Grace Theological Journal 9.2 (1988) 257-277

POLITY AND THE ELDER ISSUE

RODNEY J. DECKER

Any conclusions regarding the function of elders in local churches must take into consideration church polity. Several lines of reasoning suggest that final ecclesiastical authority is vested in local congregations. First, apostolic authority in church matters did not extend beyond the original apostles. Second, several theological principles indicate the importance of every believer in the decision making process of a local congregation. Also, there are several NT examples of churches making decisions corporately. Finally, NT instruction regarding church polity does not contradict these lines of reasoning.

* * *

INTRODUCTION

DEPENDING on one's associations in evangelical Christianity, the subject of the elder's role in church leadership is taken for granted, ignored, or hotly debated. Those who are interested in the role of elders in the church face several important questions. Who are the NT elders and what is their role in the church? What is elder rule? Is a NT church a democratic institution? Are there different kinds of elders? Is each assembly to have a single leader or is multiple leadership required? With whom is final authority vested in the church? This article will seek to address one aspect of these questions: the relationship of church polity to the elder issue. This issue has not received the necessary emphasis in other studies that have appeared.

NEED TO CONSIDER POLITY

Some of the questions concerning the elder's role arise due to a failure to consider other more basic NT doctrines. At the heart of the elder issue is the entire concept of church government. On a practical level this means answering two questions. Where does the final authority lie in a local church? How is Christ's authority functionally

applied and expressed in the local assembly?[1] Although Fee[2] questions whether the NT teaches a normative church order, it is here argued that congregational church polity does have biblical authority.

APOSTOLIC SUCCESSION AND THE POLITY QUESTION

The twentieth century church cannot hope to duplicate the decision making process of the first century church. Since the NT makes no provision for apostolic succession,[3] the contemporary church is unable to include an apostolic role in its polity considerations. The apostles often intervened and made unilateral decisions for the early churches.[4] Not only was the church in its infancy at this stage, but the

[1]Cf. Robert L. Saucy ("Authority in the Church," in *Walvoord: A Tribute*, ed. Donald K. Campbell [Chicago: Moody, 1982] 220): "Since Christ is the Lord of His church, all agree that any valid human authority in the contemporary church can only be an expression of His authority. The solution to church authority thus lies in determining the means of communication and implementation of Christ's authority in the functioning of the church today."

[2]"If the NT is one's 'sole authority' and that authority does not in fact teach anything directly about church order at the local level, then one might rightly ask whether there is a normative church order." Gordon D. Fee, "Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents," *JETS* 28 (1985) 149–50.

[3]"It must be obvious . . . that the apostles had, in the strictest sense of the term, no successors. Their qualifications were supernatural, and their work, once performed, remains in the infallible record of the New Testament for the advantage of the Church and the world in all future ages. They are the only authoritative teachers of Christian doctrine and law. All official men in Christian churches can legitimately claim no higher place than expounders of the doctrines and administrators of the laws found in their writings." *Cyclopedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature*, ed. John McClintock and James Strong, "Apostle," 1.311, col. 2; cf. also "Succession, Apostolic," ibid., 10.5 7. Fee's comments are also worth noting. "Although most Protestants in theory deny apostolic succession to reside in its clergy, *de facto* it is practiced in vigorous and sometimes devastating ways—in the 'one-man show' of many denominational churches or in the little dictatorships in other (especially 'independent') churches. And how did such a pluralism of papacies emerge? Basically from two sources (not to mention the fallenness of the clergy whose egos often love such power): (a) from the fact that the local pastor is so often seen (and often sees him/herself) as the authoritative interpreter of the 'sole authority'—Scripture; (b) from the pastor's functioning in the role of authority, thus assuming the mantle of Paul or of a Timothy or Titus. Hence it is based strictly on the use of a paradigm, the validity of which is scarcely ever questioned. Here Protestant 'tradition' [as opposed to biblical revelation] has the final say." Fee, "Church Order in the Pastoral Epistles," 149. Carson likewise observes that "Ironically, some forms of congregationalism elevate the pastor, once he has been voted in, to near papal authority, in practice if not in theory." D. A. Carson, "Church, Authority in," *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*, ed. W. Elwell (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1984; hereafter cited as *EDT*) 230.

[4]Carson observes that the apostles' "authority extended beyond the local congregation, even beyond congregations they had been instrumental in founding . . . , but it was not without limit." Ibid., p. 228. Later he points out that "The apostles enjoy a

canon of Scripture had not yet been completed.[5] The apostles' role may not be taken as normative for today. As Saucy points out, "it must be remembered that the church as it is described in the New Testament was in its foundational era. The apostles, as bearers of a unique authority, were still present. Care must be exercised to distinguish that which is normative and permanent from that which belongs peculiarly to the initiatory era."[6]

Other guidelines must therefore be sought. These guidelines may be sought in two ways. Theological principles may be sought which will suggest the appropriate conclusion or at least lend substantial assistance in choosing between alternatives. The second avenue which should be considered relates to the example of the early church.

THEOLOGICAL PRINCIPLES RELEVANT TO POLITY

There are several theological principles that are relevant to the discussion of a biblical church polity. Only a summary statement of each will be noted here.[7]

Sole Authority of Scripture

The Word of God alone is the believer's sole authority for those things he is to believe and how he is to live. The *sola scriptura* cry of the Reformation must never be lost. Although God has ordained human teachers and has placed some in positions of leadership, he has vested absolute and final authority for matters of faith and practice in the written Scriptures. No believer has authority to dictate the beliefs, lifestyle, or ministry responsibilities of another.

Tradition (despite its compulsiveness) is not authoritative. Peer pressure (strong as it may be) cannot serve as a final guide to doctrine or mores. Not even the great creeds of the church, nor one's favorite doctrinal statement (as necessary as such statements may be in some

---

self-conscious authority as God-chosen custodians of the gospel; and if they prefer to exercise their authority with meekness in an effort to win spiritually minded consensus . . . , they are also prepared, if need be, to impose their authority without seeking consensus, and even against the consensus." Ibid. As illustrations of this authority, cf. Acts 5:1-11; 8:14-17; 14:23; 1 Cor 4:18-21; 5:3-5; 2 Cor 10:11; 13:2-3; 1 Tim 1:20; Titus 1:5; 3 John 10.

[5]"The real successor to the apostolate is the NT itself, since it contains their ministry within the church of God." R. E. Higginson, "Apostolic Succession," *EDT*, p. 73.

