

SERVING: STRATEGY TO LEAD LIKE JESUS

As pastors, we want to lead like Jesus. To do so, we must adopt the leadership strategy He modeled. It is *the* New Testament way for pastors, as under-shepherds of the Chief Shepherd, to lead. Jesus promised a blessing for those who follow His management style. It will also allow the church you lead to be much stronger in the Lord. However, like so many other things in God's Kingdom, Jesus' pastoral strategy is counter-intuitive. Compared to worldly authority, it is truly otherworldly.

PROFIT

A major component of Jesus' leadership strategy was for pastors to serve the church by taking the time to build congregational consensus. The mind of Christ is more likely to be found when the leaders guide the whole congregation to wrestle corporately with major decisions. Church members are encouraged when they realize that everyone's suggestions are respectfully weighed in accordance with Scripture. Unity is strengthened, and the church can more easily be guided by the Spirit. In this process, the role of the leadership includes helping to build consensus by teaching what Scripture says on an issue, having private conversations with church members about decisions, appealing to those who differ, and, after much persuasion, calling on any dissenting minority to yield to the leadership and the rest of the congregation. Adopting Jesus' example can make the church's decision-making process both unifying and edifying for the whole congregation.

PROOF #1—THE AUTHORITY OF PASTORS: AS CHILDREN AND SLAVES

Contrasting the authority of secular political leaders with that of church leaders, Jesus said: "The kings of the Gentiles exercise lordship over them, and those in authority over them are called benefactors. But not so with you. Rather, let the greatest among you become as the youngest, and the leader as one who serves" (**Lk 22:25–26**). Let us think about this for a minute. How much authority does the youngest person in a family have? How much authority does a household servant have over his employer? Although it is true that Jesus was a master of hyperbole, there is an underlying truth that must not be glossed over. Pastors are to be servant leaders. Their attitude should be one of humility in leadership: not kingly authority that lords it over others. Pastors must lead with a servant's heart. In harmony with Jesus' words, Peter instructed elders to "shepherd the flock of God ... not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock" (**1Pt 5:1–3**).¹

Jesus offered Himself as an example for church leaders to follow: "Who is the greater, one who reclines at table or one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at table? But I am among you as the one who serves" (**Lk 22:27**). On another occasion, Jesus washed the disciples' feet to make the point that anyone who wants to be a church leader must first learn to be the servant of all. He said: "Do you understand what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord, and you are right, for so I am. If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example, that you also should do just as I have done to you. Truly, truly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master, nor

¹ The New Testament uses the words pastor, elder, and overseer (or bishop) interchangeably without any hierarchical ranking (Acts 20:17, 28, Titus 1:5–7, 1 Pt 5:1–3). They are synonymous terms.

is a messenger greater than the one who sent him. If you know these things, blessed are you if you do them” (**Jn 13:12–17**). Do we want to receive God’s blessing as church leaders? Then we must live out what Jesus modeled and wield our authority with a servant’s heart.

PROOF #2—ELDER RULE PROPERLY UNDERSTOOD

Because Scripture mentions elders who “rule well” (**1Ti 5:17**), it is obvious that God intended for pastors to serve in a management capacity. The word underlying “rule” literally means “to stand before,” i.e., directing or managing others. A secondary meaning is to stand before in the sense of caring for or giving aid to others as would a nurse or attending physician.² Combining these two definitions helps to frame the management style that is to be employed by pastors.

How can someone who has only the authority of children or slaves be expected to rule? **Hebrews 13:17** instructs believers to *obey* church leaders.³ The common Greek word for “obey” (*hupakouo*) was used to refer to situations such as children obeying their parents and slaves their masters (**Ehp 6:1, 5**). However, the common word for “obey” is not found in **13:17**. Instead, *peitho*, which fundamentally means persuade or convince, is used.⁴ In Greek mythology, “Peitho” was the name of a goddess, a consort of Aphrodite, who personified persuasion.⁵ Consistent with this root meaning, **McReynolds’** interlinear translation of *peitho* in **13:17** is “persuade.”⁶ One expositor went a step further and stated that with *peitho*, “the obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.”⁷ Lenski’s comment on this text was that those who allow themselves to be convinced by someone would obey that person.⁸ In our passage, it is found in the present imperative middle/passive form, which means “obey.”⁹ However, the author’s use of *peitho* suggests that this obedience is born of dialog, teaching, persuasion, and argument. Mindless obedience is not what is envisioned. Someone who is persuaded of something will act on it, obeying it with joyful conviction.

