

# Why We Are an Elder-Led Church

## Introduction

The question of church polity, or how local churches are governed, has been a subject of much discussion throughout church history resulting in a number of different approaches to how churches are led and how decisions are made. While it can safely be stated that the scriptures do not clearly prescribe a particular form of church governance in clear specific language, there are many passages that address leadership and authority in the local church and consequently speak to how decisions are made. In the absence of definitive commandments, one is left to weigh the Biblical evidence for and against the various forms of church governance in order to assess as clearly as possible where the weight of the evidence comes down. It is our conviction that the weight of evidence is strongly in favor of an elder-led or elder-rule model of church governance that considers and values the input and participation of the local church congregation as a part of how decisions are made particularly in areas of leadership, church discipline and other major decisions affecting the local church.

The following analysis presents our best attempt to weigh the Biblical evidence for a congregational- led church governance model versus an elder-led church governance model to demonstrate how we have arrived at holding these convictions. While this analysis may not cover every detail that could be presented in support of each view, it does attempt to include the major Biblical arguments that form the Biblical basis for holding convictions on each side of the argument. In presenting this argument we are attempting to summarize our best analysis of these issues and in no way intend or imply any disrespect for those who would hold differing views on these matters.

## The Biblical Case for Congregational-Led Church Polity

The arguments in support of congregational authority in the polity and decision-making of the local church are primarily drawn from 6 scriptural texts and one additional scriptural principle (the priesthood of all believers). The following is a summary of the congregationalist argument surrounding these seven things along with some comments on these arguments.

## 1. Matthew 18:15 - 20

Matthew 18:15 - 20 <sup>15</sup> “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. <sup>16</sup> But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. <sup>17</sup> If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. <sup>18</sup> Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven. <sup>19</sup> Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven. <sup>20</sup> For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

### Congregationalists hold the following:

- 1) “tell it to the church” in v. 17 refers to a local church congregation (this would generally not be in dispute). Consequently this passage describes a process whereby the local church body is making the decision regarding whether the offending person remains or is removed from the church through church discipline.
- 2) the pronouns in v. 18 referring to binding and loosing are plural providing further evidence that this is a congregational decision
- 3) the statement of Jesus in the midst of his people in v. 20 is a picture of Jesus being in the midst of his people (the congregation) as they make this decision
- 4) as this passage is a statement by Jesus himself, it therefore implies that Jesus is conferring the authority to make this kind of decision upon the congregation as a whole

### Comments

- 1) While this passage clearly indicates that the congregation plays a role in the church discipline process, it does not address how the decision is made or who makes it. “Tell it to the church” seems to imply that the church is informed of the situation and is then involved in calling the offending person to repentance. If the person does not repent, the entire

church has a responsibility in the exercise of church discipline and a role to play in that, particularly in how they interact with that individual who is under church discipline.

While there is no debate around these things there is no indication in the passage of how the decision to exercise church discipline is made, or as to the role of elders in that process.

The assumption that elders would not be a part of that process in some way is difficult to accept in light of the many clear texts that define their responsibility to lead and exercise oversight in the local church (these texts are described later in this document).

- 2) While Congregationalists may interpret this passage as lending support to a congregational decision-making model, this passage itself stops well short of saying anything definitive that would require that.

## **2. Acts 6:1 – 6**

*Acts 6:1 – 6* <sup>1</sup>Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. <sup>2</sup> And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. <sup>3</sup> Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. <sup>4</sup> But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” <sup>5</sup> And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. <sup>6</sup> These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

### Congregationalists hold the following:

The argument from this text is pretty straightforward. V. 3 states that the members of the congregation were to “pick out from among yourselves seven men.” This indicates a clear example where the congregation made the decision as to who these people were going to be who would serve in those leadership roles. Many scholars hold that this text is a formative passage for the role of deacons in the local church today which would consequently imply the congregation’s role in the selection and changing of leaders in the formal offices of the church today.

## Comments

- 1) While this is clearly a case of congregational involvement in the process of selecting these men, it should also be noted that the decision to appoint these men to serve in this role in v. 8 along with the decision as to how these men would be chosen was retained by the apostles. It was the apostles who appointed them and laid hands on them which would seem to imply the formal decision-making was done by the apostles in commissioning these men albeit with the involvement of the congregation in identifying appropriate candidates.
  
