

Principles of Church Polity  
GABC Elders  
February 8, 2018

## The Nature of a Local Church

The local church is a clearly defined community of God's people who repent of their sins and believe in the Lord Jesus Christ, who profess their repentance and belief through baptism and evidence it in life, and who covenant to assemble regularly to live out a common Christian faith as they hear God's Word taught, baptize new believers, take the Lord's Supper, sing praises to God, pray, evangelize, encourage one another in the faith, practice and submit to church discipline, and exercise gifts of the Holy Spirit for the strengthening of the whole.

## Church Membership

1. Church membership is (a) an individual believer's public statement that the person affirms and commits to the faith and practice of a local church and promises to join actively with that body, and (b) the local church's public statement that, based upon evidences of repentance and faith, it holds the person to be a genuine Christian believer and that it accepts him or her into fellowship.
2. Churches distinguish between those inside a church and those outside it.<sup>1</sup>
3. Church members are committed to the entirety of a church body.<sup>2</sup>
4. Churches keep track of members.<sup>3</sup>
5. There are requirements for becoming a member of a Christian church including being a baptized believer.<sup>4</sup>
6. There are legitimate behavioral expectations for members of a Christian church.<sup>5</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> See 1 Corinthians 5 including verses 1-2 (Paul says to Corinthian church, "It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans. . . . Let him who has done this be removed from among you.") and verses 11-13 (Paul tells the Corinthian church "not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler—not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you." ). See also 2 Corinthians 2:6 (referring to a majority of the church) and 6:14 (Paul commands the church to not be unequally yoked with unbelievers).

<sup>2</sup> See John 13:35, 1 Corinthians 3, James 2:1-9, 1 John 4:20, and references throughout the New Testament to the church as a building, body, and household.

<sup>3</sup> See Matthew 18:17 (concerning a member in unrepentant sin who refuses to repent after being confronted by the church as a whole is to be excluded from fellowship/membership), 1 Corinthians 5 (concerning distinction between those inside and outside the church), 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 (where Paul urges the church to take back into fellowship/membership a man who has repented after being disciplined by the church), 1 Timothy 5:9 (where the church tracks widows and by implication its members).

<sup>4</sup> See, e.g., Acts 2:41-42, Matthew 28, and Colossians 2.

<sup>5</sup> Those include regular attendance (see Hebrews 10:25), regular and cheerful support/giving, see (2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Psalm 24:1, and Acts 4:32-37), loving Christian brothers and sisters in the church (see John 13:35 and 1 John 4:20), participation in the Lord's Supper (see 1 Corinthians 11:17-34), exercising God-given gifts for the benefit of the local church (see 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 14:12 and Ephesians 4:12-13), and devotion to learning the Bible, fellowship with other members, breaking of bread, and prayers (see Acts 2:41-42).

## Congregationalism

1. Congregationalism is the belief that final human authority over a local church rests with its congregation – not with a pastor, its elders, its deacons, its denomination, or a denominational leader.
2. A congregational local church as a whole has final decision-making authority in several areas. Those areas include discipline<sup>6</sup>, disputes<sup>7</sup>, doctrine<sup>8</sup>, membership<sup>9</sup>, and selection of leaders/representative.<sup>10</sup>
3. Acceptance of congregationalism does not imply that every decision in a local church has to be (or should be) made by the congregation as a whole.<sup>11</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> In **Matthew 18:15-17**, Jesus says that the last step in disciplining an unrepentant church member who has sinned against another church member is to take the matter to the church as a whole. In **1 Corinthians 1:2** and **5:1-13**, the entire church is ultimately held responsible for not confronting immorality of another member in the church. **2 Corinthians 2:6-8** implies that "the majority" of the Corinthian church did in fact administer discipline to (i.e., punished) one of its members.

<sup>7</sup> In **1 Corinthians 1:1-4**, Paul rebukes the Corinthian church for allowing those outside the church to judge/resolve personal disputes among those inside the church. Instead, he places responsibility for settling disputes between those inside the church on the church as a whole. Resting the final human authority and responsibility over disputes with the congregation as a whole is also seen in **Acts 6:1-6**, where the whole church selects deacons to help resolve a dispute between two factions within the church, and **Matthew 18:15-17**, where Jesus gives final authority to the whole church to resolve a particular kind of dispute—dealing with the sin of one member against another member.

<sup>8</sup> In **Galatians 1:2** and **1:6-9**, Paul places upon a congregation as a whole the ultimate responsibility to judge whether the message being preached in the church is the true Gospel. In **1 Timothy 3:15**, Paul explains that the "household of God, which is the church of the living God, [is to be] a pillar and buttress of truth." In **2 Timothy 4:3-4**, Paul tells Timothy that the time will come when people (i.e., churches) "will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths." In this way, Paul is holding the entire church accountable if they put up with such false teachers. Finally, nearly all of the New Testament letters are written to churches as a whole, instructing them on fundamental matters of Christian doctrine, practice, and responsibilities.