One of the qualifications of an elder is the ability to teach (**1Ti 3:2**). This is because church leaders have to persuade by teaching the truth. **Dwight Eisenhower** captured the idea behind **Hebrews 13:17** when he said: “I would rather try to persuade a man to go along, because once I have persuaded him he will stick. If I scare him, he will stay just as long as he is scared, and then he is gone.”¹⁰ Elders are not to simply pronounce decisions from on high like popes. The servant pastor sells instead of tells. Ideally, the obedience described in **Hebrews 13:17** will happen after a process of persuasion.

Hebrews 13:17 further instructs believers to *submit* to their church leaders. However, the common Greek word for “submit” (*hupotasso*) is not found here.¹¹ Instead, the classical Greek word *hupeiko*, a synonym for *hupotasso*, which means to yield or to give way, was chosen by the

² *Proistémi*, Bauer, *Lexicon*, 707.

³ The New Testament usually refers to church leaders in the plural. The idea of a single pastor over a congregation was foreign to the early church.

⁴ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 639. Other examples of *peitho* are found in Luke 16:31 and Acts 17:4 and 21:14.

⁵ “Peitho,” en.Wikipedia.org. Accessed October 5, 2017.

⁶ Paul McReynolds, *Word Study Greek–English New Testament* (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1999), 819.

⁷ W.E. Vine, *Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words* (Iowa Falls, IA: Riverside Book & Bible House, 1952), 124.

⁸ R. C. H. Lenski, *Interpretation of the Epistle to the Hebrews and the Epistle of James* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing, 1966), 490.

⁹ Horst Balz & Gerhard Schneider, eds., *Exegetical Dictionary of the New Testament*, Vol. 3 (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1993), 63.

¹⁰ QuotationsPage.com, #2662, accessed September 30, 2016.

¹¹ Used, for example, in Romans 13:1, Colossians 3:18, Ephesians 5:21, and 1 Peter 2:13.

author.¹² Rienecker defined it more precisely as “to give in, to yield, to submit.”¹³ *Hupeiko* was used elsewhere with reference to contestants (such as wrestlers) and meant to yield after a struggle.¹⁴ The nuanced understanding *hupeiko* is not that of a structure, such as civil government, to which someone automatically submits; rather, it is submission at the end of a process, struggle, or contest. It is a portrait of serious discussion and dialogue prior to one party’s giving way.

In summary, the relationship presented in the New Testament is not mindless slave-like obedience between leaders and those who are led. God’s flock must be open to being persuaded (*peitho*) by their shepherds. Leaders, in turn, must be committed to ongoing teaching and discussion. However, there will be times when someone or a few in the fellowship cannot be persuaded. Congregations are made up of both mature and immature Christians, of those who walk in the Spirit and those who do not, of those with the gift of discernment and those without it. Impasses will arise. **Hebrews 13:17** calls on dissenters, after much persuasion, to yield (*hupeiko*) to the wisdom of their church leaders. This submission, however, is to come only after dialogue, discussion, and reasoning. Thus, even though final decision-making authority resides with the leadership, a critical aspect of elder rule must include a commitment to serve the Body by building Spirit-led congregational consensus. Just as a person can have an opinion without being opinionated or make judgments without being judgmental, so too a pastor has authority to rule without being authoritarian.

PROOF #3—PASTORS: STAR PLAYERS OR SIDELINE COACHES?

Amazingly, church leaders were given little prominence in the epistles. Paul’s highly theological epistle to the Romans was addressed simply to the “saints” (**Ro 1:7**), with no special mention of the shepherds. The two letters to the Corinthian congregation were addressed to the whole “church” (**1Co 1:2; 2Co 1:1**). There was no mention of the pastors in either the greetings or anywhere else in the body of the letters. That these two epistles deal with critical leadership topics such as the Lord’s Supper, worship services, and church discipline makes this all the more remarkable.