[6]Saucy, "Authority in the Church," 231. For a different perspective, challenging the normativeness of historical events recorded in Acts, but not specifically commanded, cf. Gordon D. Fee and Douglas Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All It's Worth: A Guide to Understanding the Bible* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 87-102.

[7]This summary draws heavily on the work of Saucy ("Authority in the Church," 225-30), particularly in items 2-6.

situations) may ever be granted equal authority with the Word of God.[8]

Ministry Responsibility

The authority exercised by the apostles has been encapsulated in the written Scriptures. Yet, as Saucy indicates, there is a sense in which their ministry is continued through the church.[9] The same basic ministry which the apostles exercised is now entrusted to the church as a whole.[10] This can be categorized in several areas: edification,[11] evangelism,[12] service,[13] and the ordinances.[14] The involvement of specific individuals will vary depending on the spiritual endowments with which God has equipped them. There will be leadership in all these areas, but the responsibility has been entrusted to the entire body. The church as a whole perpetuates an apostolic ministry, though no individual in the church exercises apostolic authority.

Priesthood of All Believers

All believers are priests before God.[15] "Access to the throne of God and to the Word of God is the present and perpetual privilege of

[8]Earl D. Radmacher, *The Question of Elders* (Portland: Western Baptist, 1977) 2.

[9]Saucy, "Authority in the Church," 224.

[10]It is true that the church did exercise these ministries prior to the passing of the apostles. Yet the apostles, by virtue of their office, held final authority in all these areas. The point to be made here is that although the church *continues* such ministries, there are no longer apostles present who may override local church decisions. Final authority for ministry is now committed to each assembly.

[11]Rom 15:14; Col 3:16.

[12]Acts 8:4; 1 Thess 1:8–10; 1 Pet 2:9; 3:15.

[13]Gal 6:2; 1 Thess 5:14.

[14]Acts 2:42, 46; 8:12; 9:17–18 and 1 Cor 1:14 illustrate the diversity with which the early church observed the ordinances. There is not a single individual identified as an elder/pastor who administers any of the ordinances in the NT. This is quite different from the popular contemporary practice of many churches in which an ordained pastor is required before any of the ordinances can be legitimately observed. "There is nothing, therefore, that the minister does in his public function that every believer does not also have the right to do. He may lead publicly in such functions at any time, *at the call and commission of the church*" [emphasis in the original]. Craig Skinner, *The Teaching Ministry of the Pulpit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1973) 65.

[15]1 Pet 2:4–5, 9. "As individuals, all Christians are priests alike." J. B. Lightfoot, "The Christian Ministry," in *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (London: Macmillan, 1913; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953) 185. "Above all [the Church] has no sacerdotal system. It interposes no sacrificial tribe or class between God and man, by whose intervention alone God is reconciled and man forgiven. Each individual member holds personal communion with the Divine Head. To Him immediately he is responsible, and from Him directly he obtains pardon and draws strength." Ibid., 181. Cf. also Alex T. M. Chemung, "The Priest As the Redeemed Man: A Biblical-Theological Study of the Priesthood," *JETS* 29 (1986) 273–75.

every single member of God's family."[16] One would expect, therefore, that there would be specific priestly functions to be performed. This expectation is consistent with the NT picture of the "spiritual sacrifices of praise, good works and personal devotion [which] are incumbent on every church member (1 Pet 2:5; Heb 13:15–16; Rom 12:1)."[17] The OT priestly ministry of the Word[18] can also be compared to the similar ministry of the believer-priest in the NT. "Any service that represents God before the outside world or that ministers to other believers is a function of the priesthood. There is no ministry that rests on a special group; it belongs to the entire church."[19] Believer-priests need to remember and emphasize, not just their privilege of access, but also their commensurate responsibility of service.[20]

Teaching Ministry of the Holy Spirit

The work of the Holy Spirit in teaching all believers argues that all believers have the responsibility for evaluating all things by the Word. "The Spirit of truth had brought the Word to them. . . . He now continues that ministry by giving them inner witness to the truth, enabling them to accept it as such and to reject the false. That in no way negates the necessity of teachers for the church, but it does give the church the ability and authority to test all things, including teachers (1 John 4:1)."[21] Since the Word of God is the written expression of his will for the church, it follows that "the application of authority belongs ultimately to those who are responsible for evaluating all things by the truth of the Word."[22] This is not limited to a subgroup of the membership (such as all or part of the church officers) but includes all believers in any given local assembly.

Spiritual Gifts

If the Holy Spirit has equipped believers with the spiritual abilities needed to carry out the ministry of the church,[23] then it is consistent

[16]Radmacher, "Elders," 1.

[17]Saucy, "Authority in the Church," 226.

[18]Lev 10:11; Deut 33:10; 2 Chr 15:3; Mal 2:6–7.

[19]Ibid. Note also the comment of Skinner: "In practice, however, we fail to apply this high view of the church's nature, and tend to organize ourselves as a group gathered around one or more specialists who are responsible to see that the work of God is effectively fulfilled through *their* service" [emphasis in the original] Skinner, *Teaching Ministry of the Pulpit*, 64.

[20]Radmacher, "Elders," 1.

[21]Saucy, "Authority in the Church," 227.

[22]Ibid.

[23]Although some have more recently challenged such an assumption, the consensus of a broad spectrum of scholarly opinion reflects no such uncertainty. Cf., e.g., Morris A. Inch, *Saga of the Spirit: A Biblical, Systematic, and Historical Theology of*

to accept the authority of the individual so enabled to perform that ministry. As Saucy expresses it, there is "a certain diffusion of authority throughout the entire church."[24] A certain tension between the formal and individual elements in the structure and authority of a local assembly can be felt in this matter.[25] Such an antinomy does not negate the validity of the argument, however. "This does not suggest the autonomous, authoritative operation of each of the spiritually gifted within the body. Rather there is an interplay between the authority of the individual and the body as a whole."[26] The point to be made here is that there is a legitimate authority that is as broad as the entire assembly.

Authority and Will of Christ Expressed Collectively

Various forms of polity reflect the final, pragmatic decision making authority in many diverse forms. Churches where the pastor is viewed as the "strong leader" often assume that the will of Christ for the church is expressed through one man. Other churches suppose that God's will is expressed through a select group in the church, whether that be the elders, deacons, or some other designation.[27]

While not seeking to denigrate the leadership of either the pastor or others charged with leadership or ministry responsibilities in a local church, the biblical concept appears to place greater emphasis

---

the Holy Spirit (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1985) 145–50; J. I. Packer, *Keep in Step with the Spirit* (Old Tappan: Revell, 1984) 81–91; Edwin H. Palmer, *The Person and Ministry of the Holy Spirit: The Traditional Calvinistic Perspective*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1974) 157–58; Charles C. Ryrie, *The Holy Spirit* (Chicago: Moody, 1965) 83–92; John Williams, *The Holy Spirit: Lord and Lifegiver* (Neptune: Loizeaux, 1980) 86–128.