- 2) The uniqueness of this situation should also be noted as well. This was a situation where a problem arose within a specific ethnic sub-group of the church (the Hellenist Jews) where the widows were being neglected in the distribution of food. In a church of several thousand people it would be difficult for the apostles to know everyone well. The decision to have the congregation select people from among the group who they (the people themselves) would trust and have confidence in to handle this responsibility fairly was wise leadership on the part of the apostles. However, as mentioned previously, it was the apostles who determined how it would be handled and who retained authority to appoint and commission those selected. While this passage can certainly be used to support congregational involvement in leadership appointments within the church, it stops short of indicating congregational leadership or decision-making.

### **3. Acts 13:1 – 3**

*Acts 13:1 – 3* <sup>1</sup> Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> 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.” <sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

## Congregationalists hold the following

- 1) “They” in v. 2 could refer to the prophets and teachers or it could refer to the whole congregation gathered in a church service. The majority of commentators would think it

refers to the whole church gathered. If so, the congregationalist would say this is clearly an indication when the Spirit (probably speaking through one of the prophets) told the whole congregation to set apart Barnabas and Saul.

- 2) This would be further strengthened by the view that “set apart” would refer to the whole congregation rather than set apart from the prophets and teachers. Consequently it would also have been the whole congregation who fasted and prayed and laid hands on them.
- 3) The understanding outlined above would be a clear example of the congregation being led directly by the Spirit fasting and praying resulting in the decision by the congregation to set apart Barnabas and Saul for the mission to the gentiles.

### Comments

While the congregationalist interpretation could be correct, there is no real clarity in the text that tells us how these events unfolded regarding the authority or decision-making process taking place here. The specific mention of prophets and teachers could imply that it's the prophets and teachers that Saul and Barnabas were set apart from and that prayed and fasted and laid hands on them. Antioch was a larger church and it would not seem practical that the whole church laid hands on them. Additionally the fasting and praying may not have been connected with making a decision to send them as much as praying and fasting for them for the mission the Spirit had set them apart for. This passage doesn't speak definitively to the role of elders, the prophets and teachers or the congregation in regard to how decisions were made in the Antioch church. There is enough ambiguity in this passage as to how decisions were made and the role of the congregation and leaders in the process that one should be cautious at best in assuming this text is definitive for how churches should be governed.

#### **4. Acts 15:1 – 29**

Acts 15:1 – 29 <sup>1</sup> *But some men came down from Judea and were teaching the brothers, “Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.”*<sup>2</sup> *And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.* <sup>3</sup> *So, being sent on their way by the church, they passed through both*

*Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and brought great joy to all the brothers. <sup>4</sup> When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them. <sup>5</sup> But some believers who belonged to the party of the Pharisees rose up and said, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to order them to keep the law of Moses." <sup>6</sup> The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter. <sup>7</sup> And after there had been much debate, Peter stood up and said to them, "Brothers, you know that in the early days God made a choice among you, that by my mouth the Gentiles should hear the word of the gospel and believe. <sup>8</sup> And God, who knows the heart, bore witness to them, by giving them the Holy Spirit just as he did to us, <sup>9</sup> and he made no distinction between us and them, having cleansed their hearts by faith. <sup>10</sup> Now, therefore, why are you putting God to the test by placing a yoke on the neck of the disciples that neither our fathers nor we have been able to bear? <sup>11</sup> But we believe that we will be saved through the grace of the Lord Jesus, just as they will." <sup>12</sup> And all the assembly fell silent, and they listened to Barnabas and Paul as they related what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. <sup>13</sup> After they finished speaking, James replied, "Brothers, listen to me. <sup>14</sup> Simeon has related how God first visited the Gentiles, to take from them a people for his name. <sup>15</sup> And with this the words of the prophets agree, just as it is written, <sup>16</sup> "After this I will return, and I will rebuild the tent of David that has fallen; I will rebuild its ruins, and I will restore it, <sup>17</sup> that the remnant of mankind may seek the Lord, and all the Gentiles who are called by my name, says the Lord, who makes these things <sup>18</sup> known from of old." <sup>19</sup> Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God, <sup>20</sup> but should write to them to abstain from the things polluted by idols, and from sexual immorality, and from what has been strangled, and from blood. <sup>21</sup> For from ancient generations Moses has had in every city those who proclaim him, for he is read every Sabbath in the synagogues." <sup>22</sup> Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, <sup>23</sup> with the following letter: "The brothers, both the apostles and the elders, to the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia, greetings. <sup>24</sup> Since we have heard that some persons have gone out from us and troubled you with words, unsettling your minds, although we gave them no instructions, <sup>25</sup> it has seemed good to us, having come to one accord, to choose men and send them to you with our beloved Barnabas and Paul, <sup>26</sup> men*

