and shoot quail or should we stand by the fire?” Eisenhower turned around and looked at Bill and said, “What do you think we should do?” The lesson Bill learned that day, which would shape his leadership for the rest of his life, is the value of including others in decisions, asking others what they think, listening well, and giving weight to the opinions of others.⁸²

This doesn’t mean we always do what others advise. But it does mean we give weight to it. For example: it is difficult for me to imagine a scenario in which the eldership and church I am a part of would proceed with ordaining and installing a new elder if 10% or even 5% of the congregation opposed it. It’s not that we have a policy against it. But that would be a much larger group disapproving of an elder candidate than we have ever known. And even if we eventually ordained that man, recognizing this level of disapproval provides an important opportunity to gain others’ perspectives, learn new information, and, where appropriate, address concerns

81. Bannerman, *The Church of Christ, Volume 1*, 242.

82. Adam Bryant, “What Eisenhower Taught Me About Decision-Making,” *The New York Times*, May 25, 2013. <https://www.nytimes.com/2013/05/26/business/bill-marriott-jr-on-inclusive-decision-making.html>

with wisdom and clarity. This is just one example of how a congregationally-sensitive elder-ruled church gives weight to the concerns of the congregation and greatly values their affirmation.

Alexander Strauch writes,

When issues are brought to the congregation, the elders, as Spirit-placed shepherds, take the lead in guiding the congregation in orderly and prayerful decision making. As the congregation looks to its elders for wise leadership, the elders also look to the congregation—their brothers and sisters—for wisdom, counsel, inspiration, creative ideas, help, and prayer. Elders who understand the sacred nature and dynamic energy of the Spirit-empowered congregation know the necessity of congregational participation in all major decisions.

The goal of the elders and congregation should always be to speak and act as a united community. Both the leaders and the led should take the time and make the effort needed to work and pray together to achieve this oneness of mind. This means that the elders must inoculate themselves against aloofness, secrecy, or independently seeking their own direction. Godly elders desire to involve every member of the body in the joy of living together as the family of God. This requires a great deal of free and open communication between the elders and the congregation.”⁸³

83. Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 294.

Mobilize the congregation for ministry.

Ephesians 4:11–13 says that Christ gave shepherds (and others) to the church

... 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 and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ . . .

Here is a vision of every-member ministry and a culture of discipleship and active membership, which God has ordained as the means of maturing the church.

Pastors alone cannot carry out the work of ministry. Rather, the church grows and matures as pastors equip, delegate, and spread out the work of ministry. In this way, pastors are dependent upon the gifts of the congregation for the thriving of the church. D. A. Carson and John Woodbridge urge pastors to rely on the congregation in ministry:

When laypeople are taught that they are spiritual priests and understand their duties and opportunities, then the burdens and joys of the local church are shared more equitably and the church prospers. When laypeople are taught that they have spiritual gifts to exercise in the church, then they begin to realize how important their own contributions are to the ongoing work of Christ. Brother, your laypeople can do things you can never do. Many of them have spiritual gifts different from your own.

The spiritual health of the church depends on laypeople working together with you in a common ministry.⁸⁴

This is very well said. And when the church is mobilized in a common ministry, it contributes greatly to the unity and solidarity of the church, and positions pastors and the entire church to labor together for the glory of Christ and the advance of the gospel.

84. <https://www.crossway.org/articles/dear-pastor-re-ly-on-your-congregation-in-ministry>

Who Governs the Church?

Let Them Govern with Joy

Christ in his kindness has given his people a model of governance that he intends to endure until he returns. The New Testament teaches that local churches are to be elder-governed, diaconally-served, congregationally-engaged, and ecclesiastically-connected. However, it's not enough to have a biblical polity position on paper. Healthy churches are the result of pastors and members working together to faithfully live out their God-given roles.

It's important to remember that God's good design in appointing elders to rule is for the flourishing of the entire church. Pastors are called to lead for the benefit and advantage of the flock. Hebrews 13:17 says, "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."

Who Governs the Church?

In that verse, there is a word to pastors and a word to congregations.

A WORD TO PASTORS

Brothers, govern with joy and not with groaning. As you shepherd the flock, as you keep watch over the souls that have been temporarily entrusted to your care, as you preach and lead, as you make governing decisions—do it all with joy. Rejoice to have so great a chief Shepherd in Christ, rejoice in the many ways God is at work in the flock, rejoice that God has called you to this work, and rejoice that your name is written in heaven. Labor in the gladness and hope of knowing that “when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory” (1 Pet. 5:4).