[24]Saucy, "Authority in the Church," 228.

[25]"The discussion of gifts of the Spirit often flounders with regard to the institutional structure of the church. Seeing that we have both designated officials and charismatic leadership present in the one fellowship, who is responsible for what? . . . The problem persists so long as we treat it as a contest over who exercises authority." Inch, *Saga of the Spirit*, 146. If a church has designated officials who are organizationally responsible for areas of ministry in which they are not equipped with the necessary gifts, there are bound to be conflicts.

[26]Saucy, *Authority in the Church*, 228–29.

[27]John MacArthur's influential advocacy of elder rule has become well known in recent years. Although appreciating much of MacArthur's emphasis in the area of ecclesiology, the present writer must take exception to his policy of elder rule. He contends that "trying to spread the authority over the entire congregation opens up the possibility of division and disagreement. Godly men leading the church is the *sine qua non* [of Grace Community Church]. Christ wants to rule His own church and has chosen to mediate it through a plurality of such godly men." John MacArthur and Fred Barshaw, *Leading the Flock*, 3rd ed. (Sun Valley, Calif.: Grace Community Church, 1982) 32. This view is addressed further below.

on the congregation in matters of final authority. "The will of Christ for the Body can only be expressed collectively."[28] This is based on the fact that Christ is still active in the church. There is no exclusiveness of direction to an elite group.[29] Indeed, Paul can exhort all believers to submit, not only to church "leaders" (Πείθεσθε τοῖς ἡγουμένοις ὑμῶν καὶ ὑπείκετε / 'obey those who rule over you and submit', Heb 13:17) but also to one another ('Υποτασσόμενοι ἀλλήλοις / 'submit to one another', (Eph 5:21).[30]

The common thread running through all of the above theological principles is the importance of the congregation corporately in matters of church polity. Although recognizing leadership in various aspects of ministry, the NT emphasizes the significance of every believer, both as part of a local assembly and as a part of the "church which is his body." There are no little people with God, and there should not be in the church. This is precisely the attitude displayed in the early church.

NEW TESTAMENT EXAMPLES OF POLITY

The second area that deserves attention in the question of polity is the example of the NT church. Such an endeavor is not as easy as might at first appear. There are widely divergent attitudes toward the use of historical precedence for such purposes. It is very common to assume that the church today is to be as nearly identical as possible to the churches described in the NT, particularly those described in the book of Acts. "By and large, most sectors of evangelical Protestantism have a 'restoration movement' mentality. We regularly look back to the church and Christian experience in the first century as the norm to be restored or the ideal to be approximated."[31] On the other hand,

[28]Saucy, *Authority in the Church*, 229. From the context of this remark, Saucy is apparently referring to the local assembly in his reference to "the Body." Two paragraphs later he says, "only the church together, and not a particular group of leaders, can finally express that ['christocratic'] authority."

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

[30]There is no practical difference between ὑπείκω (a *hapaxlegomenon*) and the more common ὑποτάσσω. This principle can, of course, be abused. It is not intended to imply that 51% of a church vote determines the Lord's will in any given situation. See Norman Nideng ("Stop the Voting; You're Wrecking My Church!" *Moody Monthly* [March, 1982] 7–9) for some thought-provoking comments to consider in this regard. A minority may well be right at times. The cure for this abuse is to seek unanimity in decisions, not to delegate decision-making authority to those who are thought to be more spiritual.

[31]Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 88.

it appears to be becoming more popular in recent years to cavalierly dismiss any possible relevance of historical examples of churches from Acts and other NT passages from consideration in ecclesiological discussions.

Fee has well stated the problem posed in seeking to establish normative polity based on NT example.

> The hermeneutical problem of Acts, therefore, is a crucial one and touches many parts of Scripture which are basically historical narrative. How is the book of Acts, which *prima facie* narrates a small segment of the early spread of Christianity, to be understood as the Word of God? That is, what is its Word which not merely *describes* the primitive Church but *speaks as a norm* to the Church at all times? Indeed, do such narratives somehow establish normative precedents for succeeding generations? Or are they merely illustrative or informative? If they do have a word for us, and I think they do, how does one discover it, or set up principles in order to hear it?[32]

While full discussion of this problem[33] is beyond the scope of this article, the following guidelines are suggested as a basis for understanding the relevance of historical example in the NT as it relates to church polity.

Normative Guidelines for Establishing Polity

Precedence of Doctrinal Passages. Explicit doctrinal passages and commands have precedence over historical narrative.[34] There are many doctrinal passages in Scripture, the specific intent of which is to teach particular doctrinal truth or to require specific action of God's people. There are numerous commands addressed specifically to the church. In these instances there is little dispute regarding obligation. Such texts must form the primary basis of ecclesiological decisions.

Historical Precedence Alone. Historical narrative records what *did* happen in a given situation. It does not prescribe what *must* happen in every subsequent situation. Historical precedence alone should never form the basis for normativeness. "On the basis of

[32]Gordon D. Fee, "The Genre of New Testament Literature and Biblical Hermeneutics," in *Interpreting the Word of God: Festschrift in Honor of Steven Barabas*, ed. S. J. Schultz and M. A. Inch (Chicago: Moody, 1976) 115.

[33]Millard Erickson (*Christian Theology* [3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1983–85] 1.120–25) has a helpful discussion of the larger question of identifying "timeless truths" in Scripture.

[34]Gordon R. Lewis and Bruce A. Demarest, *Integrative Theology* (3 vols.; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987–) 1.31.

precedence alone it is probably not valid to say, 'Therefore, one *must*.'"[35] "Just through being reported as truly happening, no event becomes the revelation of God's universal will."[36]

Scriptural Corroboration. Practices based on historical precedence are most clearly normative if corroborated by principles elsewhere in Scripture. There may not be a specific command addressing the situation, but there may well be relevant theological principles which can be established from other prescriptive passages.[37]

Noncontradictory. It should be obvious, but for the sake of clarity, a principle claiming support from historical narrative cannot contradict explicit statements found elsewhere in the epistles. "The meaning and principles derived from a story must be consistent with all other teachings of Scripture. A deductive principle drawn from a narrative which contradicts the teaching of some other scriptural passage is invalid."[38]

Consistency and Clarity. It is perhaps valid to defend a given practice on the basis of precedence if there is substantial evidence for its practice and that pattern can be demonstrated to be the only pattern present. A consistent and clear pattern must be established. Specifically, polity considerations based on NT example may be valid if the matter is both widespread (the actions of many local churches reflect such a practice) and unique (it is the only way in which the churches did something). "The strongest possible case can be made when only one pattern is found . . . , and when that pattern is repeated within the New Testament itself."[39]

Positive Versus Negative. In establishing patterns, it must be recognized that positive patterns are more clear than negative patterns.