*who have risked their lives for the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.<sup>27</sup> We have therefore sent Judas and Silas, who themselves will tell you the same things by word of mouth.<sup>28</sup> For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us to lay on you no greater burden than these requirements:<sup>29</sup> that you abstain from what has been sacrificed to idols, and from blood, and from what has been strangled, and from sexual immorality. If you keep yourselves from these, you will do well. Farewell.”*

### Congregationalists hold the following:

Acts 15:22 states the following “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas.” Many commentators would understand “choosing men from among them” to mean choosing men from among the whole congregation which then would seem to indicate that the whole church made the decision to select who would go on this assignment. Consequently this would be a clear case of congregational decision-making where the entire church body took part in the decision-making process.

### Comments

- 1) As in other passages of this type, while there is clear evidence that the congregation played a role in the events that transpired in this text, it is not clear as to exactly what that role was. Did they make the decision to send Judas and Silas? Did the apostles and elders make the decision and the gathered assembly affirm that decision? Is v. 22 more a statement of the church’s unity around the decision made by the apostles and elders with no comment at all as to how the decision was made? It is difficult to know for sure from the evidence we have in this text.
- 2) There would be a number of things in this passage that speak to the authority and decision-making role of the apostles and elders in this situation.
  - a. v. 2 - it was the apostles and elders that Paul and Barnabas took this question to, not the church as a whole.
  - b. v. 6 - it was the apostles and elders who were gathered together to consider this

matter. This is distinct from v. 5 which describes Paul and Barnabas sharing with the church all that God had done among the gentiles through their ministry. The debate that arose over this issue of how gentiles would be brought into the church seems clearly to be taken up by the apostles and elders to address. It is very possible even likely that all of v. 6 – 21 describe the events that took place when the apostles and elders gathered together to consider this problem and decide how to handle it. V. 22 would indicate that this whole church was in agreement with this decision but again gives no clear indication they were involved in that decision.

- c. V. 22 could mean that the apostles and elders chose men from among themselves to send on this assignment with the agreement and unity of the church supporting the decision that had been made.

3) It should be noted that this was a unique situation in the early development of the church.

A couple of things to consider in light of this would be:

- a. The Jerusalem church numbered in the thousands at that time. It would be questionable whether the church met together as a whole at all as having a place to even do that would have been difficult if not impossible. It is far more likely that the Jerusalem church was comprised of many different small church bodies or house churches each with their own elders. It was likely a gathering of those elders along with the apostles that this assembly of apostles and elders refer to. The elders were the representatives of the various house churches that comprised the Jerusalem church. It would have been practically and logistically very difficult to have the whole church involved in any kind of decision-making process in that context.
- b. This decision was a huge moment in the life of the predominantly Jewish church in its early development. It was clear from the text in v. 5 that there was debate over how the gentile converts should be handled within the church. Wise leadership would certainly want to handle this matter in a way to seek the unity and harmony of the church body in how they worked with the church around this decision. V. 22 seems to be a statement that the apostles and elders did that in such a way as to accomplish



that in this very difficult situation such that the church as a whole was in agreement with the solution and what should be done to implement it. It does not definitively address how decisions were made and how this was accomplished.

## 5. 1 Corinthians 5:1 – 5

1 Corinthians 5:1 – 5 <sup>1</sup> *It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.* <sup>2</sup> *And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.* <sup>3</sup> *For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing.* <sup>4</sup> *When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus,* <sup>5</sup> *you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.*

### Congregationalists hold the following:

In this text Paul is addressing a case of blatant immorality in the church at Corinth. He does not address the elders here but speaks to the church as a whole. In his words, he rebukes them for not taking action to address this more appropriately and gives them instructions to remove the person from their midst and turn him over to Satan in what would likely be an act of church discipline. Since he is speaking to the whole church and not the elders, it is clear that the church as a whole is being called to take this action and has the responsibility and authority to make this decision to impose church discipline on this individual. Consequently this would be one example of congregational decision-making.

