

# A Critique of Congregationalism and Local Church Membership

Ecclesiastical discussions have often taken a back seat to more pressing issues in the church, and I believe this is to the detriment of many believers. Most, I feel are not adequately able to discuss why they hold to a particular “polity” or why they are pressed with “local church membership” at their congregation.

As a Baptist, this just appears to be the “norm” of the universal church. No one really asks the question of why we practice a polity or why we have adopted local church membership. It is just assumed that this is the standard practice and there needs to be no more discussion about it. I truly believe this is a problem. We should be discerning when it comes to *all* matters of doctrines and theological beliefs that we have. We want to embrace what the Word teaches, not things that are just rooted in *traditions* that cannot truly be substantiated from the Word via exegetical study. If we reject some practices because they are not derived from biblical exegesis, why have we embraced others?

It has always been my hope to have an open ear, wrestle with topics, and grind into the content until I have found a biblical answer. I have tried to do this in other areas that I believe are important.

Two areas that I have found are often *presupposed* in our Baptistic traditions are a **congregational polity** and **local church membership**. As a Christian, I cannot subscribe to either of these. Before you assume that I am some guy that rejects local church gathering, discipline, and accountability allow me time and space to unpack my

ideas. My prayer is that this will point us back to scripture as the *sole infallible rule of faith* for the church and will drive a wedge between that and our traditions.

I believe both congregationalism and local church membership are predicated upon “traditions” of the church, and not based upon (a) any biblical mandates or (b) any solid biblical exegesis. Any ecclesiology that we prescribe and demand to be practiced *must* be grounded in an expressed biblical mandate and biblical exegesis. We cannot start creating practices and demanding that others engage in these practices, solely because we *think* they are right, or *think* they might be helpful. This is not a scale we can use to judge, since everyone has their own ideas and own standards. We need *commands* from scripture to justify and enforce practices. Some see something like church membership as *essential* to church life, others see it as rebellion to even question the practice, so we need to get down to the bottom of this.

At the outset, I recognize that elders of their church want to implement a *form* that works well and one they believe is biblically grounded, but often the *function* has been lost because of the overemphasis on *form*. We need to have freedom in some regards to church polity, since the bible has not laid out for us in extensive detail exactly how everything works, but at the same time, if there are practices that are assumed to be biblical, which are really not biblical, we need to get rid of these practices since they encroach on the *function*, and as I will show below, encroach on the ability to be of good use to a congregation. We need to understand that there is a balance between *form* and *function*. The church can at times overemphasize *form* at the expense of *function*.

## 1 – Local Church Membership

We must first ask ourselves, is “local church membership” *commanded* or issued as a normative practice in the scriptures? My answer is no. Nowhere does the bible teach or command us to be joined to a local congregation via some formal practice of “membership” to be of use to serve in a local body. That is not to say that we should not *attend* a local congregation, but it is to say that the bible nowhere dictates that we *ought to* sign a formal covenantal document to “join” a particular local church.

At the outset, we already have an issue, since we have no formal command from scripture to do what so many are demanding. Paul, John, Peter, or any of the other New Testament writers could have, at any point, stated that each New Testament believer was to be *joined* via a formal process to their local church, but they don’t. They are silent.

The bible however is explicit that when we are brought into union with Christ through the baptism of the Holy Spirit, a believer is made a “member” of the *universal* body of Christ (which includes believing Jews and Gentiles). This is not something that we do, this is something that the Holy Spirit does.<sup>1</sup> Being placed into that *universal* body is the first movement toward unity in the body. The natural outflow from that is to gather with other believers who have other spiritual gifts, and this points us to the local congregation, where we attend in harmony with one another. Congregating with other believers is *essential*, we must be used for the building up of the local body and use our gifts for the edification of others.

There is a natural flow from *universal* -> *local* and we see the *local* congregations established through a structural hierarchy of elder-led/rule and deacons that are there to

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<sup>1</sup> Rom. 12:4-5; 1 Cor. 12:12ff; Eph. 3:6, 4:25, 30.

assist the needs of the church. These two offices are a necessary part of the *local* congregation.