The greeting in **Galatians** was to all the “churches” in the region. No mention was made of the leadership (**1:2**). Throughout **Galatians**, the readers were addressed simply as “brothers.” The “saints in Ephesus” were the designated recipients of their letter (**Eph 1:1**). The importance of pastor-teachers was mentioned in **Ephesians 4:11**, but even there the pastors were not written to directly. **Philippians 1:1** breaks the pattern of leadership neglect. The overseers were greeted along with the saints. However, no other mention was made of these leaders, nor was anything else written directly to them. The salutation in **Colossians 1:2** was simply to “the saints and faithful brothers.” Nothing was written directly to or about the leaders. In the last chapter of **Hebrews**, the readers were asked to “greet all your leaders” (**13:24**). Not only did the author not greet the leaders directly, but he assumed they would not even read the letter.

This failure to focus on the leaders continues in the salutations of **1& 2 Thessalonians**, **James**, **1& 2 Peter**, **1 & 2 John**,¹⁵ and **Jude**. Of all the letters to the churches, it is only in **1**

¹² Bauer, *Lexicon*, 838.

¹³ Rienecker, *Linguistic Key*, 720.

¹⁴ “hupeiko”, BibleStudyTools.org. Accessed February 25, 2021.

¹⁵ 3 John was written to Gaius, a church leader, rather than an entire congregation.

Peter 5 that elders are written to directly.¹⁶ None of this should be taken to mean that pastors are unimportant. It is simply that shepherds are themselves sheep too. The pastors were a subset of the church as a whole. There was no strong clergy–laity distinction. **Ephesians 4:11–12** reveals that the duty of pastor-teachers is to equip the saints for the work of the ministry. This, combined with the apostolic spotlight on entire congregations rather than just pastors, suggests that pastors are to serve as sideline coaches rather than star players.

Much may be gleaned from the New Testament writers' direct appeals to entire congregations. They went to great lengths to influence all believers—not just those in leadership. The apostles did not simply bark out orders or issue injunctions as military commanders might do. Instead, they treated other believers as equals and appealed directly to them. The priesthood of the believer was actively practiced. Local pastors no doubt led in much the same way. Their primary authority was in their ability to influence through the truth. The respect they were given was earned honestly. It was the opposite of military authority wherein soldiers respect the uniform but not necessarily the man. **Aristotle** astutely stated: “We believe good men more fully and more readily than others. This is true generally whatever the question is, and absolutely true where exact certainty is impossible and opinions are divided ... his character may almost be called the most effective means of persuasion he possesses.”¹⁷

Hebrews 13:7 reflects the fact that the leadership style employed by church leaders is primarily one of direction by example: “Remember your leaders.... Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.” Similarly, **1 Thessalonians 5:13** reveals that leaders are to be respected not because of the automatic authority of appointed rank but because of the value of their service: “esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” As Jesus said: “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave” (**Mt 20:25–28**).

In summary, the Apostles wrote to entire churches and not just the leadership. The Apostles taught, gave reasons, persuaded, and guided as opposed to merely issuing orders. Servant pastors should serve by leading in this manner. Leaders are to be great in service.

PROOF #4—CHURCH AS CONGRESS

We will have a poorer understanding of Christ's church if we fail to factor in the dynamics of the original Greek word for church: *ekklésia*. With so much emphasis today on the separation of church and state, government is seldom associated with the church. However, in Jesus' day, *ekklésia* was used outside the New Testament to refer to a political assembly that was regularly convened for the purpose of making decisions.¹⁸ According to **Thayer**, it was “an assembly of the people convened at the public place of council for the purpose of deliberation.”¹⁹ **Bauer** defines *ekklésia* as an “assembly of a regularly summoned political body.”²⁰ Writing for *The New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, **Lothar Coenen** noted that *ekklésia* was “clearly characterized as a political phenomenon, repeated according to certain

¹⁶ The letters to Timothy and Titus are referred to as “pastoral epistles” because of their emphasis on pastors. However, Timothy and Titus were not local pastors. They were apostolic workers sent by Paul to various places to organize churches.

¹⁷ *Aristotle's Rhetoric*, Book 1, Chapter 2.

¹⁸ In the Scriptures, *ekklésia* was also used to refer to a gathering of Israel, to the church as the totality of Christians living in one location, and to the universal church to which all believers belong.

¹⁹ Thayer, *Lexicon*, 196.