### Comments

While no one would debate that the church congregation plays an important role in situations involving the exercise of church discipline and that each member of the local church has a responsibility in how a church administers church discipline, it is not as clear as to the roles of decision-making in that process (see comments on Matthew 18:15 – 20).

- 1) Considering the emphasis throughout the New Testament on elders and the role they play in leading, overseeing and shepherding the church, it would be somewhat odd to conclude that

they would have no role in this situation. Does the fact that they are not mentioned imply that they played no part in these proceedings? I seriously doubt that. If they did play a role, we are not told specifically in this passage what that role was.

2) While the style of Paul's writing in most of his New Testament letters is to address the church directly that doesn't necessarily mean that he is not addressing the elders as well or that he is by-passing them in view of congregational decision-making authority. It is not inconsistent for a person to use this style of addressing a group as a whole and still speak to leaders in their awareness of their respective roles in regard to the subject matters being addressed.

Perhaps we can see an example of that more clearly in Paul's letter to the Philippians. He begins that letter by addressing it in v. 1 "to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." While he is clearly writing to the church leaders as well as the members, he uses the same style of speaking to the church as a whole throughout the letter. Paul's style of address to the church at Corinth provides no conclusive evidence that the elders of the church did not play a vital role in this church discipline situation and it would seem inconsistent to think they wouldn't in view of the many other texts which speak to the role of elders in the local church.

## 6. 2 Corinthians 2:5 – 11

2 Corinthians 2:5 – 11 <sup>5</sup> Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. <sup>6</sup> For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, <sup>7</sup> so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. <sup>8</sup> So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. <sup>9</sup> For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. <sup>10</sup> Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, <sup>11</sup> so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

### Congregationalists hold the following:

Similar to 1 Corinthians 5:1 – 5 this is a church discipline situation (most likely not the same person in 1 Corinthians 5:1 – 5) where Paul is addressing the congregation regarding the restoration back to fellowship of this individual after they have apparently repented and turned

away from whatever the sin was that led to his “punishment.” This may have been some other more routine situation when church discipline was exercised or it may have been, as some would hold, the ex-communication of the leader of the opposition to Paul that was present in the church. If so, this would explain why the “majority” were involved in the punishment and ex-communication and not everyone, in that there may have been some who disagreed and opposed the action because they were part of the group that supported this individual. That Paul speaks of the “punishment by the majority” is an indication of the congregation’s role in the decision to exercise discipline on this person. He now addresses the congregation as a whole in instructing them to forgive and restore the person back to the fellowship of the church community. Similar to 1 Corinthians 5 the argument is that this is an example of congregational decision-making in the church.

### Comments

Many of the same comments related to 1 Corinthians 5:1 – 6 apply to this text as well. Again there would be no debate that members in this church played a role in the “punishment” of the offender in this situation in how they related to him and interacted with him. It is not unreasonable to call the whole church to forgive and restore this person and now treat them differently in view of the restoration. This doesn’t necessarily speak at all to the process by which the decision to discipline or restore was made and what role the elders did or didn’t play in that process. If this was the leader of the opposition to Paul in the Corinthian church (we don’t know for sure) the fact that the majority were in agreement with the decision to remove him from the fellowship may imply that the church was largely behind the decision to do this but doesn’t necessarily or even likely imply that the decision was made through a vote where the majority determined the direction the church would go. Again the role the elders played in that process is not indicated here, but it would seem highly likely that they were significantly involved in the decision and how it was made. It could well be that, given the way Paul speaks here, the congregation is being called to support a decision that has already been made by the leaders in conjunction with Paul rather than their being called to make one.

