

Ask: **Who runs the church?** (Eph. 1:22-23, *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.* Christ! All authority is Christ's, and he delegates authority to different spheres of people. For instance, an elder's authority is delegated from Christ and not inherent to the person, and the person does not own the office).

But to whom does he delegate authority to 'run' his church? How many of you lost sleep last night, or any night, over this question? Many Christians hardly ever concern themselves with this question. Or, they assume the pastors run everything. However, God gives us instruction in his Word concerning church, and we glorify him by following his instructions and trusting in his wisdom and power. And God makes us all responsible for the growth and health of our local church: God gave the church leaders to:

***Equip the saints** for the work of ministry, for **building up the body** of Christ, ¹³ until we all attain to the **unity of the faith** and of the **knowledge** of the Son of God...
¹⁵ Rather, **speaking the truth in love**, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, joined and held together **by every joint with which it is equipped**, when **each part** is working properly, makes the body grow so that it **builds itself up in love**" (Eph. 4:12-16).*

Church governance is integral to attaining unity, increasing knowledge, and growing in love. It is kind of like the plumbing in your house. You know it's critically important but don't notice or consider it much until something goes wrong. Church governance is the system by which authority is assigned, and decisions are made in the church. It answers, "Who in the church has the authority to do what?"

We will briefly look at the two church offices given in Scripture, elders and deacons. Then, we'll think about the congregation's authority in matters of doctrine and discipline. Under each, we will briefly list how church governance promotes unity, knowledge, and love. The more

we know how to govern God's church, the better we can all engage in faithful ministry, promote unity, increase in the knowledge of God, and build this congregation up in love.

1st. Scriptural Offices.

We will begin with the office of the **elder**. The term **elder** (*presbuteros*) is used interchangeably with **overseer or bishop** (*episkopous*) and **pastor** (*poimenas*). Let me show a few examples of how the Bible uses these terms interchangeably. Turn to Acts 20.

In Acts 20:17, “Now from Miletus [the apostle Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the **elders** (*presbuteros*) of the church to come to him.” In Acts 20:28, Paul tells the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** (*Episkopous*), **to care** (*Poimaino*; pastor or shepherd) for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” The elders are leaders who oversee (bishop) and pastor the church and meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9.

Now turn to 1 Peter 5. Peter exhorts the elders, “So I exhort the **elders** (*presbuteros*) 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: ² **shepherd** (*Poimenas*) the flock of God that is among you, exercising **oversight** (*Episkopous*)...” The biblical terms “elder,” “pastor,” and “overseer” are understood to refer to the same biblical office.

God charges elders with the spiritual oversight of the church. We learn from the book of Acts that elders should primarily devote themselves to prayer and the ministry of the Word (Ac. 6:4). The Bible requires that every elder have the ability to teach (1 Tm. 3:2), and that means he has the ability “to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict

it” (Titus 1:9). Note that an elder’s authority is wholly tied to the Biblical faithfulness of his teaching, not exclusively to his title. Those who abuse their authority of office by propagating false teaching or using Scripture or doctrine as weapons to control people disqualify themselves, and the congregation should remove them from office.

Paul says to Timothy, “*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching*” (1 Tm. 5:17) . All elders lead. But it is desirable that at least one elder, exceptionally gifted in teaching and leadership, devote himself to the full-time to the work of ministry.

In our church, the elders nominate elder candidates. The elders seek recommendations and involvement from the membership, and members are free to suggest names of members they consider to be potential officers. The elders nominate, but only the congregation can elect or remove them from office by a majority vote.

In the church, only qualified men may serve in the office and function of a pastor.

Paul says to Timothy in 1 Timothy 2:11-13, “*Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman to teach or to exercise authority over a man; rather, she is to remain quiet. For Adam was formed first, then Eve.*” Paul writes to Timothy to instruct the church how they must order themselves when they assemble (1 Tm. 2:8; 3:15). Paul is not sharing his opinion here or giving a temporary injunction. He self-consciously exercises his authority as an apostle in giving this prohibition.¹

¹ ‘Permit’ is the same word as ‘urge’ in Rom. 12:1; it is binding for all times and cultures.

He prohibits women from (1) publicly teaching Scripture in the church's official gatherings (function), and he prohibits (2) women from exercising authority over men in the church (role of elder). Women teaching other women and children are not in view here but encouraged elsewhere.²

Observe the parallels between v. 11 and 12. Women must learn **(1) quietly** and **(2) with full submission**. These two descriptions of learning correspond respectively to his prohibition: (1) women are not to teach men, nor (2) have authority over a man. He wants women to be “quiet” concerning the teaching in the gathered church and pastoral responsibility.

Paul bases the command on the creation design (2:13) and the design's distortion (2:14). God created man first and gave him authority while creating her as a helper (2:13). The woman's deception and the man's failure to teach and exercise authority toward his wife and the serpent distorted God's good order. Eve's deception does not represent a woman's gullibility; it represents rebellion against the created order. Eve took the initiative in authority and applied the Word of God over the man. Adam stood by and allowed it, rebelling against God. **Paul sees this as support for restricting some distinct governing and teaching roles in the church to men. God created Adam first; his purpose reflects an abiding distinction in the roles (not value) between men and women.**³

² The verb Paul used for “*Exercise authority*” is found only here in the NT. But over 80 examples of this word outside the NT in the same timeframe establish the meaning of “exercise authority” (not “abuse authority”).