²⁰ Bauer, *Lexicon*, 240.

rules and within a certain framework. It was the assembly of full citizens, functionally rooted in the constitution of the democracy, an assembly in which fundamental political and judicial decisions were taken ... the word *ekklésia*, throughout the Greek and Hellenistic areas, always retained its reference to the assembly of the polis.”²¹

The secular meaning of *ekklésia* can be seen several times in **Acts 19**, where it is translated as “legal assembly” rather than “church.”²² Two of the occurrences in **Acts 19** refer to a meeting of silversmiths convened by Demetrius. These trade union members rushed into the theater where civic decisions were normally made in order to decide what to do about a damaged reputation and lost business.²³ However, they overstepped their jurisdiction, so the town clerk counseled that the matter be settled by the “legal” *ekklésia* rather than the trade union *ekklésia* (**Acts 19:37–39**).

Why did Jesus choose such a politically loaded word (*ekklésia*) to describe His people and their meetings?²⁴ Had He merely wanted to describe a gathering with no political connotations, Jesus could have used *sunagogé*. Perhaps it was because Jesus intended His followers to function together with a purpose that parallels that of the political government. If so, believers have the responsibility to make decisions together through consensus. God’s people have a decision-making mandate. A church is a body of Kingdom citizens authorized to weigh major issues, to make decisions, and to pass judgment on various issues. The *Baptist Faith and Message* of 2000 stated: “Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes.”²⁵

The New Testament contains many examples of God’s people making decisions as a body. After promising to build His *ekklésia* on the rock of Peter’s revealed confession, Jesus immediately spoke of the keys to the kingdom of heaven and of binding and loosing (**Mt 16:13–20**). Keys symbolize the authority to open and to close something. “Kingdom” is a political term, and binding and loosing involve the authority to make decisions. Was this authority given to Peter only? In **Matthew 18:15–20**, the authority to bind and loose was conferred on the whole *ekklésia* by Jesus. In **Acts 1:15–26**, Peter charged the Jerusalem church as a whole with finding a replacement for Judas. Later, the apostles looked to the church corporately to choose men to administer the church’s food program (**Acts 6:1–6**). **Acts 14:23** indicates that the apostles appointed elders with the wide agreement of the local congregation.²⁶

The Apostles were the standard for doctrine and practice. If ever there were an appropriate time and place for the Apostles to make a decision on their own apart from the church, it would have been the Jerusalem Council (**Acts 15**). The very nature of the Gospel had been called into question. Yet, even here, the amazing fact is that the Apostles included not only the local Jerusalem elders but also the whole church.²⁷ **Colin Brown** observed: “In the council’s decision-making they are accorded no special preeminence.... It is consistent with the non-authoritarian, collegiate character of church leadership which Acts consistently depicts (1:13–26;

²¹ Lothan Coenen, “Church,” *New International Dictionary of New Testament Theology*, Vol. 1, Colin Brown, General Editor (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971), 291.

²² Acts 19:32, 39, 41 (NIV).

²³ “Theater,” Ephesus.us, accessed September 1, 2016. There was so much confusion that a majority did not know why they had been summoned.

²⁴ Matthew 16:13–20 & 18:15–20. In the *Septuagint*, wilderness gatherings of the ancient Israelites were called *ekklésia*.

²⁵ Article VI, “The Church.”

²⁶ “Paul and Barnabas had elders elected” (footnoted alternative translation, NIV).

²⁷ Acts 15:4, 12, 22.

6:2ff; 8:14ff; 11:1ff; 13:1–4).”²⁸ Servant leadership is decentralized. Furthermore, **1 Corinthians 5** reveals that the church corporately has the authority to lovingly discipline unrepentant members.

PROFESSORS

Commenting on the general nature of congregational involvement, **Donald Guthrie** observed: “These early communities displayed a remarkable virility, which was a particular characteristic of that age. The churches were living organisms rather than organizations. The promptings of the Spirit were more important than ecclesiastical edicts or Episcopal pronouncements. When decisions were made, they were made by the whole company of believers, not simply by the officials.... It would be a mistake, nevertheless, to suppose because of this that the church was run on democratic lines. The Acts record makes unmistakably clear that the dominating factor was the guidance of the Holy Spirit.”²⁹

