

RETHINKING CHURCH GOVERNMENT

PART 1 – The Role of the Congregation

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I had never given the topic of church government much thought – at least not until this past year when a decision to revise our church bylaws for practical purposes ended up raising questions of a more biblical nature: “Where does governing authority reside in the local church – with the membership or the leadership?” “We have deacons, but not elders – why is that?” “And where do our pastors fit in?” Most importantly, “What does the New Testament actually teach about church order?” “Is our church in line with this teaching?”

I had often heard or read that there is a diversity of forms of church government found in the New Testament church (which would explain a lot of things!), but I had never checked out this assumption. As a life-long Presbyterian who had served as a Baptist pastor for the past eleven years, I welcomed the opportunity not only to help the church sort out its concerns on this important issue, but also to resolve some of my own nagging questions as well. Are there in fact ways to go about local church organization and leadership that are more biblical than others? What does the New Testament actually reveal?

D. A. Carson notes that when it comes to church government, “modern models are not so much wrong as frequently lopsided, favoring a prejudicial selection of the New Testament data.”² Because of this tendency, I have done my best to identify and briefly exposit all of the

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² D. A. Carson, “Church, Authority in,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984) 230.

relevant texts before drawing any conclusions (undoubtedly I will overlook some). My goal for this study is quite simply to provide the kind of basic biblical resource that I unsuccessfully tried to find when I began looking into this vital issue.

Philippians 1:1 As Our Starting Point

Philippians 1:1 proves to be a great place to start as it raises virtually all of the issues in which we are interested. Here is what it says: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons.” We may note the following:

1. Paul addresses the congregation as a whole (“To all the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi”), as is the case in the majority of his letters (cf. Rom 1:7; 1 Cor 1:2; 2 Cor 1:1; Gal 1:1; Eph 1:1; Col 1:2; 1 Thess 1:1; 2 Thess 1:1).
2. The apostle then mentions “the overseers and deacons” in a way that distinguishes them from the congregation, implying that “he considered them to be persons with some kind of official status.”³
3. The preposition “together with” (or “alongside of”) reveals the relationship between “all the saints” and “the overseers and deacons,” and it is implicitly one of “close fellowship or cooperation.”⁴ As Gordon Fee explains, the preposition

is the sure giveaway as to the role of leadership in the Pauline churches. The community as a whole is addressed, and in most cases therefore the ‘overseers and deacons’ are simply reckoned as being within the community. When they are singled out, as here, the leaders are not ‘over’ the church, but are addressed

³ Gerald F. Hawthorne, *Philippians* WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1983) 7. It should be noted, however, that “New Testament ministries are never formally termed ‘offices.’ Rather, they are always noted in terms of function” (Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1972] 136 n.15).

⁴ H. E. Dana and Julius R. Mantey, *A Manual Grammar of the Greek New Testament* (New York: Macmillan, 1957) 111.

'alongside of' the church, as a *distinguishable* part of the whole, but as *part of the whole*, not above or outside it.⁵

4. In light of 1 Timothy 3:1-13, "overseers and deacons" are surely referring to two distinct offices in the church,⁶ although it is not clear how they are distinguished from one another in Philippi (they are not referred to again in the letter, and 1 Tim 3 is the only other place in the NT where these two offices are mentioned together).
5. Concerning "overseers," both the name itself and the fact that it is listed first suggests that this group fulfilled the primary leadership role in the Philippian church.
6. Interestingly, there is no explicit mention of elders or pastors in the salutation. And yet, as Robert Saucy states, "It would be incredible for the apostle to overlook a third [or fourth!] order of ministers, namely, the elders."⁷
7. Finally, "overseers" and "deacons" are both plural, implying that there was no single chief officer in the Philippian church.

Each of these points raise some good questions – not the least of which is whether or not what we observe in the church at Philippi applies to all churches today.⁸ I will seek to answer such questions in the course of this study by briefly examining the relevant New Testament passages in their probable chronological order. My outline will flow right out of Philippians 1:1,

⁵ Gordon D. Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995) 67. Cf. idem., "Laos and Leadership Under the New Covenant: Some Exegetical and Hermeneutical Observations on Church Order" in *Gospel and Spirit: Issues in New Testament Hermeneutics* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1991) 122; Hawthorne, *Philippians 7-8*; and J. A. Motyer, *The Message of Philippians* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1984) 33.

⁶ Hawthorne suggests that Paul may have had one office in mind, that is, "overseers who are deacons," or "overseers who serve" (*Philippians* 9-10), but this position is effectively refuted by Peter T. O'Brien, *The Epistle to the Philippians* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 48-49 n.21, and Fee, *Paul's Letter to the Philippians* 66.

⁷ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* 141.

⁸ This, of course, is one of the basic issues in biblical interpretation. For help along these lines, see esp. chapters 3, 4 and 6 of Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth*, 2nd edition (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993).

as we examine the role of the “saints” (or congregation) in this present article, and the role of “overseers” (or elders) and “deacons” in the article to follow.

A Word About Being “In Christ Jesus”

Because a local church consists of “saints *in Christ Jesus*” (Phil 1:1, emphasis added; cf. 1 Cor 1:2), it is vital that we keep in mind just who this person is that we are “in” or “united with.” In addressing matters of church organization and leadership, we are often seeking to answer one basic question: “Who’s supposed to be in charge around here?” But this question has long since been settled. It is Jesus and Jesus alone who is “the head of the church, his body, of which he is the Savior” (Eph 5:23; see also 1:22; 4:15-16; Col 1:18; 2:19).