## **7. The Priesthood of Believers**

The priesthood of all believers (1 Peter 2:4 – 10, Revelation 1:5 – 6, 5:9 – 10, 20:6) is an important foundational theological concept that underlies the congregation-led polity model. The

priesthood of all believers means that every believer has direct access to God and the Holy Spirit with no intermediary necessary. It further means that every believer is a mediator between God and man and has been given the privilege and responsibility to offer “spiritual sacrifices” to God (1Peter 2:5). Congregationalists hold that “if all believers are to exercise this ‘royal priesthood’ through the offering of various spiritual sacrifices then why should not those same believers together participate in and be responsible for the decision-making of the congregation.”<sup>1</sup>

### Comments

While the priesthood of all believers is an important theological principal and has bearing on the life and community of the church in many ways, to assume that it applies to the governance of the local church and defines how decisions are made is an application for which there is no clear scriptural support. There is, however, much support and evidence in scripture that God appoints leadership roles in the home and the church and invests those roles with authority to care for and oversee the church or the family including the responsibility for decision-making. To say that the priesthood of all believers defines a particular model of church polity would seem to ignore God’s purposes and function for leaders throughout scripture. Even the priests in the Old Testament had a chief priest who had a unique leadership role and responsibilities. It is certainly true that the loss of the principle of the priesthood of believers has led to abuses in church leadership throughout various times in church history but it would not be appropriate to swing the pendulum so far in response to those abuses that the proper place and role for elders and leaders is compromised and fails to be the blessing to the church it was intended to be.

### **Concluding Comments on the Case for Congregation-led Church Governance**

While one could feasibly interpret the biblical passages cited as indicating congregational decision-making, the support for that argument seems to be weak at best based on the evidence in the passages themselves. While it is certainly possible to see these passages in that light, it is just as possible to read them in ways that show no contradiction between them and an elder-led church polity. While the congregation has a role to play in church discipline, the choosing of leaders in the local church and other important events in the life of the church, it is not at all clear from these texts that that role is a decision-making one rather than a confirming, supporting

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<sup>1</sup> *The Congregation Led Church* by James Leo Garrett, Jr. from *Perspectives in Church Government – Five Views*, edited by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman, 2004 B & H Publishing

affirming role. The question that remains in view of the weight of biblical evidence for the congregational-led view that has been presented is – Is there another church governance model where the weight of biblical evidence would be stronger or more persuasive.

## **The Biblical Case for Elder-led Church Polity**

The argument for elder-led church polity is not found in specific texts that say how churches are governed, nor in texts that show how elders made decisions in the New Testament church. The argument for elder-led church governance is primarily found in the many texts that describe the role and function of an elder.

### 1. Some basic principles regarding elders in the New Testament

- 1) Elders were established as part of the forming of all New Testament churches.

*Acts 14:21 – 23 <sup>21</sup> When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, <sup>22</sup> strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. <sup>23</sup> And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

*Titus 1:5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you...*

- 2) The pattern in the church in the New Testament was for each church to have a plurality of elders.

Acts 14:21 – 23 and Titus 1:5 above – note the plural form of elders

*Acts 20:17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.*

James 5:14 *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.*

1 Peter 5:5 *Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the elders. Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for “God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble.”*

Philippians 1:1 *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons...*

- 3) Elders (along with deacons) are the only leadership roles formally designated in the New Testament as part of the local church with specific qualifications for those who serve in those roles.

1 Timothy 3:1 – 13 <sup>1</sup> *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.* <sup>2</sup> *Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,* <sup>3</sup> *not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.* <sup>4</sup> *He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,* <sup>5</sup> *for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?* <sup>6</sup> *He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil.* <sup>7</sup> *Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.* <sup>8</sup> *Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain.* <sup>9</sup> *They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience.* <sup>10</sup> *And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless.* <sup>11</sup> *Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things.* <sup>12</sup> *Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well.* <sup>13</sup> *For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus.*

Titus 1:5 – 9 <sup>5</sup> *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—* <sup>6</sup> *if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.* <sup>7</sup> *For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain,* <sup>8</sup> *but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined.* <sup>9</sup> *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*

2. The case for elder-led decision-making seen in the role and function of an elder.

- 1) One of the words used to describe the role of an elder is “overseer.” The term indicates oversight which involves “someone charged with the duty of seeing that things to be done by others are done rightly” (from Strongs Lexicon). The very nature of an overseer implies authority and responsibility for decision-making.

1 Timothy 3:1 – 2 <sup>1</sup> *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.* <sup>2</sup> *Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach...*

Titus 1:7 For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain...

1 Peter 5:1 – 3 <sup>1</sup> *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:* <sup>2</sup> *shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;* <sup>3</sup> *not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

- 2) Elders are to care for the church and manage it for God and his purposes. In 1 Timothy 3:5 caring for the church is compared to a man managing his own household.