[35]Fee, "The Genre of NT Literature," 117.

[36]J. Robertson McQuilkin, "Problems of Normativeness in Scripture: Cultural Versus Permanent," in *Hermeneutics, Inerrancy, and the Bible*, ed. Earl Radmacher and Robert Preus (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1984) 234.

[37]"For a biblical precedent to justify present action, the principle of the action must be taught elsewhere, where it is the primary intent so to teach." Fee, "Genre of NT Literature," 118. Although addressing a slightly different issue, the following comment is also relevant. "When these injunctions to a specific individual or group parallel general teaching found elsewhere, they may be viewed as normative, but not on their own strength." McQuilkin, "Normativeness in Scripture," 235.

[38]Henry A. Virkler, *Hermeneutics: Principles and Processes of Biblical Interpretation* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1981) 220. Cf. also Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1.30–31.

[39]Fee and Stuart, *How to Read the Bible*, 102.

In other words, the fact that something was done is more significant than something that was not done, unless the text explicitly and emphatically states that a specific action was not involved. Arguments from silence are dubious and inconclusive in most instances.

Intention Versus Incidentals. Exegesis must emphasize the intention of the passage rather than incidental allusions.[40] Historical narrative texts record numerous minor details. Although accurate descriptions of what actually happened, they are not to be elevated to the primary, didactic level unless the writer is clearly representing these details as significant to his primary thesis.[41] On a related matter, it should be noted that "extensive passages on a subject take priority for theological purposes over brief allusions."[42]

Normative Guidelines and the Question of Polity

If the NT passages are considered in which a local assembly of believers conducts what might be termed "church business," a clear pattern emerges apart from the apostolic role. If a clear and consistent pattern can be established which is consonant with the theological principles referred to above, and is within the scope of the normative guidelines enumerated above, it would seem to be questionable to defend an alternative approach on the basis of pragmatic considerations.[43] The following paragraphs will summarize the various aspects of functional authority in the local church that are evident in the book of Acts and the NT epistles.[44]

[40]Fee, "Genre of NT Literature," 116.

[41]They may, of course, illustrate specific teaching recorded elsewhere.

[42]Lewis and Demarest, *Integrative Theology*, 1.31.

[43]Whether or not something works has little to do with establishing the validity of the method employed. The philosophy and methodology of pragmatism is all too prevalent in contemporary churches. Godly decisions, however, must be based on biblical revelation. Similar to the pragmatic appeal is the claim that it really doesn't matter how the church is governed. Edward J. Carnell ("The Government of the Church," in *Basic Christian Doctrines*, ed. C. F. H. Henry [New York: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, 1962; reprint, Grand Rapids: Baker, 1971] 252) suggests that "the ministry of rule, like other auxiliary ministries of the church, is free to develop its office according to the needs of the times. In the actual life of the fellowship, therefore, divergent modes of government may emerge. These modes may be the result of rich cultural and social influences. Or they may simply grow out of the dictates of expediency." Lewis Sperry Chafer (*Systematic Theology* [8 vols.; Dallas: Dallas Seminary, 1948] 4.150) likewise says, "church government is a mere convenience which serves a limited purpose."

[44]The warning of Carson ("Church, Authority in," 230) needs to be remembered in this connection. "Modern models [of church government] are not so much wrong as frequently lopsided, favoring a prejudicial selection of the NT data."

Disciplinary Action

The NT discusses disciplinary actions of various sorts that might be encountered in a local church context. A basic question regarding church discipline is critical to the issue of authority and polity: "Who has authority to exercise discipline?" A wide diversity of practice can be observed in this regard. In some assemblies, the congregation exercises this function. In other churches it is handled by the pastor, a committee, or by the "board" (whether elders, deacons, or some other designation). Is there any biblical pattern? The central passages regarding church discipline in the NT are 1 Corinthians 5 and 6, 2 Corinthians 2, 2 Thessalonians 3, and 1 Timothy 5.[45] The only aspects of these passages which are immediately relevant are those which specify the final seat of authority in the local church setting.

In 1 Corinthians 5 it is obvious that the Lord Jesus is the final authority (v 4: ἐν τῷ ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ, . . . τῇ δυνάμει τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ / 'in the name of our Lord Jesus, . . . the power of our Lord Jesus'). The concern of this study, however, relates to the functional application of Jesus' authority in a local assembly of believers. Two factors stand out in the Corinthian account. First, the apostle Paul exercises authoritative direction (v 3: ἤδη κέκρικα / 'I have already judged'). Second, that judgment must be implemented by the assembled church in Corinth (v 4: συναχθέντων ὑμῶν / 'when you are gathered').

The Corinthians had only two choices. Either obey the apostolic directive by disciplining the immoral brother, or disobey by refusing to do so. In spite of the clear-cut choice, Paul did not personally exercise this discipline. He placed the responsibility (and authority) for doing so in the hands of the local congregation. He does not charge the pastor (or elders) or the deacons with this task. It is clearly a congregational matter.

2 Corinthians 2 points to a similar picture. The traditional assumption is that this chapter recounts the restoration of the disciplined individual after he repented and sought forgiveness. Paul points out that the original punishment was imposed ὑπὸ τῶν πλειόνων / 'by the majority' (v 6).[46] His instructions regarding forgiveness and restoration

[45]Galatians 6 is certainly also relevant to the matter of discipline. It is not considered in this section because there is no explicit reference either to the involvement of the church corporately, or to the elder(s) of the church. Instead the emphasis is on the responsibility of individual Christians (note the use of σεαυτόν, ἀλλήλων, ἑαυτόν, and ἕκαστος in vv 1–5). Certainly church leaders, whatever their designation, ought to qualify as part of the ὑμεῖς οἱ πνευματικοί / 'you who are spiritual' group, but that is perhaps implied, not stated.

[46]Cf. C. F. D. Moule, *An Idiom-Book of New Testament Greek* (Cambridge: The University Press, 1959) 108. Although it might be discussed how this majority

(vv 7–8) are addressed to the church as a whole (ὑμᾶς, the plural referring to "the church of God in Corinth," 1:1).