In addition, as Eduard Schweizer notes, “there is hardly any description of ministry that is not used, on occasion, of Jesus Christ.”⁹ He is “apostle” (Heb 3:1), “teacher” (John 13:13; Matt 23:10), “overseer” (1 Pet 2:25), “pastor” or “shepherd”¹⁰ (Matt 2:6; John 10:11, 14, 16; 1 Pet 2:25; Heb 13:20), “deacon” (Rom 15:8), and “servant” (Matt 20:28; Luke 22:27; Phil 2:7). In the church, then, there is really only one single officer or leader – the Lord Jesus Christ.¹¹ And he said as much himself:

“I will build my church” (Matt 16:18).

“You have only one Master and you are all brothers . . . you have one Teacher, the Christ” (Matt 23:8, 10).

“All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me” (Matt 28:18).

In the words of 1 Peter 5:4, Jesus is “the Chief Shepherd” of the church and therefore we who are “in Christ Jesus” must acknowledge and uphold his leadership in our church

⁹ Eduard Schweizer, *Church Order in the New Testament* (London: SCM Press, 1961) 189-190.

¹⁰ The English word “pastor” is derived from a Latin term that means “one who cares for sheep.”

¹¹ “All the New Testament authors, each in their own way, insist that the Christian community has but one leader, Jesus Christ, who is the ascended Lord of the church, and is now present through the

government. But this raises a very practical question: “To whom does Christ delegate his authority in the church?” or “Through whom does Christ exercise his authority in the church?” The congregation as a whole? The elder or deacon board? The pastor(s)?¹²

The Role of the “Saints” (or Congregation)

As we examine what the Bible has to say about the role of the congregation as it pertains to authority in the church, we should once again note that most of the New Testament letters are written to entire churches rather than to their leaders, and this fact alone “indicates the reality of the congregation’s authority.”¹³ But what is the extent of that authority, and how do leaders figure into the local church picture? Here’s what the New Testament has to say:

Matthew 18:15-17. The earliest reference to congregational authority is from the lips of Jesus. As a last resort in confronting someone who sins within the Christian community, our Lord says, “tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, treat him as you would a pagan or a tax collector” (v. 17). It is the entire church—and not just the leadership—that is to be made aware of the offense and is to dissociate itself from the individual if he or she still refuses to repent. Thus, in matters of discipline, it seems clear that “churches become the final court of appeal.”¹⁴

Holy Spirit” (Kevin Giles, *What On Earth is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1995] 186).

¹² “All agree that the only valid ultimate authority is Christ, the head of the church. However, the question of authority in the church concerns the functional application of Christ’s authority as it is expressed in the local assembly” (Robert L. Saucy, “Authority in the Church” in *Walvoord: A Tribute* [ed. Donald K. Campbell; Chicago: Moody Press, 1974] 220).

¹³ David L. Bartlett, *Ministry in the New Testament* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993) 39. Similarly, Stanley Grenz writes, “The practice of addressing epistles to entire churches rather than to their leaders reinforces the impression of the ultimate importance of the people as a whole in the life and decision-making of the local congregations” (*Theology for the Community of God* [Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1994] 722).

¹⁴ Carson, “Church, Authority in” 229.

Acts 6:1-6. When the very first community of believers needed to expand its leadership base to care for the needs of a growing church,

the Twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word." And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose [seven men] (vv. 2-5, NASB).

What we observe here is what might best be called a "guided democracy."¹⁵ The whole congregation is given the authority to choose additional leaders, but their choice is guided (or we could say limited) by the apostles, who specify both the number and the character qualifications of these leaders.

Acts 11:19-24. When the gospel began to spread to Greeks in Antioch, "a great number of people believed and turned to the Lord. News of this reached the ears of the church at Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch" (vv. 21-22). The implication here is that the entire congregation at Jerusalem was aware of (or made aware of) the ministry going on in Antioch, and they exercised their authority to dispatch one of their leaders to the scene.¹⁶

Acts 13:1-3; 14:26-27. Concerning the church at Antioch, Acts 13:2 says, "While *they* were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, 'Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them'" (emphasis added). "They" may be a reference to the prophets and teachers listed in verse 1; however, at the end of their mission, Paul and Barnabas reported back to the entire church gathered together (14:26-27), and so it may be that the congregation as a whole received the message from God while they were worshiping together

¹⁵ Giles, *What On Earth is the Church?* 95.

¹⁶ However, it should be noted that in a similar episode regarding the gospel reaching Samaria, it is the *apostles* in Jerusalem rather than the church as a whole who are said to have heard about the ministry in Samaria and who then send two of their colleagues to check things out (Acts 8:14).