Guthrie further said: “Any examination of Paul’s view of the leadership within the Christian community must begin from his basic idea that the church is a body of which Christ is the head. No authority structure is possible without the supreme authority being vested in Christ Himself. Moreover, even here the authority must be understood as organic and not organizational ... it is the most intimate kind of authority.... Any officials who are mentioned must be regarded as exercising their various functions under the direction of the head.... Although the Christian church is not a democracy, neither is it an autocracy. Indeed, the one instance mentioned in the NT where one man sought to lord it over the community is regarded with strong disfavor (3 John 9–10). The NT idea of the church is a community in which Christ, not man, is the head (Col. 1:18; Eph. 1:22). It is theocratic, not democratic. Its sense of law and order is dominated by God’s will (cf. 1 Cor. 5:3–5).”³⁰

The New Testament approach is for leaders to involve the whole church in major decisions, relying on the Holy Spirit’s guidance and seeking to build congregational consensus on important matters. Early church government was a combination of elder rule and congregational consensus under Christ as the Head. If the church leaned too much in one direction, it would become a dictatorship, and too much in the other, there would be mob rule. The pastors and the church are in a nuanced dance of mutual respect as they look to Jesus as the Head, the caller of the dance steps.

PROVISION

The process a church goes through to achieve consensus can be just as important as the consensus that is finally achieved. Consensus governing takes time, commitment, mutual edification, and a great deal of brotherly love. It truly *can* work in smaller churches, such as those in the New Testament era.³¹ We must love enough to accept one another and to work through our disagreements. The concept of consensus could be called government by unity, oneness, harmony, or mutual agreement. Do we really trust in the Holy Spirit to work in our lives and churches?

²⁸ Brown, Vol. 1, *Dictionary*, 135.

²⁹ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1981), 741.

³⁰ *Ibid.*, 760 & 946.

³¹ Because the early church met in the private homes of its wealthier members, each congregation was necessarily small (scores of people rather than hundreds or thousands).

It is important to consider what the Lord has done to help His people. First, our Lord Himself prayed “that they may be one as we are one ... that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you.... May they be brought into complete unity” (**Jn 17:11, 20–23**). Because Jesus asked this on our behalf, unity is certainly achievable.

Another provision God made for our unity lies in the Lord’s Supper: “Because there is one loaf, we, who are many, are one body, for we all partake of the one loaf” (**1Co 10:17**). The prepositions “because” and “for” are important. Partaking of the Lord’s Supper not only symbolizes unity, but it even creates it.³²

Finally, Christ gave the church various leadership gifts (such as pastor-teacher) for a purpose: “until we all reach unity in the faith” (**Eph 4:11–13**). Leaders play a critical role in building consensus.

PROPOSITION

Jesus said that church leaders are to become like children and slaves: those with the least authority in worldly Roman society. Jesus Himself came not as a king but as a servant. A servant leader is concerned about the needs and desires of others, truly respects the values and dignity of the brethren, believes in and practices the priesthood of the believer, adopts a participative management style, and takes the time and effort to build congregational consensus in problem-solving and decision-making. Serving in this way involves shepherding, community-building, making disciples, teaching, persuasion, listening, explanation, empathy, humility, and coaching.

The church as a whole may be compared to a congress with authority to make decisions and to render judgment that is binding on its members. Church leaders are congressmen as well. However, they are appointed to a special committee whose purpose is to study the issues and to make recommendations, teach, inform, or prompt the congress. Church leaders should not normally make decisions on behalf of the church as an alternative to seeking consensus. Pastors should guide, teach, suggest, and build consensus. However, when the church finds itself in gridlock, unable to resolve an issue, the pastors serve as predetermined arbitrators or tiebreakers. In these instances, those in opposition are called on to submit in the Lord to the elders’ leadership and wisdom (**Heb 13:17**). Spirit-filled elder rule, combined with congregational consensus on major decisions, gives free rein to the Holy Spirit and puts the church in a better position to discern the mind of Christ and to walk in the Light of God’s Word.

PRACTICUM

Consensus vs. Simple Majority: Should decisions be made by *consensus* or *simple majority*? It is important to consider what is implied in these two options. Consensus means general agreement, a representative trend, or an opinion. It is related to the words “consent” and “consensual.” In contrast, majority rule can be a 51% dictatorship for the 49% who do not agree. This works against unity. Consensus, however, seeks to build unity.