The issue, in my honest opinion, is adding another pre-requisite to *serving* in a local congregation. The leaders of the local congregation have implemented a way to distinguish between those who solely attend on Sunday from others who are far more serious and more committed, which in turn has placed another burden upon the church, which is to declare a sort of *allegiance* to the local expression of the universal body. This *allegiance* is often seen in forms of “covenantal signing” or “declaring that you affirm their constitution” or “going through a formal foundations class,” etc. The goal of this *formality* is to make sure that you are a genuine believer and that you *will* submit to your leaders and come under their authority, but this is again nowhere stated in scripture. A believer once joined to the universal body is a “member” already, there is no need or command to become a “member” of another institution. That *universal* membership can be seen at the bare minimum through a declaration of their faith in Jesus Christ. All believers that follow Jesus are a “member” of His body, and this should be sufficient to have them serve in a local congregation.

Now, how does one ensure that the believer can be trusted to serve appropriately, this should come about by observing and doing life with the believer. When elders/deacons “do life” with other believers, they experience their love for Jesus, they see their gifts, and leaders ought to take that information and use it to the building up of the body of Christ.<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> Eph. 4:12

The issue, and one of my big concerns, is that elders are not engaged in the lives of the congregants the way they should be, and therefore, they are requiring believers to go through a “formality” to ensure that they are genuinely believers and that they want to commit. If elders were more engaged, this simply would not be needed. Elders are not in the habit of mentoring, discipling, building up and equipping men and women for works of service.<sup>3</sup> They generally do not take the time to engage with the sheep, walk with the sheep, or smell like the sheep. They stand from a far and watch, but this is insufficient for an elder, and because they stand from a far, they cannot discern from that distance the use of a fellow brother or sister in Christ, because they simply don’t know the sheep. This leaves believers at the hand of a “system” or “formality” to know how to proceed forward with that believer. Believers are then put through a “process” (i.e., local membership) to determine (a) whether they know doctrine and agree with the doctrines of the church, (b) whether they are followers of Christ, and (c) what they consider their gifts are. These are all things that elders could determine if they were with the sheep on a regular basis. So, I am convinced the root of the issue is that elders are not engaged with the sheep enough, and therefore a formal process was put into place to assist the elders in making these sorts of determinations. I am sure you can see the concern.

I am convinced that “local” church membership is essentially a “cop-out” for elders. Yes, that might seem blunt, but I believe it to be true. I believe that if elders were attentive to the men and women that attend their churches, they would know the gifting of each of

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<sup>3</sup> This is a broad-brush statement; I recognize that this doesn’t fit every elder/pastor. Some are very much involved in the lives of their brothers and sisters, but I would say from my observation, that this is very limited and/or rare.

the believers, they would see their desire to serve or be involved, and their love for Jesus, rather than being put through the ringer, they would be able to use their gifts immediately, without this “formal” process that is nowhere demanded for in scripture. It is a *form* that has been put in place, but it jeopardizes the *function*.

Another issue is that it creates a sort of *classification* of believers within a local body. You may have people that have been at the church for years, but they are not paid attention to, because they are not formal members. The ones that are included in activities, invited to events, are the ones that have become members, while the others sit on the side-lines watching and waiting. It has created a sort of “elite” class structure in the church that has rendered one party effective, the other not so much. The non-members may never be involved because they are *potentially* treated as second-class citizens, the non-members may never feel welcomed to the church, the non-members coast by with no accountability, no discipline, and the elders can basically wipe their hands clean because they [the believer] haven’t taken this step forward for membership.

Now, with all that said some/all of this may not apply to you as a leader, or as a member/non-member of a local church, and I want to be clear that I am making *broad brush* statements, simply because I cannot address all the variation that exists within local churches, neither here in Canada, nor in the United States or abroad.<sup>4</sup> Some may not have a “members vs. non-members” category at all.

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<sup>4</sup> I personally know some churches that have membership, but the elders are involved in the lives of the sheep, they seek out the new attendee, they get to know them, they have them over for lunch, they do life with them, and they let them be involved even if not formal members. I consider this rare.

My larger issue is with churches that have *demanded* that we practice church membership and if we do not, we are basically *rebellious* Christians that refuse to come under the authority of the local church elders.