The leadership role and functions of the elder is like the leadership role of a husband and father in his home. Leadership in the home clearly involves responsibility for decision-making and an authority to lead and care for others.

1 Timothy 3:5 ...*for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?*

- 3) Elders are described as God's stewards over his church. The role of a steward is one who has been given charge to manage and oversee some area of responsibility on behalf of an owner to serve the owner's interests and purposes. The role of a steward involves the responsibility and authority to make decisions along with an accountability to the owner for those decisions.

Titus 1:7 *For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain...*

Luke 12:41 – 43 <sup>41</sup> Peter said, "Lord, are you telling this parable for us or for all?" <sup>42</sup> And the Lord said, "Who then is the faithful and wise manager, whom his master will set over his household, to give them their portion of food at the proper time?" <sup>43</sup> Blessed is that servant whom his master will find so doing when he comes.

- 4) Elders exercise rule in the church.

1 Timothy 5:17 *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*

- 5) Elders exercise authority in doctrine and practice in the church.

Titus 1:9 *He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.*



- 6) Elders will give an account to God for the care and well-being of God's people under their care. This implies an authority to exercise this responsibility.

Hebrews 13:7 *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

- 7) Elders are to protect the church from dangers outside the church and inside the church. Again this implies both a responsibility and an authority to address these concerns.

Acts 20:28 – 31 <sup>28</sup> *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.* <sup>29</sup> *I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock;* <sup>30</sup> *and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them.* <sup>31</sup> *Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.*

- 8) The Holy Spirit makes men overseers and calls them to the responsibility to care for God's church. The leadership and congregation recognize and affirm what God has done in doing this.

Acts 20:28 *Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*

- 9) Elders have charge over those in the church.

1 Peter 5:3 *...not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

1 Thessalonians 5:12 – 13 <sup>12</sup> *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, <sup>13</sup> and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.*

10) Elders are to be obeyed and submitted to in the church.

Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.*

11) Elders are not to use their role and authority to lord it over the flock.

1 Peter 5:1 – 4 <sup>1</sup> *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; <sup>3</sup> not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. <sup>4</sup> And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.*

12) Elders are to lead as servants of those in their charge.

Mark 10:42 – 45 <sup>42</sup> *And Jesus called them to him and said to them, “You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. <sup>43</sup> But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, <sup>44</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. <sup>45</sup> For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.”*

## Comments

When one compares the passages used to support a congregational-led model of church governance with those describing the role and function of an elder, the weight of evidence would seem to clearly fall on the elder-led side regarding the responsibility for decision-making and the

accountability before God for the decisions that are made. That is not to say that the congregation doesn't play an important role in how decisions are made. It does however, lead to the conclusion that the focus and responsibility for decision-making in the local church lies with the elder team and not the congregation.

## Conclusions

Elders are called and charged by God to lead and care for his church. They will give an account to him for how they do this which clearly implies the responsibility and authority to exercise the role they have been assigned. Consequently it would be our conviction based on the evidence that an elder-led church governance most closely fits the pattern and biblical data that has been presented.

Elders are to lead and oversee the church but they are to do so in a way that cares for, serves and shepherds the church. They are to lead in a way that protects and preserves the unity and harmony of the church. Caring for and shepherding the church wisely implies a conscientious valuing and seeking input and counsel from the church congregation in decisions and issues that have a significant impact on the church. It would also include recognizing and utilizing the congregation's role in recognizing and affirming the work of the Holy Spirit in the appointment of leaders (elders and deacons). That Paul addresses the entire church in most of his letters along with the passages including congregational affirmation and/or participation would support the value of congregational input and affirmation of key decisions that have a significant impact of the local church.

While the wisdom of seeking input from those in the congregation has value across a wide range of contexts based on the evidence in scripture we would see a specific role for the congregation in the following ways:

1. the affirmation of elders
2. nomination and affirmation of deacons
3. participating in church discipline decisions, as a part of the process of appeal prior to the step of formal discipline
4. affirmation of other major decisions that have broad importance to the church (e.g. purchase of land or buildings, entering into debt, formal affiliation with other churches, etc.)
5. affirming a church constitution and any consequent amendments to that constitution