³ Women must be taught, and they must teach. Jesus commissions men and women alike in Matt 28:18-20. This commission involves being taught and teaching. Women can evangelize anyone. It is a pastoral responsibility to teach women how to teach others (Titus 2:1). These mature women then, in turn, teach other women (Titus 2:3). Sometimes, reformed people have a narrow understanding of “teaching” and the “ministry of the Word.” But there are scores of ways women teach: older women teach to younger women (Titus 2:3-4), women disciple one another, they counsel — professionally and informally — and they disciple children (2 Tim. 1:5; 3:14). Women seemed to pray and prophesy in public assemblies (which is not the same as the preaching teaching of 1Tim 2; Cor. 11:5; 14:31), Priscilla partnered with her husband in the personal discipleship of Apollos (Acts 18:26), women participate

The Scriptures teach that, ordinarily, there should be a plurality of pastors in each local church (Ac.14:23; Ac. 20:17; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5; plural nouns). Therefore, the church endeavors to elect a plurality of qualified, and the Bible does not specify or fix the number of pastors a church must have or their length of term. Elders make decisions collectively rather than by a single bishop, and plurality means the elders must have humility. Also, a plurality of elders enables the leadership to know, lead, protect, and feed the congregation better.

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.”* **God holds elders responsible for caring for and preparing the church for works of service. God calls his sheep “obey” their leaders and “submit to their authority” when they rightly explain the Word of God and apply it in specific circumstances. They should generally trust Biblically qualified elders to recommend a course of action — when the course of action does not contradict the Bible.**

However, elders must humbly exercise their authority consistent with God’s aims and the good of the congregation. God does not give elders the right or power to discipline. They have the authority to teach, rebuke, warn, correct, train, and encourage. But elders have no external enforcement mechanism to compel obedience (unlike the state with the power of “the sword”; parents with the power of “the rod”; church with the power of “the keys”). Their authority is tied

in responsive readings in corporate worship, and women edify the entire congregation when we sing together (Col. 3:16). Women can admonish and edify men in conversation, as can wives with their husbands. Women can publicly testify to the work of God (hence, the announcements, reports, and updates women give about various ministries during prayer meetings). Women engage in the “one another’s” of Scripture. Women can lead specific ministries. Women preach to women. Moreover, there are numerous venues and special events where women can utilize their teaching gifts outside the assembled church where Christian men are present. e.g., seminars, podcasts, books, etc. Though they have distinct roles, women are of equal value to men, and women significantly contribute to the health and growth of the church.

to the gospel and God's Word. They seek to compel action by teaching the Word and trusting the Spirit to change internal desires.

Moreover, they publicly recommend courses of action to the congregation in vision, membership, cases of discipline, etc. So, they have the authority to teach God's Word, and members have a moral obligation to obey their leaders that lead and teach according to God's Word. God will one day hold both leader members accountable.

Elders promote unity by setting a positive example of Christian character and teaching a common Biblical standard to the whole church. These instruct the church in doctrine and prepare the church for works of love so that we can all reach unity in the faith.

The second church office outlined in Scripture is the **office of deacon**. The word 'deacon' (*διάκονος*) means 'servant,' or more literally, "*one who assists or gets something done at the behest of a superior.*"⁴ They are primarily responsible for organizing the church's benevolence ministry and may also administer the ordinary business of the church. A deacon is a servant who safeguards the unity of the church and supports the ministry of the Word. The Bible neither specifies nor fixes the number of deacons nor the length of their term of service.

First, the apostles created the office of deacon to heal and prevent division. The church increased in number, and by Acts 6:1, a conflict arose concerning the practical neglect of Greek widows. The threat to the church's unity was a threat to their witness to the gospel. The deepest challenge for the church was not the distribution of food but the threat of disunity. The

⁴ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 230.

apostles create the office of deacon *because* serving tables is so important. They assist church members with practical needs. **Deacons display Christian love and protect the unity of the church by caring for all the members of the church.**

Second, the compassionate care of deacons enables the elders to devote themselves to the ministries of the Word and prayer. They support the ministry of the Word by handling the church's day-to-day operations.⁵ Deacons are not teachers, primarily, nor do they have ruling authority like elders. **Deacons serve under the oversight of the eldership and enable the elders to focus on instructing the congregation in the knowledge of the Son of God.**

But Deacons must have exemplary character. They are humble examples of godly character and service for the church (see 1 Timothy 3:8-13). They must be dignified and examples of self-control and proven service. **Let us imitate them as they imitate Christ, that we may have a church full of character-qualified deacons who serve with or without the title.**

Elders and deacons are the only two church offices outlined in Scripture. But what about the congregation? Do they have any authority?

2nd. Congregational Authority.