(perhaps through one of their prophets?). In any case, we can affirm that “it is the responsibility of every local church (especially of its leaders) to be sensitive to the Holy Spirit.”¹⁷

Galatians 1:6-9. Following his first missionary journey, Paul writes to the churches in Galatia, “But even if we or an angel from heaven should preach a gospel other than the one we preached to you, let him be eternally condemned!” (v. 8). Here we find that “the church has the right and power to excommunicate its own apostle if he radically departs from the gospel.”¹⁸ No leader—or congregation, for that matter—is above the authority of the word of God.¹⁹

Galatians 6:6. Toward the end of his letter to the Galatian churches, Paul writes, “Anyone who receives instruction in the word must share all good things with his instructor.” This is the first of a number of passages indicating that the role of the congregation includes supporting those who teach the word. F. F. Bruce provides the following helpful commentary:

The teacher relieves the ignorance of the pupil; the pupil should relieve the teacher of concern for his subsistence. This is another way of stating the principle that ‘the labourer deserves his wages’ (Lk. 10:7; 1 Tim 5:18; cf. Mt. 10:10) or, as Paul elsewhere paraphrases those words of Jesus, ‘those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel’ (1 Cor. 9:14). Whereas the emphasis in those other places is on the right of the preacher or teacher to claim his support, here it lies on the duty of those who are taught to make material provision for their teachers.²⁰

Acts 15. At the so-called “Council at Jerusalem” (convened sometime after Paul’s first missionary journey in order to respond to a serious threat to the gospel), the role of the leaders

¹⁷ John R. W. Stott, *The Spirit, the Church, and the World: The Message of Acts* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 1990) 218.

¹⁸ Robert Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* (Revised edition; Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1994) 183.

¹⁹ “Whereas Christians are encouraged to support and submit to spiritual leadership (e.g. Heb 13:17), such encouragement must not be considered a blank check if churches are responsible for and have the authority to discipline false teachers and to recognize an antecedent commitment not to a pastor but to the truth of the gospel” (Carson, “Church, Authority in” 230).

²⁰ F. F. Bruce, *The Epistle to the Galatians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1982) 263. James D. G. Dunn adds, “This text provides the earliest evidence of what we might call a ‘professional’ Christian ministry, although we should note that it was dependent on the sense of obligation (and ability to pay) of the one taught, rather than on a more formal organization” (*The Epistle to the Galatians* [Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Publishers, 1993] 328).

was clearly prominent (and will be discussed in the next section). However, the congregations of Antioch and Jerusalem were not uninvolved nor uninformed regarding the crisis. Rather, when the threat arose in Antioch, we are told in verse 3 that *the church* there sent two of their leaders, Paul and Barnabas, to the apostles and elders in Jerusalem (from where the false teachers came; v. 24). Upon arrival in Jerusalem, “they were received by *the church* and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them” (v. 4, emphasis added). The congregation apparently remained while the leaders addressed the threat at hand (note that “the multitude kept silent,” v. 12). When a decision was reached, “the apostles and the elders, *with the whole church*” (v. 22, emphasis added) chose two leaders from the Jerusalem congregation to deliver the decree to the entire church at Antioch (v. 30).

The role of the congregation(s) here seems to have included respecting the authority of leaders to discuss a serious doctrinal matter and render a decision (15:2-3, 6; 16:4),²¹ encouraging the process by practicing hospitality and staying informed (15:4, 12, 30), and exercising particular (and apparently shared) authority in selecting and sending leaders to carry out necessary ministries (vv. 3, 22; cf 6:1-6; 13:1-3). Overall, there is a strong sense of leaders and congregation(s) working together to address and solve a major problem.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13. During his second missionary journey (embarked upon sometime after the Council at Jerusalem), Paul established the church at Thessalonica (Acts 17:1-9). Later, while on that same trip, he writes to this young church and makes the following request: “Respect those who work hard among you, who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you. Hold them in the highest regard in love because of their work” (1 Thess 5:12-13).

²¹ We should be careful in our application of this observation, however, as the active role of the apostles at the council represents a situation that is unlike ours today. Apostolic authority is present for us not in our leaders, but in the New Testament documents with which we are entrusted as a church.

The reference is clearly to people who were functioning as leaders within the congregation, and Paul calls the entire church to adopt a proper attitude toward these hard-working servants.

“Respect” here is literally “know,” and, as Leon Morris explains, “the verb has the idea of knowing fully, appreciating [the leaders] true worth. It indicates that the brothers [and sisters] had not realized as they should have the rightful position and worth of the people in question, and they are called on to know them better.”²² In addition, as verse 13 clarifies and F. F. Bruce restates, “The highest possible regard is due to such people, *not because of their status but because of their work.*”²³ (emphasis added). Indeed,

It will make for the effective life and witness of the church and for peaceful relations among its members if its leaders are recognized and honored and their directions followed. The corollary of this is that the leaders should be the kind of people who deserve to be recognized and honored by their fellow Christians.²⁴

1 Thessalonians 5:14-22. Immediately following his entreaty to show leaders proper esteem and love, Paul writes a string of commands that, at first glance, seem to be directed at those very leaders. However, as verse 14 indicates (and virtually all commentators agree), these imperatives are to be carried out by the entire church at Thessalonica. To be sure, leaders are to be exemplary in all of these matters (esp. admonishing or warning others, as Paul has already indicated in v. 12), but the members of the community are likewise to “warn those who are idle, encourage the timid, help the weak, be patient with everyone” (v. 14). In addition, they are to maintain an environment of nonretaliation and kindness (v. 15; cf. v. 13), exhibit an attitude of constant joyfulness, prayer, and thanksgiving (vv. 16-18), and be active in encouraging and

²² Leon Morris, *The First and Second Epistles to the Thessalonians* NICNT (Revised edition; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1991) 165.

