

Elder-Rule with Congregational Involvement

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The biblical norm for church government is by a plurality of God-ordained elders. The elders jointly shepherd, oversee and lead a local body of believers. Nowhere in Scripture do we find a local assembly ruled by one pastor or majority opinion. But the question of the extent of congregational involvement in the elder-rule/led assemblies is seldom discussed or studied from the New Testament. I had numerous occasions to teach and discuss this matter with many elders and congregants. Recently, this topic came up again in certain assemblies for study and discussion. One brother told me that though everyone had their own opinions about this matter, no substantial principles were presented from the Word.

Church is not a democracy and is not governed entirely by the will of the people. Elders lead and govern the church. They are called and appointed by God for the task of leadership. **But what is the extent of congregation - elder interplay?** Does the New Testament prescribe “strict elder-rule” without any involvement from the congregation, totally excluding them?

Biblical Considerations & Relevant Texts

1. **Acts 6:1-6:** The text undoubtedly indicates that the congregation was involved and consulted in the appointment of these servants (some would see them as the first instance of deacons). **The congregation nominated certain spiritually qualified men** to serve, with the final decision and appointment resting with the spiritual leaders (in this context, the apostles).
2. **Acts 14:23:** “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” The process of identifying elders may also have involved the people. **The assent of the congregation is implied in this process** – “when they had appointed elders for them” (the text doesn’t say how they appointed them). “They commended them” – and **probably the church as a whole** – to the Lord’s service. Timothy and Titus were charged with appointing elders (**1 Tim.5:22; Titus 1:5**) but do not specify who performs this. The appointment seems to be performed by Timothy and Titus in their unique position as apostolic delegates. Some would argue that Titus was to see that these elders were appointed. He could have seen it carried out via congregational means or involvement. But whether it was apostles or apostolic delegates they appointed elders with **congregational involvement and consensus**.
3. **Acts 13:1-3:** Here we find the first record of a church recognizing, commissioning and sending out missionaries. The church at Antioch recognized the work of the Holy Spirit and the calling on the lives of Paul and Barnabas. **Their call was affirmed and commended by the church.** The leaders laid their hands on the missionaries (signified identification, confirmation, fellowship, and unity in their upcoming mission). Having prayed for Saul and Barnabas and having publicly identified with

them, **the Antioch church sent them away** (“they let them go,” or “they released them”).

4. **Matt.18:17:** “.... 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-gatherer.” As a final stage in church discipline, the matter is brought **before the church**. A local congregation is meant here. The text does not specifically say who ultimately makes the decision to expel the individual. It may be assumed that the official decision is that of elders with **congregational support**. Based on this principle, it may be argued that congregational involvement may be considered in receiving new members (not visitors) into the fellowship and activities of the assembly. We don’t find any specific text addressing the congregational involvement in regulating the boundaries of its membership. But some would consider receiving new members as a corollary to the principle in Matt.18:17.
5. **1 Cor.5:1-13:** Paul confronts sexual immorality in the church and exhorts the church to act. Regarding the discipline and the removal of the immoral person from their midst, **Paul addresses the entire church**, not just the elders. Paul rebukes the Corinthian church with blunt honesty. The church knew about the problem and did nothing about it. “You have become arrogant” (v.2). The “you” here in the Greek is in the plural. They were to carry out the discipline when they were “assembled” (v.4). The Greek verb is *synago* from which the word “synagogue” is derived. It means “to gather together” and refers to the official gathering of the assembly. The church has the authority and responsibility to “Remove the wicked man from among yourselves” (v.13). The imperative to remove the man is plural and presumably **addresses the congregation**. Though the elders are uniquely responsible for carrying out this decision, **the decisive role and involvement of the congregation in the whole process makes it a congregational act**.
6. **2 Cor.2:5-11:** “Sufficient for such a one is the punishment which was inflicted by the majority” (v.6). Paul’s words indicate that the church in Corinth had followed the biblical process in disciplining the sinning man. Paul describes their church discipline as a “punishment by the majority” implying that this discipline was not merely from the elders **but the entire congregation**. Now there is no further need of a severe penalty; it was time to grant the repentant man forgiveness so that he would be restored to fellowship (vs.6-8).
7. **1 Tim.5:19-20:** The same process established in Matt.18:15-20 also applies in the matter of disciplining elders. It is noteworthy that though these instructions were addressed to Timothy, **the text seems to involve the congregation** – “in the presence of all,” v.20).
8. **Acts 15 & the Jerusalem Council:** Here is a beautiful example of apostles, elders and the congregation working together in peace and unity. The Jerusalem Council established and affirmed the most vital question regarding salvation: salvation is totally by grace through faith in Christ alone. The very nature of the Gospel had been