Paul's instructions in 2 Thessalonians 3 should also be included in discussions of church discipline. The Thessalonian problem was not immorality but laziness. In such cases the church was to refuse to associate with the offending individuals (vv 6–15). Whether or not this form of discipline entailed a formal church action as depicted in 1 Corinthians 5 is unspecified.[47] In any event, the responsibility for obedience is placed on the church as a whole. The command (παραγγέλλω), based on the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ (v 6: ἐν ὀνόματι τοῦ κυρίου Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ / 'in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ'), is directed to "you, brothers" (ὑμῖν, ἀδελφοί; identified in 1:1, 3 as "the church of the Thessalonians").

As has already been pointed out, there are no longer apostles who continue to propound binding instructions. With no provision for the perpetuation of such a role, the church is left with the pattern of congregational responsibility and authority in matters of discipline.

Two remaining areas related to church discipline also evidence the same pattern. 1 Corinthians 6 indicates that the church has a varied role in arbitrating disputes between members. Although there are difficulties in these verses, Paul does appear to place this authority in the hands of the church as a whole. Certainly there is no statement in the context that authorizes either pastor, deacons or elders to function in this way. It is "before the saints" (ἐπι τῶν ἁγίων, v 1) that such matters are to be settled. This may well be implemented by the congregation designating a wise individual or individuals to adjudicate.[48] The point to be made here is that it is the local congregation which possesses such authority, not a select group in the church (such as the elders).

Disciplinary action may also at times be necessary against an elder according to 1 Tim 5:19–20.[49] An elder is not a "super-saint"

---

conducted business, it is clearly a reference to action taken by the congregation: ὑπὸ τῶν πλειόνων answering to συναχθέντων ὑμῶν in 1 Cor 5:4.

[47]This may be, as F. F. Bruce (*1 & 2 Thessalonians* [Waco: Word, 1982] 210) suggests, "a less severe degree of dissociation than that laid down in 1 Cor. 5:9, 11."

[48]Note v 4: ἐν τῇ ἐκκλησίᾳ . . . καθίζετε / 'appoint as judges . . . in the church' and v 5: οὕτως οὐκ ἔνι ἐν ὑμῖν οὐδεὶς σοφὸς ὃς δυνήσεται διακρῖναι ἀνὰ μέσον τοῦ ἀδελφοῦ αὐτοῦ; / 'Thus, is there not even one among you who is able to judge between his brother [and his opponent]?'

[49]Joh. Ed. Huther (*Critical and Exegetical Handbook to the Epistles to Timothy and Titus*, in *Meyer's Commentary on the New Testament* [11 vols.; Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1883; reprint, Winona Lake, Ind.: Alpha, 1979] 9.173) points out the connection of these verses with the preceding context: "The apostle now defines the proper conduct on Timothy's part towards the presbyters who do not superintend the church καλῶς but expose themselves to blame, thereby doing hurt to their official influence."

who never sins. He is subject to the same frailties and failures as are all of God's people. Yet he is unique in that he holds an official church position.[50] The apostle Paul sought to balance these two factors and provide the necessary safeguards. Elders may be disciplined, yet if such charges are ever made, they must be handled with great care. If an accusation (v 19: κατηγορία[51]) is to be considered, it must be substantiated by two or three witnesses.[52] Assuming that this charge proves to be valid and worthy of disciplinary action, public action (v 20: ἐνώπιον πάντων / 'before all')[53] is to be taken. In this case, the discipline takes the form of a rebuke (v 20: ἐλέγχω). "The imperative 'rebuke' means more than a reprimand; it denotes an admission of guilt and the subsequent conviction of the sinner. The errant elder must become aware of his wrong and be convinced of

[50]"This is required, as a special precaution, in the case of the elder, both because his position creates a presumption in his favor, and because, as a minister, he is peculiarly exposed to malice, and his reputation and influence might be seriously injured by the entertaining of a charge, though on the trial he was acquitted. The influence of even the best minister might be destroyed, if idle gossip and social tattling were accounted a sufficient ground for serious charges and judicial proceedings." H. H. Harvey, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles, First and Second Timothy and Titus; and the Epistle to Philemon*, in *An American Commentary*, ed. Alvah Hovey (7 vols.; Valley Forge: Judson, 1890) 6.66.

[51]Robert Gromacki (*Stand True to the Charge: An Exposition of 1 Timothy* [Grand Rapids: Baker, 1982] 146) suggests that this accusation refers to the sin identified in Titus' list of elder qualifications: "One Qualification for an elder is that he be 'not accused of riot or unruly' (Titus 1:6). The 'accusation' (*katēgorian*) mentioned in this verse [1 Tim 5:19] probably refers to that specific type of sin." Titus' comment, however, relates to the elder's *children*, not to the elder himself. Κατηγορία should be given a wider meaning in this passage. The nature of the accusation is not identified, other than if proved valid, it is called ἁμαρτία / 'sin'.

[52]This is first found in the principle of Deuteronomic law (Deut 17:6; 19:15) and reaffirmed by Jesus (Matt 18:16). Paul uses the same principle in 2 Cor 13:1.

[53]"Public" here is probably before the community of believers, not "those without" (τῶν ἔξωθεν, 1 Tim 3:7). However, Huther (*Handbook*, 173–74) would restrict this even further: "The most natural reference of πάντες . . . is to the presbyters. . . . It would clearly be too much to expect that Timothy should punish *all* sinners before the whole church . . . ; that would be unsuitable, even in the case of presbyters who had sinned." Cf. also Ralph Earle, "1 Timothy," in *Expositors Bible Commentary* [hereafter: *EBC*] 11.381. The general tenor of the NT passages dealing with discipline suggests, however, that such action would be suitable before the whole church. Harvey (*Pastoral Epistles*, 67) notes that "the public position of the offenders made their sin public, and there was, therefore, the more danger of its infecting others. A public rebuke in such case would at once vindicate the church from complicity with the sin, and deter others from falling into it . . . Here he speaks of a formal church censure, after due public conviction, and which therefore would be administered as from the church." Cf. also Henry Alford, *The Greek Testament*, ed. E. F. Harrison (4 vols.; Chicago: Moody, 1958) 3.353.

it."[54] This also serves as a warning to the other elders (οἱ λοιποὶ),[55] of whom there were a plurality at Ephesus (Acts 20:17).