²³ F. F. Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1982) 119. I. Howard Marshall adds, “In the NT church honor is not given to people because of any qualities that they may possess due to birth or social status or natural gifts but only on the basis of the spiritual task to which they are called” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians* NCBC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1983] 148).

²⁴ Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* 120.

evaluating spiritual ministries (vv. 19-22). This latter role, in particular, is one we might have expected to be carried out by leaders, but Paul tells the *church* to “Test everything. Hold on to the good” (v. 21).²⁵ Charles Wanamaker explains:

Thus Paul exhorts the community to evaluate what is said or done in the name of the Spirit or under the supposed influence of the Spirit (cf. 1 Cor. 14:29). He does not specify what criteria should be used in determining whether something is good or evil, but presumably he expected his readers to weigh supposed Spirit-inspired words and deeds against the doctrinal and ethical norms they had received from him.²⁶

2 Thessalonians 3:6-15. Along these same lines, Paul, in his second letter to the church at Thessalonica, places the responsibility of disciplining idle members on the community as a whole and not just the leadership. “Keep away from every brother who is idle” (v. 6), writes the apostle. “If anyone does not obey our instruction in this letter, take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed. Yet do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother” (vv. 14-15).²⁷

1 Corinthians 1:10-13; 3:1-23. The church at Corinth was also founded by Paul on his second missionary journey (Acts 18:1-11), and the apostle was one of a number of gifted leaders who taught the community in its first few years. But what should have been a blessing that led to the maturing of the church instead became a source of division as personality cults developed: “One of you says, ‘I follow Paul’; another, ‘I follow Apollos’; another, ‘I follow Cephas [Peter]’; still another, ‘I follow Christ’” (1 Cor 1:12). While leaders are to be respected and highly regarded in love (1 Thess 5:12-13; cf. the upcoming 1 Cor 16:15-18), they are not to be

²⁵ “The various forms of service enjoined in [1 Thess 5:14-22] are certainly a special responsibility of leaders, but not their exclusive responsibility: they are ways in which all the members of the community can fulfill the direction of v. 11 to encourage and strengthen one another” (Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* 122).

²⁶ Charles A. Wanamaker, *The Epistles to the Thessalonians: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990) 203.

²⁷ Note the insightful comment of Bruce: “And the community as a whole had an interest in setting them right; if they lived in idleness it was the community that had to support them, and it was the community’s reputation that was endangered by their irregular way of life” (*1 and 2 Thessalonians* 123).

exalted above Christ! Therefore, as Paul writes, “no more boasting about men!” (1 Cor 3:21). In the church, the focus is to be on Jesus, the Chief Shepherd, not on the gifted undershepherds.²⁸

1 Corinthians 5. In a passage similar in some ways to 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15, we once again see that the church as a whole has the authority and the responsibility to discipline a church member (or members) whose sin “carries with it the serious possibility of corrupting the entire congregation.”²⁹ In this case, it was not idleness but a well-known incestuous relationship that was the problem, and Paul calls the church to “put out of your fellowship the man who did this” (v. 2; cf. 5, 7, 13).³⁰ And this drastic but necessary action³¹ is to be carried out “when you are assembled *in the name of our Lord Jesus*” (v. 4, emphasis added), that is, at a church meeting, “under [Jesus’] authority, and with the intention of acting in obedience to him.”³² Thus, we may view this as an example of the final step of Matthew 18:15-17 being implemented.

1 Corinthians 6:1. This verse may also reflect the provisions made in Matthew 18:15-17, where the church is the final court of appeal: “If any of you has a dispute with another [church member], dare he take it before the ungodly for judgement instead of before the saints?” As C. K. Barrett concisely puts it, “The point is simply that cases that arise within the people of God should be kept there. This is partly (but not wholly, as the next verses show) a matter of not sending out the dirty linen.”³³

²⁸ Of course, as Paul later explains, there is an appropriate sense in which leaders are to be followed, but the focus is still on Jesus: “Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ” (1 Cor 11:1; cf. 4:16; Phil 3:17; 4:9; 2 Thess 3:7, 9; Heb 13:7).

²⁹ Craig Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 108.

³⁰ “That no mention is made of removing the woman suggests she was not a church member to begin with” (*Ibid.* 105).

³¹ “There are always some who see this action as harsh and unloving; but such criticism comes from those who do not appreciate the biblical view of God’s holiness, and the deep revulsion to sin that that holiness entails” (Gordon D. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 203).

³² C. K. Barrett, *A Commentary on the First Epistle to the Corinthians* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1968) 124.

³³ *Ibid.* 135.

1 Corinthians 9:7-14. See comments under Galatians 6:6.

1 Corinthians 11:17-34; 14:1-40. It is surely significant that when Paul rebukes, corrects, and instructs the Corinthians regarding their church gatherings (with such matters as the Lord's supper, prophecy, and tongues figuring prominently in the discussion) he addresses the congregation as a whole and not merely the leaders.³⁴

1 Corinthians 12. Of course, various leaders do have a role to play in the church (as verses 28-29 clearly indicate), but so does everyone else in the congregation: "Now to each one the manifestation of the Spirit is given for the common good" (v. 7). "Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it" (v. 27).