In one book my wife and I were reading, this was strongly stated:

“The reasons for this view [believing church membership is a hinderance and not fruitful] of church membership are many. Some Christians are just plain *indifferent* to church membership. They can take it or leave it; they’re neither excited nor negative toward the church. It just doesn’t matter to them. Others are *ignorant*. They are uninformed. They’ve never considered the Bible’s view of the local church. Still others are *indecisive*. They can’t make up their minds about joining. Perhaps they’re the kind of people who never really make decisions; decisions tend to happen to them. And there are the *independent* types. They are “Lone Ranger Christians” who don’t want to be saddled with the burdens of church membership. They don’t want people “in their business.” They want to come into a church, consume what they need, and leave unattached. Finally, there are those who are slow to commit to a local church because their affections are *inverted*. They have strong attachments to a “home church” in the town they grew up in, and yet their bodies are hundreds of miles away. They can’t bring themselves to join a church where they live because they’ve never emotionally left a church from their past.”<sup>5</sup>

He goes on to say:

“At root, all of these perspectives on the local church stem from the same problem: a failure to understand or take seriously God’s intent that the local church be central to the life of his people. People don’t become committed church members and therefore healthy Christians-

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<sup>5</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is A Healthy Church Member?* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, ILL, 2008), 64. Bold and Brackets added by me. Italics in the original.

because they don't understand that such a commitment precisely how God intends his people to live out the faith and experience Christian love.”<sup>6</sup>

Did you catch it? The reason that people reject the concept of “local” membership is because of (a) indifference, (b) ignorance, (c) indecisiveness, (d) independence, and (e) because their affections are inverted. Essentially you have rebellious believers who don’t know what they are missing because they don’t care, they just want to be alone, they can’t make decisions or commit, and they just miss their home church and don’t want to join another church. The obvious issue is that Thabiti has stacked the deck with a very shallow list. He hasn’t listed all possible reasons for a rejection of church membership. One might (in the case of my wife and I) believe that local church membership is (a) not exegetically defensible, and (b) nowhere demanded in scripture for the local church to follow. However, that option is not on the table, we are basically grouped into the “rebellious/confused” believer category. So, Thabiti’s categories are ultimately unhelpful, since they don’t categorize myself, nor my wife’s beliefs. While it is true, that this may reflect *some* believers, it certainly cannot be true of *all*.

It is interesting that Thabiti’s next page starts with: “*Is Church Membership a Biblical Idea?*” I believe this is listed next in his book because some believers might reject the premise that church membership is biblical, and that this might be another reason why one would reject it, though he doesn’t list that as a possible option. Thabiti understands what is at stake, he must prove that the concept itself is *biblical*, and as I will try to show, the evidence is extremely weak and will ultimately be found wanting.

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid.

Let's continue with Thabiti's arguments here:

"As with so many things, you can't turn in the Bible to "the Book of Church Membership" or to a chapter conveniently labeled by Bible publishers, on "becoming a member." The biblical data isn't as obvious as that, yet the idea of membership is nearly everywhere in scripture."<sup>7</sup>

Did you catch it? Despite there being no articulated requirements or mandate for membership in scripture, nor the command for elders to practice it, it is apparently "everywhere in Scripture." Bold claim let's test the evidence!

The first heading is "Church Leadership", and it is here where Thabiti brings out his first argument. Let's quote it in full:

"Two classic passages in Scripture outline for the church the qualifications its leaders must have (1 Tim. 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9). In addition to these qualifications, there are explicit commands for leaders to shepherd the flock and for Christians to submit to their leaders (Heb. 13:17). Yet if there is no identifiable membership, there is no one for leaders to lead. Submission to their authority as Hebrews 13:17 requires becomes nonsense if the leaders are not responsible for group, and that group is not attached to them in some way."<sup>8</sup>

First, this is not evidence for local church membership, this is evidence that a local church requires leaders who oversee those who gather at the local congregation, which all respectable evangelical churches acknowledge. Secondly, a local church doesn't need "identifiable" members, in the sense that they need to declare via a formal institution that they are joined to a local body for them to shepherd. This doesn't follow logically. One could attend a congregation, know the leaders, be willing to submit to the leaders,