The question that remains relates to the vestiture of such authority. In 1 Timothy 5, it is given to Timothy himself as an apostolic representative.[56] Timothy is nowhere called the pastor of the church in Ephesus, nor do any statements imply that he functioned as such. The other elders at Ephesus (who were not involved in a particular disciplinary charge) are pictured as *observers* rather than as administrators of the discipline. It is thus illegitimate to consign this disciplinary authority to the pastoral office. Since there are no longer apostles (or apostolic representatives) and since the elders appear to be outside the picture in 1 Timothy, it appears that the only possible choice is to vest such authority in the church corporately.

Inter-Church Relationships

Several instances of inter-church relationships can be seen in the NT. The three key passages in this case are Acts 15 and 18, and 2 Corinthians 8.

In Acts 15 a major doctrinal issue is the focus of quite sharp debate in the church at Antioch. The questions raised were not able to be resolved even with an apostle present.[57] To resolve the circumcision/salvation issue, the church undertakes a cooperative "problem resolution" effort with the "mother church" in Jerusalem. Paul and Barnabas (along with several others) are appointed (ἔταξαν[58]) to

[54]Gromacki, *Stand True*, 148.

[55]The οἱ λοιποὶ / 'the rest' could conceivably refer to the other members of the church, but the context favors limiting the reference to the other elders. The principle, of course, is true of the entire church, but this is not explicitly stated here (as it is in Acts 5:11).

[56]Both imperatives in 1 Tim 5:19–20 are second person singular: παραδέχου, ἔλεγχε. On the basis of 1 Thess 1:1; 2:6 it is also possible to view Timothy (along with Silas) as an apostle. Some argue for a nontechnical use of ἀπόστολος in this context but still maintain apostolic authority despite their not having seen the risen Christ. Cf. Robert L. Thomas, "1, 2 Thessalonians," in *EBC*, 11.253.

[57]It could well be that there were *several* apostles present if Barnabas is accorded apostolic status equal with Paul (as Acts 14:14 would seem to imply).

[58]Aorist indicative active of τάσσω. The subject of this verb is not specified in the sentence. The antecedent must be the ἀδελφούς / 'brothers' of Acts 15:1. This is further clarified by the explanatory ἐκκλησίας / 'church' in v 3. Note also the verb used to describe the relationship of these messengers to the sending church: προπεμφθέντες / 'those who were sent'. Προπέμπω could be used merely to specify the financial assistance provided for their journey (as in Rom 15:24), but in conjunction with τάσσω / 'to appoint' (v 2) it is probably broader and includes the local church authorization as well. "The reference in v 3 to being sent 'by the church' (*hypo tēs ekklēsias*) gives the context for Luke's use of *etaxan*, so that we should understand 'they' as signifying the involvement of the entire congregation at Antioch and its leaders in the appointment." Richard N. Longenecker, "The Acts of the Apostles," in *EBC*, 9.443.

represent the church of Antioch. In the course of events described in this chapter the apostles and elders take the lead in considering the question.[59] The comment by James (v 19) should not be taken in a legal sense as if he were personally issuing an authoritative verdict, but rather as an expression of his personal opinion or judgment in the matter.[60] As one would expect, the wording formulated by a key leader is accepted as the appropriate summary of the group deliberation. The matter does not rest at this point, however. Luke's record again returns to the congregations, both in Jerusalem and in Antioch (note vv 22, 30). As sister churches worked together in the resolution of a doctrinal matter, the final authority in each instance was lodged in the church corporately, even though the apostles and elders play key leadership and deliberative roles.[61]

Another instance of inter-church relationships can be observed in Acts 18, though not in the detail of chap. 15. Apollos is the key figure in this instance. At Ephesus his limited knowledge of the gospel message is greatly expanded under the tutelage of Priscilla and Aquila. When he later desires to minister in Achaia, where there was already a church in existence, the brothers in Ephesus provided both the encouragement and opportunity to do so. As Apollos was yet comparatively unknown, the Ephesian church provided him with a letter of introduction and reference to the believers in Achaia. Although the specific details as to how such a letter was drafted or authorized are not known, Luke presents it as a church-to-church situation.[62]

The charitable collection for the Jerusalem church in their time of distress also illustrates the interrelationships of the early churches.

[59]Note especially vv 6 and 22–23. Peter and James are particularly prominent in their leadership role within the larger group (πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος) of apostles and elders. Or does πᾶν τὸ πλῆθος refer to the church, as Gilmore ("Does the Bible Teach Congregational Rule?" *Baptist Bulletin* [Feb. 1987] 15) asserts? "Inferred here is the idea that the multitude had just finished listening to Peter. In other words, the apostles and elders *were not* in executive session." That is a possible conclusion, but not one mandated by the text.

[60]The translation of κρίνω by the word *judgment* (*NIV* and *NASB*) or *judge* (*NKJV*) is preferable to the traditional *sentence* (*KJV*). Cf. BAGD 451.

[61]"The case is laid before the apostles and elders (15:4); 'the apostles and elders, with the whole church' (15:22), make the final decisions; and the apostles and elders write the letter (15:23). Peter speaks as an apostle, James as an elder; it is not obvious that either 'chaired' the meeting. But even if James did so, the crucial decisions were taken by the apostles, elders, and the church in concert." D. A. Carson, "Church, Authority," 229. This does not appear to correlate with John MacArthur's contention that the elders "are to determine doctrinal issues for the church" and that they are "to determine church policy (Acts 15:22)" (*Questions about Elders* [Panorama City, Calif.: Word of Grace Communications, 1984] 12, 13).

[62]Although the word ἐκκλησία / 'church' does not appear, that is the obvious reference of οἱ ἀδελφοὶ / 'the brothers' and τοῖς μαθηταῖς / 'the disciples' in v 27. Such matters were probably handled much more informally in the early church than is the tradition in many churches today.

Paul's comments in 2 Corinthians 8 are written in that context. As part of his efforts to avoid any suspicion or criticism in the way the funds were being handled (vv 20–21), several men were jointly administering the collection. The first trustee was Titus. Although the second man is unknown by name, he is described as χειροτονηθεὶς ὑπὸ τῶν ἐκκλησιῶν / 'chosen by the churches'. Although χειροτονέω can mean simply 'appoint', it is more likely in the present context that it designates an official vote of the church.[63] (Ignatius frequently uses the same word in referring to similar instances in which church envoys are elected to represent the home church in matters relating to a congregation in another city.[64]) This would imply that Paul considered congregational authority to be the proper basis for such matters. The congregational pattern in inter-church affairs appears to be the only one known in the NT.