1 Corinthians 16:3. Toward the end of the letter, Paul provides brief instruction regarding the collection of money to help relieve the poor in the church at Jerusalem, and he calls on the Corinthians to "approve and send" a number of men to accompany the gift to Jerusalem. Once again, we see a local church exercising its authority to select qualified members to fulfill a ministry need.

1 Corinthians 16:15-18. Finally, as the letter draws to a close, Paul writes:

You know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints. *I urge you, brothers [and sisters], to submit to such as these and to everyone who joins in the work, and labors at it.* I was glad when Stephanas, Fortunatus and Achaicus arrived, because they have supplied what was lacking from you. For they refreshed my spirit and yours also. *Such men deserve recognition* (emphasis added).

As he did in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, Paul addresses the attitude that should be adopted by the congregation toward those functioning as leaders in the church. Here the people are called to "submit to such as these," which speaks not of blind obedience but "of submission in

³⁴ "In all of 1 Corinthians not one of the many directives is spoken to the leadership, and in 14:26 their worship is singularly corporate in nature ('When you [plural] assemble together, *each one of you*

the sense of voluntary yielding in love”³⁵ (cf. Eph 5:21). In other words, Paul is saying something like, “Let your leaders serve you! Willingly follow their example and direction.” Further, they are commanded to “recognize such people,”³⁶ which “would include acknowledgement of their service and an accompanying honor of submission as described in verse 16.”³⁷ These leaders deserve such submission and recognition not because of their position or status, but because “they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints” (v. 15), laboring hard in their work (v. 16) and providing spiritual refreshment to all (v. 18).³⁸

2 Corinthians 2:5-11. In Paul’s second letter to the Corinthians, the congregation as a whole is urged to restore a brother who has been under church discipline³⁹: The apostle writes, “The punishment⁴⁰ inflicted on him by the majority⁴¹ is sufficient for him. Now instead, you ought to forgive and comfort him . . . reaffirm your love for him” (vv. 6-8; cf. Luke 17:3). Here we see that a person whose sin affected the whole congregation (“he has grieved all of you, to some extent,” v. 5) is both disciplined and restored by the whole congregation (although the passage implies that the church was slow to do so).

has . . . ; let all things be done with an eye to edification’). One receives the distinct impression that people and leaders alike are under the sovereign direction of the Holy Spirit” (Fee, “*Laos and Leadership*” 132).

³⁵ BAGD 830. Cf. Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* 830; Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* 338.

³⁶ The NIV fails to reflect the Greek imperative.

³⁷ Blomberg, *1 Corinthians* 338.

³⁸ “Christians at all times and places should cooperate with and defer to church leaders who have earned that respect through faithful service, but no New Testament text enjoins blind subservience to authoritarian or incompetent Christian office holders” (*Ibid.* 340).

³⁹ Colin Kruse reaffirms the traditional position that identifies the offending individual as the incestuous man referred to in 1 Corinthians 5 (2 *Corinthians* TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1987] 41-45), but most modern commentators dispute this.

⁴⁰ It is generally agreed that this “punishment” probably involved being excluded from church gatherings (see, for example, Victor Paul Furnish, *II Corinthians* AB [New York: Doubleday, 1984] 161).

⁴¹ “This reference to *the majority* does not require one to presume a formal ‘minority’ with its own identifiable position, although the existence of such a group may well be implied. If so, did it favor greater or lesser leniency toward the offender? In view of the point Paul seems anxious to make in vv. 5, 10, it may be that the minority wanted to take no action at all on the premise that this was a strictly private affair between one individual and one particular apostolic leader” (*Ibid.* 161).

2 Corinthians 8:18-19. Later in the letter, Paul tells the Corinthians of a “brother who is praised by all the churches for his service to the gospel” (v. 18), who was in fact “chosen⁴² by the [Macedonian?] churches” (v. 19) to accompany Paul and his team in delivering the offering to relieve the poor in Jerusalem. Yet again we find evidence that the role of the congregation (and, in this case, a number of congregations) includes appointing leaders to carry out a ministry on their behalf.

Romans 12:4-6. Shortly after Paul wrote to the Corinthians, he sent a letter to the church at Rome, and at one point he reiterates much of what he said in 1 Corinthians 12 about unity and diversity in the church: “Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts . . .” To put it another way, in the church, everyone’s gifted, so everyone serves – whether you’re a leader or not!

Romans 15:14. Paul acknowledges the spiritual maturity of the believers in Rome, noting that they are “full of goodness, complete in knowledge and competent to instruct [i.e., admonish⁴³] one another.” This does not mean that there is no place for teachers or leaders in the church (even in a mature church; cf. 12:6-8). Rather, it points to “the reciprocal brotherly ministry of the members exercising pastoral oversight with a sense of congregational obligation.”⁴⁴ In other words, teaching and admonishing is not just the responsibility of leaders; it is part of the role of the entire congregation (cf. 1 Thess 5:14; cp. Col 1:28 and 3:16).

⁴² “This word is rare in the NT, being found only at Acts 14:23 for the appointment by Paul and Barnabas of elders in the Galatian churches. According to Furnish, 422, originally it meant elect ‘by show of hands’ but later simply ‘elect’ (Paul Barnett, *The Second Epistle to the Corinthians* NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1997] 421).