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<sup>7</sup> Ibid., 65.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

but reject the premise of local membership. Is that person someone that could be led, or someone that could come under their care? Of course, especially if they have indicated that they are a follower of Jesus Christ.<sup>9</sup> A shepherd can know the sheep, engage the sheep, love the sheep, and them not be formal members in a local body. Again, it's a non-sequitur that they need to be *stamped* with a member category, via a formal process, to be "identifiable." A shepherd can spot a sheep without a formal process, just like a shepherd can spot a wolf without the wolf needing to go through membership classes. Thirdly, Hebrews 13:17 is not a defence for local membership, it simply states that men/women are to obey their leaders (amen) and submit to them (amen), notice "for they keep watch over your souls." There is nothing here about a formal process. The leaders *ought* to know those who are attending their congregation, they should be able to sniff out wolves and sheep, it is their duty. It is their duty to watch over your souls. If you are a believer in a local congregation, it is *their* duty to watch over *you*, not for you to formally engage in a process where *you* get recognized as a believer and you agree to all their formalities. The elders duty is to protect the sheep and that means knowing who is coming and going within a congregation. If your congregation is too big, you either need more elders, or you need to church plant. There is no good reason that elders should not be able to know those that are coming and going.

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<sup>9</sup> Some might appeal to 1 Peter 5:2-3, but this doesn't necessitate membership either. The text clearly states that elders will take care of the flock. Elders at a local level will have believers in the congregation that are entrusted to them, these are the believers who are genuine followers of Jesus Christ that have made a declaration of faith. This can be determined quite easily without all the formality. If the shepherds *lived* with the sheep, they would know the sheep and they would know whether they were a wolf or a sheep, very easily. No formal process needed.

So, under the title church leadership there is no evidence for a formalized process of local church membership issued by Paul to Timothy or to Titus, or by the author of Hebrews. One can be identified as a believer without membership [simple declaration of faith], and one can submit to their leaders without local membership.

“Church Discipline” is the next title and the next piece of evidence. Let’s again quote it in full:

“In 1 Corinthians 5, the apostle Paul instructs the believers in Corinth to put out of their fellowship a man involved in sexual immorality. The Lord Jesus commanded a similar action in Matthew 18:15-17. Part of the reason the Bible commands the practice of church discipline is so that clear distinctions can be maintained between God’s people, the church, and the surrounding world (1 Cor. 5:9-13). If there is no practical visible way of determining who belongs to the church and who belongs to the world, this distinction is lost, and “putting out of fellowship” is an impossible feat since there is no real way of being in the fellowship.”<sup>10</sup>

First off, it should be noted that the alleged evidence is again an argument from silence. Nothing in 1 Cor. 5, or Matt. 18 discusses the formality we practice today. Nowhere does Paul or Matthew talk about some formalized process for becoming members in the church, it isn’t even implied here. Secondly, what does it mean to “put out of their fellowship?” He doesn’t say, he doesn’t exegete 1 Cor. 5. He just assumes to be put out is to have your formal membership removed, this is just begging the question.

Let’s talk about 1 Cor. 5:2:

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<sup>10</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is A Healthy Church Member?* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, ILL, 2008), 66. Bold and Brackets added by me. Italics in the original.

“And you have become puffed up and have not mourned instead, *so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.*”

The text states, that there was one who has done this sinful deed (sexual immorality discussed in 1 Cor 5:1) in the church, and that they [the local congregation] have neglected to *discipline* this individual. Had they considered the seriousness of the crime, they would have put away (removed from their midst) this individual. What does this mean? I am convinced after studying the text that all that is meant here is that there if there is no repentance the individual should have been *excommunicated*. This means that the believer would not be allowed to gather with the believers.<sup>11</sup> They would be “put out” of the congregation and not be allowed to have fellowship or communion with the believers therein. There is *no* evidence that this individual had local membership status since this *presupposes* that there was even this status to begin with here, and that they should have been *stripped* of this status. That’s not what the text says or teaches. It doesn’t say that in disciplining the individual, they should have their local membership status revoked, which again from my perspective doesn’t address the concept of “putting them out.” Removing the label of “membership” is not discipline as

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<sup>11</sup> As Clarke notes, “Probably no more is meant than a simple **disowning of the person**, accompanied with the refusal to admit him to the sacred ordinances, or to have any intercourse or connection with him.” Clarke, Adam. “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 5:2”. “The Adam Clarke Commentary”. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/acc/1-corinthians-5.html>. Bold added by me.