Intra-Church Affairs

In two passages from Acts the local workings of the NT church can be observed. Both the Jerusalem church (in chap. 6) and the Antiochean church (in chap. 13) illustrate once again the congregational basis of NT polity.

From a polity perspective, Acts 6:1–6 can be quickly summarized.[65] The church faced a significant problem. The Twelve, who were

[63]Historically, the etymology of the word included the idea of raising or extending the hand (χείρ + τείνω). Although the hand gesture soon became "optional" (in that other means were used, and this as early as the 5th century B.C. [Lohse, *TDNT*, 9.437]), the sense of popular election was retained. The usual meaning ("*choose, elect by raising hands*, then gener., esp. of election or selection for definite offices or tasks," BAGD, 881) is probably in view in 2 Corinthians 8. The very broad sense of 'appoint' is possible (normally the subject is explicitly identified if this is the case), but unlikely. If so the emphasis is on the elected (means unspecified) representative's official appointment to his task *by the local church or churches* involved. Paul's emphasis on avoiding criticism would seem to demand a broad based election instead of selection by the elders alone (as MacArthur [*Questions about Elders*, 20] assumes). The reference to elders being appointed by Paul and Barnabas in Acts 14:23 illustrates the use of χειροτονέω in the sense "appoint," but that does not affect the current discussion. As apostles they had authority to do so. The passage cannot be used to argue that elders are to be appointed rather than elected by the congregation. "Appointment" in the post-apostolic era simply raises the question as to who has such apostolic authority.

[64]The references can be found in BAGD 881. Given the radical shift in emphasis by Ignatius on the authority of the bishop (when compared, e.g., with Polycarp and Clement) it is significant that he maintained congregational authority in such inter-church matters. *The Didache* also uses χειροτονέω to refer to churches electing/choosing their own overseers and deacons: Χειροτονήσατε οὖν ἑαυτοῖς ἐπισκόπους καὶ διακόνους / 'therefore, elect for yourselves overseers and deacons' (15.1).

[65]That is not to say that this is an easy section to interpret otherwise. For an exceedingly helpful discussion of the other difficulties, cf. Longenecker, *EBC*, 9.326–32.

the only "official" leaders in the church at this point, were not able to personally handle the additional oversight necessary to resolve the matter. They did, however, propose a solution. This recommendation was presented to the entire group of believers, referred to in v 2 as τὸ πλῆθος τῶν μαθητῶν / 'the assembly of disciples'.[66] The believers (here called ἀδελφοί / 'brothers') were advised to select from their own number a group of seven men to administer the debated needs. The congregational involvement is evident in the implementation of this solution recorded in v 5: ἤρεσεν ὁ λόγος ἐνώπιον παντὸς τοῦ πλήθους / 'the word pleased the whole assembly'[67] and also ἐξελέξαντο / 'they chose'.[68] That the apostles laid their hands on the men selected by the assembly does not detract from the congregational emphasis.[69] With the apostles still on the scene exercising their God-given authority over the church one would expect no less. The laying on of hands designated the apostles' approval and authorization for these men to exercise the delegated authority.[70] In this instance it is noteworthy that a congregational emphasis is present even with apostles present.

Acts 13 begins as a local matter, but eventuates in the first of the Pauline missionary journeys. Only three verses describe the church proceedings in Antioch—the clipped style prompting wishes for more detail.[71] The situation is generally clear. The church is being served by five men described as προφῆται καὶ διδάσκαλοι / 'prophets and teachers' (v 1).[72] During a meeting of the church,[73] a prophetic oracle

[66]Cf. the discussion of τὸ πλῆθος and its parallel in the Qumran community in ibid., 9.332 and the references there.

[67]This awkward phrase is a semitism arising from the spoken Jewish-Greek. Cf. BDF, p. 3, n. 5. It is nicely expressed by the *NIV*'s "This proposal pleased the whole group."

[68]The third plural carries on the reference to παντὸς τοῦ πλήθους.

[69]"'Whom they set before the apostles' makes the impression that it took some time to effect the election, and that the apostles entrusted the election entirely to the congregation. They, too, were the ones to be satisfied. After the election had been held, these seven were certified as the congregation's choice." R. C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934) 246.

[70]These may well be the first deacons, although that conclusion (not explicitly stated in the text) is not necessary to the establishment of the congregational polity illustrated here. Elders, of course, are not mentioned by title until Acts 11:30.

[71]Longenecker, *EBC*, 9.417.

[72]The relationship of each of the five men to the two descriptive words is debated. For the possible conclusions, cf. Longenecker, *EBC*, 9.416 and I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 215.

[73]The subject of λειτουργούντων / 'worshiping' (v 2) is not specified. It seems best to conclude that it refers to the service of the entire church, not just the prophets and teachers. Cf. Marshall, *Acts*, 215 and Longenecker, *EBC*, 9.416.

directs that Barnabas and Saul be set apart for a special ministry. The polity question revolves around the identity of those who commissioned Barnabas and Saul in v 3. "We may infer from the parallel usage in 15:2 . . . and from the descriptions of early church government in 6:2–6 and 15:4–30 . . . that the whole congregation, together with its leaders, was involved in attesting the validity of the revelation received, laid hands on the missioners, and set them out."[74] If this is the proper conclusion, then the congregational pattern seen elsewhere in Acts remains consistent.

NEW TESTAMENT INSTRUCTION REGARDING POLITY

There is no didactic text in the NT which gives specific instructions regarding church polity, hence the importance of the theological principles and NT examples summarized above. One major passage proposed as a basis for elder rule is 1 Tim 5:17.

This verse does not contradict the principle of congregational government. It teaches that every elder should both rule and teach, and emphasizes the elder's duty to study diligently in order to teach. As Kent says, "This verse does not give sufficient warrant for the Reformed view of two classes of elders, those who ruled and those who taught. Every elder engaged in teaching (3:2). However, some would do so with more energy and excellence than others."[75] There are no ruling elders distinct from teaching elders in the biblical sense, though unfortunately this has been assumed in many churches.[76]

[74]Longenecker, *EBC*, 9.417. Likewise Everett F. Harrison (*Interpreting Acts*, 2nd ed. [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1986] 215–16): "What persons are being indicated by the phrase 'While they were worshipping the Lord'—the prophets and teachers or the church? Since the praying and sending forth of two from this group was almost certainly undertaken by the church as a whole (v.3) and no change of subject is indicated from verse 2, it is probable that the ministering (or worshipping) applies to the congregation. If the ministering were intended to refer to the gifted men only, it would be natural to say that they were ministering to the church rather than to the Lord. Furthermore, it is questionable that the Holy Spirit would reveal His will for the church to the leaders only rather than to the entire congregation assembled for worship." Cf. also F. F. Bruce (*The Acts of the Apostles: The Greek Text with Introduction and Commentary*, 2nd ed. [London: Tyndale, 1952] 254): "The whole church sent them forth, and it was to the whole church that they gave their report when they returned. Cf. xiv.26f."