⁴³ This is the same Greek word Paul used in 1 Thess 5:12 and 14.

⁴⁴ J. Behm, *TDNT* IV 1022.

Romans 16:17. Similarly, the whole church is “to watch out for those who cause divisions and put obstacles in your way that are contrary to the teaching you have learned. Keep away from them.” As we learned in Galatians 1:8, the congregation is to identify and dissociate themselves from false teachers, “for such people are not serving our Lord Christ, but their own appetites” (Rom 16:18).

Colossians 2:8. Paul says much the same thing to the church at Colosse a few years later: “See to it that no one takes you captive through hollow and deceptive philosophy, which depends on human tradition and the basic principles of this world rather than on Christ.” Such a person “has lost connection with the Head [i.e. Christ], from whom the whole body, supported and held together by its ligaments and sinews, grows as God causes it to grow” (v. 19; cf. Eph 4:15-16). The church is not to tolerate any teaching that is contrary to “the word of Christ” (Col 3:16).

Colossians 3:16. “Let the word of Christ richly dwell within you [plural],” Paul continues, “in all wisdom teaching and admonishing *one another* with psalms and hymns and spiritual songs” (NASB, emphasis added). A congregation in which the word of Christ richly dwells in not just the result of effective, Christ-centered teaching by pastors (cf. 1:28). Rather, as we noted with Romans 15:14, church members must also exercise their mutual responsibility to instruct and warn each other. In addition, Paul tells us that this obligation is fulfilled (at least in part) by means of congregational singing!⁴⁵

Ephesians 4:11-12. The mutual ministry of the congregation is crucial to the edification of the church: “It was he [Christ] who gave some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, *to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that*

⁴⁵ Cf. David F. Detwiler, “Church Music and Colossians 3:16,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 158 (July-September 2001) pages?

the body of Christ may be built up" (emphasis added). After careful analysis of this text (which some take quite differently⁴⁶), Ernest Best concludes, "The building up of the body of Christ is not then to be left to the ministry [i.e., office-bearers] but is the responsibility of all believers."⁴⁷

Ephesians 5:21. In a passage parallel to Colossians 3:16, Paul tells the church at Ephesus to "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ."⁴⁸ The verb is the same one used by Paul in 1 Corinthians 16:16, where the Corinthians are urged to submit to those functioning as leaders in the church. Here, however, Paul is advocating *mutual* submission, which "demands readiness to renounce one's own will for the sake of others, i.e., *agape*, and to give precedence to others."⁴⁹ This would apply to anyone in the congregation – leaders included. However, by implication it also strengthens Paul's encouragement that the congregation voluntarily submit to its leaders.⁵⁰

1 Timothy 5:17-18. Toward the end of his life and ministry, Paul wrote to Timothy in Ephesus, urging him to stay there and "command certain men not to teach false doctrines any longer" (1 Tim 1:3). First Timothy 5:17-18, however, is "implicitly addressed to the congregation as a whole,"⁵¹ and here (as in Gal 6:6 and 1 Cor 9:14) we find that the church is to support those who labor at teaching the truth: "The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy

⁴⁶ Notably Andrew T. Lincoln, *Ephesians* WBC (Waco: Word Books, 1990) 253, and T. David Gordon, "'Equipping' Ministry in Ephesians 4?" *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 37.1 (March 1994) 69-78.

⁴⁷ Ernest Best, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on Ephesians* ICC (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998) 395-99. Cf. Peter T. O'Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* PNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999) 301-303; and Gordon D. Fee, *God's Empowering Presence: The Holy Spirit in the Letters of Paul* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994) 706.

⁴⁸ The verb "submit" is actually a participle dependent upon the main verb in verse 18: "Be filled with the Spirit." As such, "submitting to one another" is either (in part) the result of the Spirit's fullness in the community of believers, or (in part) the means of it (cf. Lincoln, *Ephesians* 365).

⁴⁹ G. Delling, *TDNT* VIII 45.

⁵⁰ O'Brien goes so far as to conclude that "on grounds of semantics, syntax, and the flow of Paul's argument . . . the apostle is not speaking of *mutual* submission in the sense of a reciprocal subordination, but submission to those who are in authority over them" (*The Letter to the Ephesians* 404).

of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, 'Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,' and 'The worker deserves his wages.'" The phrase "double honor" is not referring to "twice the pay" (a popular notion that I doubt is ever carried out!), but to "both 'honor' and 'honorarium,'"⁵² that is, "the honor and respect due those in such positions as well as remuneration."⁵³

1 Peter 2:4-10. At about the same time Paul was writing to Timothy (and Titus), Peter sent a letter to churches "scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (1 Pet 1:1). In it he reveals wonderful truth about the nature of the church, and our interest here is with the priestly character that he identifies:

. . . you also, like living stones, are being built into a spiritual house to be a *holy priesthood, offering spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ* . . . But you are a chosen people, a *royal priesthood*, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (2:5, 9, emphasis added; cf. Ex 19:6; Is 43:20-21; Rev 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Basically, a priest is one "who serves God and has the right of access to him,"⁵⁴ and this privilege belongs to the whole church and not just its leaders (cf. Heb 4:16; 10:19-22). As Wayne Grudem explains, "Since all who come to Christ are now a *holy priesthood*, able continually to 'draw near' to God's very presence and offer *spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus*

⁵¹ I. Howard Marshall, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on The Pastoral Epistles ICC* (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1999) 612.