The Bible grants the congregation the ‘final say’ on matters of discipline and doctrine. The Bible highlights four areas of congregational authority. **First, Matthew 18:15-20 teaches us that the church is the final court of appeals in matters of discipline and membership.** In Matthew 18:17, the offense of an unrepentant, sinning brother rises from a personal grievance to

⁵ They handle logistical affairs, budget reports, policies, and emergency protocols, our facility, and many other tasks.

a concern of the whole church. The witnesses of 18:15-16 are to tell the matter “*to the church*” (18:17b). The church must gather, hear the matter, and determine whether to endorse the charge.

The witnesses establish the charge, but the church renders the verdict.

Similarly, 1 Corinthians 5:4 appeals to the congregations’ authority in matters of membership and discipline. Paul says, “*When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus, and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh.*” The church must assemble (‘*assembled*’), formally as the gathered church (‘*in the name of the Lord Jesus*’), and the whole church acts ‘*with the power of our Lord Jesus.*’ *Any act of excommunication must be executed by the gathered church.*

Also, in 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, Paul urges the whole church to re-admit a repentant person previously expelled from the church at Corinth. Here, the church restores repentant brothers and sisters by a vote. *Moreover, Those seeking membership share their testimony with our congregation, and our members vote to receive them or not. Their vote results in the affirmation of baptism (if required) and the nominee’s immediate reception into membership.*

The congregation admits and excommunicates its members and has the final say in matters of membership and discipline. The membership must take an interest in the health of the body. Individual members should care about one another’s physical and spiritual health. This care is an expression of John 13:34-35 love and promotes unity. So, the congregation also protects the church against unrestrained sin and a member who is in unrepentant sin. The congregation is called to safeguard the church’s witness to the gospel. The membership, by its careful selection of leaders, ensures the church preserves the gospel itself.

Therefore, second, the church has authority in matters of doctrine. Church expresses this authority primarily by electing or removing its official leaders who formally teach. Paul says

in Titus 1:5, “*This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.*” Paul compresses the leadership installation process by alluding only to the end result (‘appointment’). He abbreviated the steps that lead to formal recognition of church leadership, steps which are delineated in Acts 6, this verb’s only other occurrence (*keirotonia* – *χειροτονία*).

In Acts 6:3, the apostles list characteristics and qualifications for whom they will appoint to this duty and put the seven chosen by the congregation in the diaconal role by laying hands on them. Paul likely assumed this operative pattern to be understood by Titus. Like Acts 6, Paul made the following list of qualifications for Titus and as a guide for the Christians on Crete, just as Peter listed qualifications for the Christians in Jerusalem.

At our church, ‘No fewer than three-fourths of those ballots cast by the members present and voting shall be required for election... after a full and free discussion oriented around the relevant Scriptural passages.’ Also, ‘A disqualified elder can be immediately dismissed by a three-fourths vote of the members present at a stated members’ meeting. If the elder is unrepentant, the church shall also pursue church discipline.’ Likewise, our documents can only be amended by a three-fourths vote of the members present and voting at a members’ meeting.

So, the congregation also protects the church against false teaching in the knowledge of the Son of God. The congregation is called to safeguard the church’s witness to the gospel and ensure the church preserves the gospel itself.

Third, only our members can affirm and approve the church’s budget. Scripture does not give us an explicit command here, but this principle emulates an implicit pattern of

Scripture. Paul says in 2 Corinthians 8:20-22, *“We take this course so that no one should blame us about this generous gift that is being administered by us, for we aim at what is honorable not only in the Lord’s sight but also in the sight of man”* Our Church Constitution reminds us that *“The budget is an expression of our gospel vision, values, and identity as a church. The leaders should seek the congregation's advice and support and should be willing to yield to the congregation when appropriate.”* Our budgetary process promotes integrity, a unified vision, and an expression of love through financially supporting specific ministries and causes. The church must pass a budget resolution.

Fourth and finally, the members must approve formal cooperation or disassociation and authoritative church representatives. Again, this imitates the implicit pattern of the early church (versus explicit command): Acts 15:22, *“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.”* 2 Corinthians 8:19, *“And not only that, but he has been appointed by the churches to travel with us as we carry out this act of grace that is being ministered by us.”* We vote on formal cooperation and sending representatives. The elders can nominate representatives from among themselves or the church to official meetings necessitating authoritative representation. Still, the church votes to officially appoint, certify, and send them.

Members should take our membership privileges and responsibilities seriously, including our voting privilege. Attend the church’s members’ meetings, for your participation promotes unity and love in the body. We are showing our agreement by voting along with the rest of the congregation on essential matters.

In conclusion, the elders exercise authority by teaching and leading. Deacons lead by serving under the oversight of the elders. The eldership counsels and equips the congregation to exercise their authority to make church-defining decisions (**think of a doctor-patient relationship; or influencing the church like a parent influences an adult child; versus commanding a young child**). When the congregation elects qualified men, they should trust and submit to the elders when their teaching and leadership are within the bounds of Scripture. But the membership has a responsibility to protect and promote the gospel. **God makes church members ultimately responsible for building the church and maintaining its gospel ministry.**