[75]Homer A. Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1958) 181–82.

[76]Contra Glasscock ("The Biblical Concept of Elder," *BSac* 144/573 [1987] 77): "All elders are to be 'able to teach' . . . , but [1 Tim] 5:17 seems to imply a more formal type of public exhortation not expected of all the elders." There is considerable diversity even among those who contend for a distinction. For representative positions, note the following: Bornkamm, *TDNT*, 6.667; Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956) 213; and William Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957) 179.

The terms 'teaching elder' and 'ruling elder' do not appear historically until Calvin. 1 Tim 5:17 refers to elders who are ruling well—not to a class of "ruling elders." The noun is οἱ πρεσβύτεροι, modified by the participle προεστῶτες, which is further qualified by the adjective καλῶς. It is thus the "well-ruling elders," not the "good, ruling-elders." To create two classes of elders also ignores the force of the superlative adverb μάλιστα. Paul contends that an elder who rules well is worthy of double honor. This is "especially" (μάλιστα) true, he says, of those elders who not only rule well, but also labor in the word and doctrine. He is not referring to two separate classes of elders, but rather indicating in a comparative manner how worthy they really are. "This text only shows that one office of presbyter or bishop involved two kinds of labor, and that certain presbyters or bishops were more successful in one kind than in the other."[77]

The responsibility to rule in 1 Tim 5:17 can be understood in the context of the home (τοῦ ἰδίου οἴκου καλῶς προϊστάμενον / 'the one who manages his own household well'), carried over from 3:4–5,[78] or in the context of the duties of the overseer's realm of authority in the church (3:1).[79] The latter option seems more likely. When the pastor's teaching ministry is applied to his leadership role as an overseer he will be able to equip the members of the congregation for ἔργον διακονίας / 'a work of ministry' (Eph 4:11–12). The church will prosper when individuals besides the pastor function in administration, exhortation, showing mercy, evangelism, etc. They may be able (when properly equipped) to have a ministry which is potentially more effective than even the pastor in those ministries. It is for this reason that this particular kind of elder (who applies his teaching gift to "ruling") is worthy of double honor.

MacArthur's use of this passage also needs to be examined. He asserts that the word προίστημι in 1 Tim 5:17 and elsewhere authorizes the elders to govern the church. There appears to be little or no accountability to the congregation in his system. He states, "As those who rule in the church, elders are not subject to any higher authority outside the local assembly."[80] This statement might be taken to mean that they are subject to the authority of the local assembly, but that is apparently not his intention. In the preceding context he has stated

[77]A. H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Old Tappan, NJ: Revell, 1907) 915.

[78]This passage is the only other use of προΐστημι in relation to the elder (technically ἐπίσκοπος / 'overseer' in 1 Timothy, and the only reference which specifically states what it is that the elder is to *rule*.

[79]The only passage that may directly link the use of the word προΐστημι with both the elders and the church is 1 Thess 5:12: εἰδέναι τοὺς κοπιῶντας ἐν ὑμῖν καὶ προϊσταμένους ὑμῶν ἐν κυρίῳ καὶ νουθετοῦντας ὑμᾶς / 'respect those who labor among you and rule over you in the Lord and admonish you'.

[80]MacArthur, *Questions about Elders*, 12. Cf. also the quotation in n. 27, above.

with regard to elders that "there is no higher court of appeal, and no greater resources to know the mind and heart of God with regard to issues in the church."[81] In an earlier syllabus the statement is made that "There is no higher earthly authority in the New Testament than the Elders of the local assembly."[82] A congregational qualification is appended a few pages later in the syllabus. "The congregation will (and has the right to) react negatively to non-unanimous decisions, but cannot argue with effect against unanimity in the Spirit."[83] While the present writer would certainly concur with the congregation's right to intervene, the narrow window of authority granted above (only when the elders are not in unanimous agreement) does not do justice to the biblical principles of congregational authority.

The evidence cited to support these contentions is not accurate. MacArthur asserts, "The Greek word translated 'rule' in that verse [1 Tim 5:17] is *proistēmi*, used to speak of the elders' responsibilities four times in 1 Timothy (3:4, 5, 12; 5:17), once in 1 Thessalonians 5:12 . . . , and once in Romans 12:8."[84] The problems are three. Two of the references relate to the elders' responsibility in the home, not the church (1 Tim 3:4, 5). Another text cited (1 Tim 3:12) relates to deacons (and also to domestic responsibilities), not to elders. The Thessalonian passage does not specify that it is restricted to elders. It certainly includes them, but may also include deacons, or perhaps even civil authorities. Likewise Rom 12:8 is not necessarily a reference to elders. The reference there is to someone with the spiritual gift of leadership—they may or may not be an elder.

These considerations leave one explicit use of προίστημι in relation to the church, and two others by implication. The question still remains, however, as to the extent of the authority implied. It certainly cannot be an absolute, unlimited authority in every area of church (and church member) life. The only areas of authority specified in this text are the word and doctrine (λόγῳ καὶ διδασκαλίᾳ)—certainly insufficient statements upon which to base elder-rule as opposed to congregational government.

When the various aspects of the passage are considered, 1 Tim 5:17 relates, not to church polity as such, but rather to the role and responsibility of the elders for ministry within local assemblies of believers.

CONCLUSION

The term 'plurality of elders' is usually associated with a polity which vests ecclesiastical authority in the πρεσβυτέριον / 'council of

[81]Ibid., 11.
[82]MacArthur and Barshaw, *Leading the Flock*, 32.
[83]Ibid., 36.
[84]MacArthur, *Questions about Elders*, 11.

elders'. Regardless of the conclusion to which one comes on the plurality issue, the preceding paragraphs have sought to demonstrate that congregational polity must be maintained if NT doctrine and example are to be heeded. It is possible for a church to minister with a plurality of elders and still maintain a congregational form of church government. It is also possible to maintain the congregation's authority under a single pastor. Neither conclusion regarding plurality resolves all questions of polity. Nor does a congregational conclusion regarding polity decide the issue of plurality of elders. Questions regarding both polity and plurality need to be considered and interrelated on a biblical basis.