⁵² George W. Knight III, *The Pastoral Epistles: A Commentary on the Greek Text NIGTC* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1992) 232.

⁵³ Gordon D. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus NIBC* (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1988) 129. Marshall adds, "The backing provided in v. 18 surely implies that the thought is of material honour rather than simply of respect. Moreover, the fact that some people expected to make money out of godliness, i.e. out of teaching godliness (6.5), indicates that some kind of material return was expected" (*The Pastoral Epistles* 613). Further, William Mounce adds that "it is more likely that Paul was speaking of an honorarium than a set salary" (*Pastoral Epistles WBC* [Nashville: Nelson, 2000] 310).

⁵⁴ I. Howard Marshall, *1 Peter* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1991) 75.

Christ, there can no longer be an elite priesthood with claims of special access to God, or special privileges in worship or in fellowship with God.”⁵⁵

1 Peter 4:10-11. In 1 Corinthians 12 and Romans 12, Paul emphasized “every member ministry”; Peter now does the same: “Each one should use whatever gift he has received to serve others, faithfully administering God’s grace in its various forms” (1 Pet 4:10). In other words, there are no useless members in the body of Christ. Everyone is called and gifted to serve others, “so that in all things God may be praised through Jesus Christ” (v. 11b).

Hebrews 13:7. Hebrews was likely written to Jewish Christians sometime in the 60s, and the writer commands these believers to adopt a proper attitude toward their former leaders⁵⁶: “Remember your leaders, who spoke the word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” The opening command, “Remember,” is a present imperative, meaning, “Continue to remember.” This is followed by a present participle (NIV, “Consider”) which also stresses continued action: “Looking at again and again.” The point is that these former leaders had been faithful teachers and examples to the church, and therefore they should continue to be followed (i.e., their faithfulness imitated⁵⁷)—even though they are no longer physically present.⁵⁸ William Lane appropriately adds that, “In the context of v 7a, emulation of their faith will be reflected in the firm adherence to the word they preached.”⁵⁹

⁵⁵ Wayne Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter: An Introduction and Commentary* TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988) 101.

⁵⁶ Many commentators suggest that these former leaders were the founders of the church who had since passed away.

⁵⁷ Cf. Paul Ellingworth, *The Epistle to the Hebrews: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993) 704.

⁵⁸ F. F. Bruce writes of “those who led them in earlier days but have now completed their service; the whole course of their lives, from start to finish, now lies before their disciples and followers for review and imitation. By precept and example they showed the right path to tread; being dead they yet speak, and the record of their faith is still alive in the memory of those who knew them” (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1964] 395).

⁵⁹ William L. Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* WBC 47B (Dallas: Word Books, 1991) 527-528.

Hebrews 13:17. The writer now addresses the community's attitude toward its current leaders (perhaps suggesting that things were not well along these lines): "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority." The Greek word here translated "Obey" (again, a present imperative, "Continue to obey"), generally means "be persuaded, be convinced," that is, "to heed, to pay attention to someone's words, attitudes or actions, so that one is influenced by them."⁶⁰ Lane explains:

This verb certainly demands obedience. But the specific quality of the obedience for which [the word here] asks is not primarily derived from a respect for constituted structures of authority. It is rather the obedience that is won through persuasive conversation and that follows from it.⁶¹

The second command, "submit [to their authority⁶²]" (i.e., "continue to submit"⁶³) is found only here in the New Testament, and means to "yield, give way, submit to someone's authority."⁶⁴ This appears to be the stronger of the two imperatives, and together they call for "a willing and loyal response"⁶⁵ on the part of the congregation toward its leaders. In other words, the writer is saying to the church, "Let your leaders lead you!" The motivation for such a response is found in the rest of the verse: "[for] they keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them⁶⁶ so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you." That last phrase, in particular, "is a sober reminder that the welfare of the community is tied to the quality of their response to their current leaders."⁶⁷

⁶⁰ BAGD 639; O. Becker, *NIDNTTI* 591.

⁶¹ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* 554. Cf. Timothy M. Willis, "'Obey Your Leaders': Hebrews 13 and Leadership in the Church," *Restoration Quarterly* 36.4 (1994) 322, who favors translating the verse, "Be persuaded by your leaders."

⁶² The words "to their authority" do not appear in the Greek; they are implied from the meaning of the word "submit." See discussion above.

⁶³ Once again, a present imperative denoting continued action.

⁶⁴ BAGD 838. Paul Ellingworth refers to it as "due deference to the leaders by the led" (*The Epistle to the Hebrews* 723).

⁶⁵ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* 556.

⁶⁶ The command is actually not repeated in the Greek.

⁶⁷ Lane, *Hebrews 9-13* 556.

1 John 2:18-27. The last – and the latest – passages that we will examine come from the apostle John, writing to a community that had been thrown into confusion and upheaval by false teachers. On the whole, his letters “present a strong check to a development of institutionalized authority in the church,”⁶⁸ and this is what we find in 1 John 2:26-27:

I am writing these things to you about those who are trying to lead you astray. As for you, the anointing⁶⁹ you received from him remains in you, and you do not need anyone to teach you. But as his anointing teaches you about all things and as that anointing is real, not counterfeit – just as it has taught you, remain in him.