A WORD TO THE WHOLE CONGREGATION

Remember that your role is vital to the health and mission of the church. Take seriously the full range of responsibilities you have as a church member to love and serve the church. In particular, seek to make your pastor’s work a joy, knowing this is ultimately to your advantage. That is the teaching of Hebrews 13:17. Churches are blessed when they experience joyful elder-rule, and members of the congregation serve the mission of the church when they cultivate happy pastors.

So, love your pastors just as they love you. Pray for your pastors and for the church, just as they pray for you. Follow your pastors and do what you can to add to their joy, just as they labor for your joy. God promises that this will be to your advantage. As pastors and congregations faithfully, humbly,

and gladly labor together for the gospel, the purposes of Christ for his church are fulfilled. May God continue to equip our churches to that end, for his glory alone.

*Now may the God of peace
who brought again from the dead our Lord Jesus,
the great shepherd of the sheep,
by the blood of the eternal covenant,
equip you with everything good
that you may do his will,
working in us that
which is pleasing in his sight,
through Jesus Christ,
to whom be glory forever and ever.
Amen.*

Hebrews 13:20–21



We plant and strengthen
CHURCHES
for the glory of God.

Sovereign Grace Churches is a confessional community of congregations, united in theology, fellowship, and mission. We treasure the sovereign grace of God in Christ, and we are committed to gospel-centered doctrine, preaching, and living.

Our fellowship extends beyond mere denominational affiliation, to relationships that foster mutual encouragement, care, and a glad pursuit of Christlikeness.

We are continuationist in our pursuit of the Spirit and spiritual gifts, complementarian in convictions on gender, and elder-governed in our polity, with some carefully delineated areas of shared governance. Our passion is to see churches planted and nurtured throughout the world.

To learn more about our churches, including our *Statement of Faith* and how to join us, visit sovereigngrace.com.



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At the Pastors College, students learn how to build their lives, families, and churches upon the gospel of Jesus Christ. This gospel produces a particular kind of pastor—joyful, grateful, servant-hearted shepherds who faithfully lead and care for “the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood” (Acts 20:28).

To learn more, visit us at sgcpastorscollege.com.



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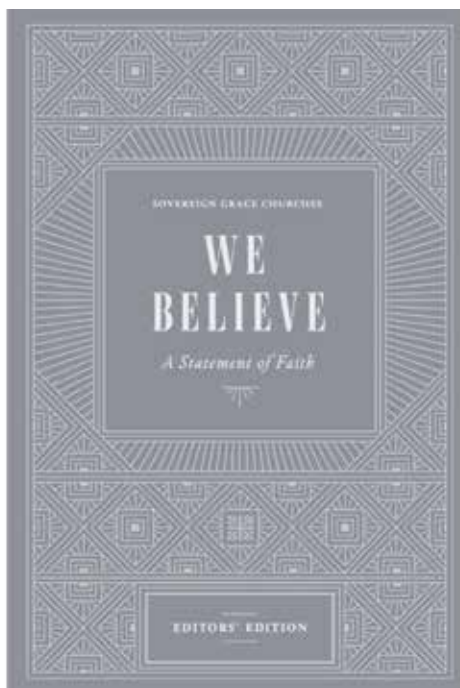
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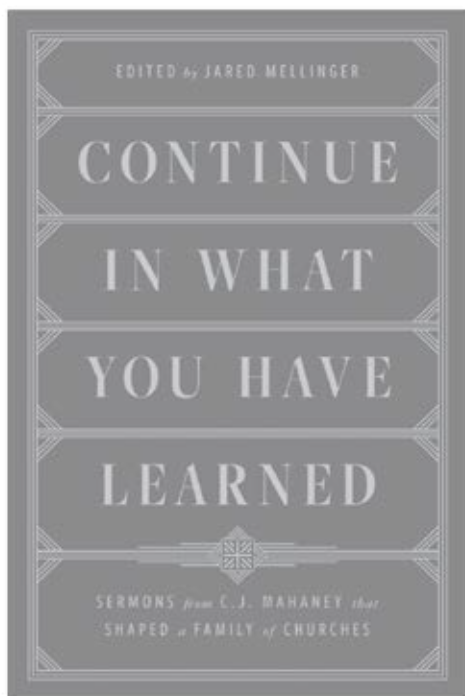
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