<sup>9</sup> In **2 Corinthians 2:6-8**, after the majority of the Corinthian church had administered discipline against one of its members, Paul encourages the entire church to welcome the man back into its fellowship (i.e., membership) after he had repented. Paul but leaves to the church the final decision on allowing a person back into fellowship. See **2 Corinthians 2:10**.

<sup>10</sup> See **Acts 6:1-6**, **Acts 11:22**, **Acts 15:2-4**, **1 Corinthians 16:1-4**, and **2 Timothy 4:2-3** (where Paul assumes the church selects its own preachers/teachers and should remove those who are not sound).

<sup>11</sup> Such a view would be inconsistent with **Hebrews 13:17**, which commands Christians to "[o]bey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account." The command to obey and submit to church leaders necessarily means that those leaders have a certain amount of authority to make particular decisions that are to be followed by the church unless contrary to the Word of God. In many instances, there is wisdom in including the congregation as a whole in a decision-making process, even if church leaders have final authority over a particular decision.

## Elders

1. The words "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" interchangeably refer to the same local church office<sup>12</sup>.
2. Elders have serious/weighty responsibilities in a local church. These include decision-making<sup>13</sup>, paying careful attention to themselves and the whole church while caring for God's flock<sup>14</sup>, hospitality and teaching and managing the household of God<sup>15</sup>, ruling/leading/directing the affairs of the church, preaching and teaching<sup>16</sup>, being God's stewards/trustees/managers, being hospitable, giving instruction in sound doctrine, and rebuking those who contradict God's Word<sup>17</sup>, keeping watch over the souls of all church members<sup>18</sup>, praying for the sick and anointing them with oil<sup>19</sup>, shepherding the congregation, exercising oversight of the church, and being an example to the church<sup>20</sup>.
3. There are serious Biblical qualifications for elders<sup>21</sup>.
4. Although the New Testament does not say a church *must* have a plurality of elders (and does not prescribe a fixed number of them), the New Testament regularly refers to elders of a local church in the plural.
5. Congregational churches as a whole approve/vote on their elders. The Acts 6:1-6 pattern of deacon selection is extended to the office of elder. In doing so, the "appoint"[ing] of elders referred to in Titus 1:5 and Acts 14:23 is read in light of the use of the word in Acts 6:3,5-6 where it is presumed to mean something more like "ordain" than "select." (Selection of elders by ones outside a local church would violate the basic principle of congregationalism.)
6. The Scriptures are silent on the issues of a) a church automatically recognizing as an elder a person that has served as an elder in another congregation and b) permanent recognition as an elder in a single church. Practices on these matters vary among congregational churches. The practices have the potential to conflict with a need to exercise church discipline concerning an elder and the possibility that a person is qualified to serve at one point in life but later ceases to be so.
7. There is Biblical support for elder "ordination" consisting of public acknowledgement, prayer, and laying on of hands<sup>22</sup>.

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<sup>12</sup> See Acts 20:17-28.

<sup>13</sup> See Acts 16:4.

<sup>14</sup> See Acts 20:28.

<sup>15</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:1-5.

<sup>16</sup> See 1 Timothy 5:17.

<sup>17</sup> See Titus 1:7-9.

<sup>18</sup> See Hebrews 13:7.

<sup>19</sup> See James 5:14.

<sup>20</sup> See 1 Peter 5:4.

<sup>21</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9.

<sup>22</sup> See Acts 6:6.

## Deacons

1. The Bible word for deacon, "diakonos," means servant or minister.
2. The Bible does not discuss deacon responsibilities in great depth. In their first mention in the Bible, deacons were given the responsibility of serving tables for widows<sup>23</sup>. That service had several purposes. It fulfilled particular physical needs of the church by ensuring wise use of available ministry resources (but not deciding overall allocation of resources), by promoting unity in the church (being "shock absorbers") by serving impartially, and by supporting the ministry of the Word by freeing up others for preaching, teaching, and prayer. Scripture does not say that deacons shared the same responsibilities as elders or that they together functioned as a deliberative body.
3. The Bible gives serious qualifications for deacons. Deacons must be dignified/worthy of respect, not double-tongued/hypocritical, not addicted to much wine, not greedy, holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience, tested first and blameless, the husband of one wife, and managing children and household well<sup>24</sup>. Wives of deacons must be dignified, not slanderers, sober-minded, and faithful in all things<sup>25</sup>. Deacons are to be full of the Spirit and of wisdom and be men of good repute<sup>26</sup>.
4. Deacons are not required to be able to teach nor are they required to teach, but there is no prohibition on deacons teaching.
5. The Bible pattern is that the final selection of deacons should be made by the congregation as a whole<sup>27</sup>. Deacons are to be tested first before being selected, but the Bible does not explain in detail how that is to be done.

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<sup>23</sup> See Acts 6:1-6.

<sup>24</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

<sup>25</sup> See 1 Timothy 3:8-13.

<sup>26</sup> See Acts 6:1-6.

<sup>27</sup> See Acts 6:1-6.