The phrase “you do not need anyone to teach you” presents something of a paradox, for John is in fact teaching the church as he writes! As Gary Burge explains, “He is not setting aside the authority of pastors trying to instruct their congregations. Rather, *John is invalidating the authority of the false teachers.*”⁷⁰ Those who possess the “Spirit of truth” – as all true Christians do – are never “in the dark” when it comes to God’s truth and therefore are never dependant upon elite teachers to “enlighten” them. “The Word of God has been conveyed to [believer’s] hearts by the Spirit,” writes I. Howard Marshall, “and this is the ultimate safeguard against falling away into heresy”⁷¹ (cf. v. 20; John 14:17; 16:13).

1 John 4:1. Along these lines, John writes, “Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world.” It is the church as a whole that is commanded to be vigilant and discerning in regard to those who would teach the congregation (cf. 2 John 10).

⁶⁸ G. W. Hanson, “Authority,” *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments* (eds. Ralph P. Martin et al; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1997) 109.

⁶⁹ Most commentators see this “anointing” as a reference to both the Spirit and the word of God. Stephen Smalley, for example, writes, “The faithful are by definition those who have received the gospel of truth, and appropriated it through the activity of the Spirit” (*1, 2, 3 John* WBC [Waco: Work Books, 1984] 123; cf. 104-107).

⁷⁰ Gary M. Burge, *The Letters of John* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996) 132. He continues, “If they were validating their new theological insights through the authority of the Spirit, as I suspect they were doing, and if John’s congregation likewise shares in this Spirit *equally*, this self-promoting authority diminishes.”

Brief Summary and Analysis of the Role of the Congregation.

In light of the passages just examined, we can say with confidence that the role of the congregation in the New Testament includes at least the following:

1. Maintaining a primary commitment to the truth of the gospel, that is, the word of Christ (above any commitment to a leader or a church tradition; Gal 1:6-9; Col 3:16; cf. Matt 28:20; 1 Thess 2:13; 1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:1-23 [esp. v. 11]; 15:1-4; 2 Cor 11:1-4; Rom 16:25-27).
2. Ministering to others in such a way that the church is strengthened or built up. This includes – among other things – admonishing, encouraging, teaching, serving, and submitting to one another (1 Thess 5:11, 14; 1 Cor 11:17-34; 12-14 [esp. 14:26]; Rom 12:4-8; 15:14; Col 3:16; Eph 4:11-12; 5:18-21; 1 Pet 4:10-11).
3. Disciplining and ultimately restoring church members whose sin has affected – or could affect – the whole congregation (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:1-13; 6:1; 2 Cor 2:5-11).
4. Selecting – and, in some cases, sending out – qualified church members to function in leadership roles (Acts 6:1-6; 11:19-24; 13:1-3; 15:3, 22; 1 Cor 16:3; 2 Cor 8:18-19).⁷²
5. Respecting, appreciating, recognizing, acknowledging, honoring, remembering, and imitating those who are working hard at leading the congregation (1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Cor 16:15-18; 1 Tim 5:17; Heb 13:7; But not boasting about them! 1 Cor 1:10-13; 3:21). Plus,
6. Providing financial support for congregational leaders who labor in the word of God (Gal 6:6; 1 Cor 9:7-14; 1 Tim 5:17-18; cf. Luke 10:7). Further,

⁷¹ I. Howard Marshall, *The Epistles of John* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1978) 162.

⁷² However, it is probable that in all of the cases in the New Testament, the congregation(s) were selecting and sending out leaders that were known to them, being members of the congregation themselves. Today, it is not unusual to be considering leadership candidates from all over the country who have had no prior relationship with the local church and thus are not known to the congregation outside of the candidating process. This situation obviously makes it more difficult for the congregation as a whole to meaningfully fulfill this particular aspect of their role.

7. Obeying and submitting to those who “have devoted themselves to the service of the saints” and who “[speak] the word of God to you” (not blind obedience, but willingly yielding to them in love; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Cor 16:15-18; Heb 13:7, 17; cf. Acts 6:1-6; 15:1-35; Eph 5:21).
8. Evaluating or testing spiritual ministries that would impact – or are impacting – the congregation (1 Thess 5:21; 1 Cor 14:29; 1 John 2:26-27; 4:1). And, if necessary,
9. Disciplining – even excommunicating – false teachers who threaten the health and growth of the church (Gal 1:6-9; Rom 16:17; Col 2:8; 2 John 10; cf. Acts 15; 1 Tim 1:3-4).

All of this affirms the reality of congregational *authority* (specifically in the areas noted), but it does not necessarily lead to the notion of congregational *government* (at least in the purely democratic sense). To be sure, the church as a whole is “a holy priesthood” (1 Pet 2:5) and “God’s temple” (1 Cor 3:16), where all serve the Lord and have equal access to him by the indwelling Holy Spirit. However, in the church, leaders are called and gifted by God to lead and the congregation is urged to follow, and therefore this “leading authority” must be upheld as well. Such will be the focus of part two of this study.