Consider the following biblical texts: “How good and pleasant it is when brothers live together in unity” (**Ps 133:1**). “I appeal to you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that all of you agree with one another so that there may be no divisions among you and that you may be perfectly united in mind and thought” (**1Co 1:10**). “Make every effort to keep the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace” (**Eph 4:3**). “Make my joy complete by being like-minded, having the same love, being one in spirit and purpose” (**Php 2:2**). “Clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience. Bear with each other and forgive

³² See Chapter 1 for more details.

whatever grievances you may have against one another. Forgive as the Lord forgave you. And over all these virtues put on love, which binds them all together in perfect unity” (Col 3:12–15).

Systematic, well-presented, biblically-based teaching that is soaked in fervent prayer will facilitate mature discussion. Even though leaders will bring teachings that are relevant to the issues under consideration in church meetings, much of the consensus-building process will occur outside a church service. It will happen one on one, brother to brother in many ways, including the fellowship of the Lord’s Supper, midweek social visits, telephone conversations, text messages, and email. Bringing church members into agreement requires time, patience, humility, gentleness, and the ministry of elders. There is a major difference between consensus and simple majority rule, which involves voting and a 51% “win.”

Congregational Voting: In the consensus process, there may never be a time that a vote is taken. The leadership should know each brother’s position on the basis of individual conversations. Due consideration should be given to the opinions of godly, mature, longstanding members rather than those who have just begun to attend. After consensus has been reached and any few remaining dissenters have been asked to yield to the elders, an announcement can be made and the proposal implemented.

Should a general meeting of the church be held to ascertain whether there is consensus on an issue? Ideally, the church should be small enough that the leadership knows where each person stands without necessarily having to call a general meeting. However, it would be appropriate to have special meetings, apart from worship services, for teaching about and discussing important issues.

Who makes decisions in the consensus process? Should it be men and women or only men? Everyone’s thoughts are important. In the Trinity, God the Father and God the Son are equal; however, the Son voluntarily submits to the Father’s will. Even though men and women are equal in God’s sight, wives are called on to submit to their husbands. God is the head of Christ, Christ is the head of the church, and the husband is the head of his family. One way this divine order is expressed in the church is that only men are to serve as elders and teachers. It is further expressed when men, as heads of their homes, represent their wives’ opinions in the consensus process. Certainly, wives have valid opinions and insights. These concerns may be expressed directly by the women or through their husbands. A loving husband will carefully consider his wife’s views, but it is the brothers who have the last say. It is the brothers who must make the decisions that are binding on the church (See 1Co 11:1ff, 14:33–35; 1Ti 2:11–15).

In matters of mere preference, being considerate of the women and yielding to their desires is the appropriate course to take. However, in matters of theology or the application of Scripture, the men must make the final decisions. In his commentary on 1 Corinthians 14:33–35, R.C.H. Lenski quoted from an *Opinion of the Theological Faculty of Capital University*: “How the granting of voice and vote to women in all congregational meetings can do anything but place women completely on a level with men in all such meetings and gravely interfere with their divinely ordered subjection and obedience, we are unable to see.”³³

When do issues rise to a level that requires consensus? It is impractical to involve the entire church in every decision. The key is to focus on achieving consensus on major issues, such as major purchases, selecting elders and deacons, church discipline, determining the location for the church to meet, making major changes to the way meetings are conducted, planting new churches, supporting missionaries, and starting outreach ministries.

³³ R.C.H. Lenski, *Interpretation of I & II Corinthians* (Minneapolis: Augsburg Publishing House, 1943), 617.

When does the size of the congregation present a problem? No magic number is provided in the Scriptures for the optimal congregational size. If a church is too big for the elders to know and have a relationship with every man, it is too big. Consensus governing works best in a congregation that is small enough for everyone to know and love one another. Relationships must be strong enough to allow people to work through their disagreements without becoming upset and leaving the church. It is noteworthy that the early church met in Roman villas. The typical villa could accommodate approximately 100 people.³⁴

What about inactive or newly converted members? Do their voices count in the consensus process? There will almost always be spiritually immature people in a church. The opinions of the inactive should carry the same weight as their involvement with the church. This is precisely where **Hebrews 13:17** is relevant. After reasonable discussions and appeals, such persons are to listen and yield to the wisdom of the elders.