called into question by the legalistic Judaizers. The apostles were the standard for doctrine and practice in the church. If ever there were a proper place for the apostles to make a decision alone, apart from the church, it was at the Jerusalem church. But the amazing fact is that the apostles not only included the local Jerusalem elders (15:6) **but also the whole church** (15:4,12, 22). The leadership of the apostles was without any authoritarian preeminence. It is also noteworthy that the delegation of faithful men from the Church at Antioch were sent on their way to Jerusalem by the church (15:3).

Specific Matters & Practical Considerations

In addition to the Scriptural guidelines derived from specific texts, it is prudent for us to consider certain practical areas where congregational involvement may deem quite appropriate and even needed.

1. **Beliefs:** Under the leadership and initiative of the elders, the congregation should have an involvement in the formulation of the doctrinal statement of the church (Faith & Practices). Any modifications or changes to these documents should be brought to the attention of the congregation with due explanation. God gifts the entire congregation with spiritual gifts and the entire congregation must be equipped for its doctrinal purity. The New Testament letters were written not to the elders of those churches but to the entire congregation. When doctrinal and practical errors inflict the church, the entire assembly has the responsibility to correct these matters under the sound teaching of elders and teachers in the assembly.
2. **Finance:** Since the believers contribute financially to the various needs and ministries of the assembly, major financial expenses and distributions should be informed to the assembly. The congregation should have some involvement in the “major” financial decisions of the church.
3. **Changes, Projects & New Mission/Ministry:** Changes to the schedule, format of the ongoing ministries, meetings and the introduction of new ministries/mission should be informed in advance and done in consultation with the assembly. New building projects or expansion of the facility should be with the support and involvement of the congregation. This is essential for the unity, peace and cooperation in a spirit of love to achieve a common goal.

There may be other areas in the life of the church where congregational involvement and support are essential. Such prudent policies will foster the vibrant health of the eldership and the church. Elders who are committed to the Scriptural model of pastoral care will always seek the counsel and mind of those they lead.

Conclusion

New Testament churches were led by a plurality of spiritually qualified elders, called to oversee, shepherd, teach, equip and model a particular flock. Decisions were made by them as a team and the congregation was involved in the process. “Significant decisions” were made by *seeking congregational involvement and widespread agreement with the congregation even though the elders ultimately lead the process*. The congregants are commanded to obey their leaders and submit to them (Heb.13:17; 1 Thess.5: 12-13). Thus, it’s a balance where elders guide the church with input from the congregation. This model is clearly attested in the New Testament.

The elders should be open and willing to consult Bible teachers, evangelists and other spiritually mature believers in the assembly as and when they need more spiritual input and insight in their leadership responsibilities. Such men also may be able to represent the feelings and the voice of the congregation in a realistic manner. *Elders should never encourage a passive congregation.*

The topic discussed in this article is generally neglected and ignored by elders and congregations. The Scriptural data is seldom studied, analyzed or implemented. A healthy relationship between elders and congregations is not seen in many churches. In some churches, the elders do not encourage any congregational involvement. This is the primary reason for disunity, strife and divisions in the church.

The New Testament presents a church governance model where a plurality of biblically qualified elders lead the church with primary authority in decision-making with congregational support, involvement and input. The members of Christ’s body bear significant responsibility for the church. This model gives free reign to the Holy Spirit and puts the church in a better position to glorify Christ, the Head of the church, and walk in the light of God’s Word.