How should consensus apply to interpretations of the Bible? Certainly, we should study the Bible as individuals but not individualistically. We need to weigh our interpretations against the consensus of the Church: not just our local church but the Church universal. Historical humility is needed. To reject the time-honored conclusions of millions of our fellow believers over thousands of years is to effectively become little popes who fancy themselves as having the divine right to interpret Scripture autonomously.³⁵

The Scriptures teach that the Holy Spirit dwells in every believer. As we survey the beliefs of the Church around the world today and throughout the past two millennia, we can readily see several fundamental agreements about the correct interpretation of Scripture. This has to be more than coincidence. It is the work of the Spirit. Some of these general agreements are about matters such as the virgin birth, the Trinity, the deity of Christ, the propitiatory nature of Christ's death on the cross, the bodily resurrection of Christ, the future bodily return of Christ, the future bodily resurrection of the dead, and the inspiration of Scripture. When the church universal has arrived at a consensus about a doctrine, it becomes authoritative. Does one congregation have the right to defy the historical consensus of the church? These basic agreed-upon doctrines constitute the *regula fide*, the rule of faith. We need a good dose of historical humility.

Thus, we can see that there are limits to what a local church as a decision-making body should determine. No local church has a license to redefine the historical Christian faith. Some doctrines are simply not open for debate. Each *ekklésia* should operate within the bounds of orthodoxy. The elders are to consider the harmful and heretical ideas to be off limits (**1Ti 1:3**). The reason is that the church at large today and throughout time has already reached a consensus on certain fundamental interpretations of Scripture. The Holy Spirit has not failed in His mission of guiding the church into all truth (**Jn 16:13**). **G. K. Chesterton** said: "Tradition means giving votes to the most obscure of all classes, our ancestors. It is the democracy of the dead. Tradition refuses to submit to the small and arrogant oligarchy of those who merely happen to be walking about."³⁶

Plural Leadership: New Testament references to local church leaders are generally in the plural. For example: "they had appointed elders for them in every church" (**Acts 14:23**), and "call for the elders of the church" (**Jam 5:14**). From such texts, many have inferred that each local church should have a plurality of elders. Generally, each church should have as many men

³⁴ To read more on size considerations, see Chapter 5.

³⁵ Keith Mathison, *The Shape of Sola Scriptura* (Moscow, ID: Canon Press, 2001).

³⁶ "Tradition Is the Democracy of the Dead," Chesterton.org, accessed September 1, 2016.

as are qualified to serve as elders. Ideally, it should be a plurality.³⁷ The following are some of the benefits of plural leadership:

1. The chances of a dictatorship developing are reduced. We should remember **Lord Acton's** wise words: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men." Even if only one brother is qualified to serve as an elder, an understanding that elder rule is to include consensus building among all the brothers will help to avoid the development of a modern Diotrephes: "I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church" (**3Jn 1:9–10**).
2. Dealing with an attack of wolves is easier: "I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them" (**Acts 20:29–30**). **Ecclesiastes 4:12** says: "Though one may be overpowered, two can defend themselves. A cord of three strands is not quickly broken."
3. There is greater wisdom: "By wise guidance you can wage your war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory" (**Pr 24:6**).
4. As reflected in Jethro's advice to Moses (**Ex 18:13–27**), having several elders would allow for the sharing of the workload, e.g., hospital visitation, teaching, counseling, and dealing with problems.
5. It taps into a broader range of spiritual gifts. Elders do not have the same gifts or motivations: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching" (**1Ti 5:17**).
6. It has been said that it is lonely at the top. Being a sole elder can be lonely and discouraging. Having several elders makes for mutual encouragement.

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

1. What can Luke 22:24–27 teach about a church leader's authority?
2. To what did the Greek word *ekklésia* originally refer?
3. Why did Jesus choose a political word such as *ekklésia* to describe His followers?
4. What are some New Testament examples of God's people making decisions as a body?
5. What is the difference between majority rule and congregational consensus?
6. What is the difference between consensus and unanimity?
7. What provisions has God made to help a church achieve consensus?
8. How do pastors build congregational consensus?
9. In Hebrews 13:17, believers are encouraged to obey and submit to their leaders. How does this square with congregational rule?

NTRF.org has audio, video, and a teacher's discussion guide on leadership.

Revised 01/19/21

³⁷As to the difference between an elder, overseer (KJV: "bishop"), and pastor (shepherd), an examination of Acts 20:17, 28–30, Titus 1:5–7, and 1 Peter 5:1–3 will show the synonymous usage.