Barnes concurs, “Might be taken away - **By excommunication**. He should not, while he continues in this state, be allowed to remain in your communion.” Barnes, Albert. “Commentary on 1 Corinthians 5:2”. “Barnes’ Notes on the Whole Bible”. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bnb/1-corinthians-5.html>. Bold added by me.

S. Lewis Johnson, Jr. also agrees, “Be taken away from you refers to **ecclesiastical censure and excommunication**.” *1 Corinthians* in the Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Moody Press, Chicago, ILL, 1981), 1237. Bold added by me.

Paul sees here, discipline is *excommunication* [cutting off all ties with the individual] if they will not repent of their sin. This is the logical fallout from following Matt. 18, the last step, but the Corinthians were arrogant, they weren't practicing what they were told, instead they boasted in this.

Matt. 18 doesn't say anything about a formal implementation of membership either, it discusses the process for *discipline*, which we should all take seriously, but it does not at all insinuate that membership is in view at all. One can be disciplined even if they are not a formal member of a local church.<sup>12</sup>

Being "in-fellowship" refers to one's believers consistency in gathering with other believers at a local congregation, it does not require formal membership to have fellowship with the same believers on a regular basis.

The last piece of evidence is the weakest, which is titled "Keeping Lists and Voting." Remember, these are supposed to be the *best* arguments for the position. As of right now, there has been no serious exegetical presentation of this formalized practice, we've seen proof-texting, but not exegesis and no serious consideration of the content of the passages being presented. Let's quote the last section:

"There is slight evidence that the early church kept some lists associated with its membership. For example, lists of widows were kept (1 Tim. 5:9). Also, Christians in the local church voted for some actions. It was the "majority who voted to remove the man from membership in the church at Corinth (2 Cor. 2:6)? Electing leaders, submitting to them, regulating membership,

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<sup>12</sup> I believe the implementation of discipline amongst men and women is incredibly weak and essentially not tolerated. If someone were to be placed in discipline, I think they would probably leave, because they don't understand the biblical necessity for it. Elders, in my opinion, at least in North America have become soft regarding discipline.

keeping lists, and voting only make sense if a known, identifiable, and distinct body is recognized. So while the Bible doesn't provide us with a biblical treatise on membership *per se*, there is enough evidence in the inspired record to suggest that some form of membership was practiced and was necessary to the church's operation. Church membership is no less important in our day.”<sup>13</sup>

Notice that Thabiti starts with “there is *slight* evidence...” which hardly makes it persuasive to someone who hasn't been persuaded by the other arguments above.

Now, it is supposed that there is evidence because *lists* were kept with its associated membership. Notice that Thabiti has already presupposed that the lists are related to local church membership. He is trying to prove that local church membership is biblical, but in his argument, he's assuming that lists are associated with membership, how does he know that? Let's look at this. The first text is 1 Tim. 5:9 which reads:

A widow is to be put on the *list* only if she is not less than sixty years old, having been the wife of one man.

The text again does not state anything about church membership at a local congregation. It only says, “a widow is to be put on the list.” The list of what? Again, Thabiti doesn't tell us. The evidence seems to point to the fact that there was a *list* specifically for “widows” (**note: not church members who went through a formal process**), but widows *alone*. This is the list, and this showed women who were receiving regular support from the congregation. To make the list, one wasn't required to do a foundations class, affirm the doctrinal statement of the church, or agree with the

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<sup>13</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is A Healthy Church Member?* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, ILL, 2008), 66.

church's constitutions. This is all but absent from the discussion. To be added to the list "the widow" needed to be at least 60 years old, she had to have been the wife of one man, and in vs. 10 she had to have a reputation for good works. Extrapolating that now we need to make lists for church members is again an argument from silence. The text doesn't indicate anything beyond what it says, it doesn't extrapolate nor should we. We are nowhere commanded to keep lists of "non-widowed" related issues, all of this is built out by deduction, not induction via exegesis. The practice was limited to widows who met the criteria, because after which in vs. 11 excludes younger widows.

So, again, if we were to draw out a conclusion via exegesis of what is happening here and apply it to ourselves, the meaning is simply that widows who met a criteria were added to a list, so that the congregation could support them, younger widows were not added to the list, so by way of application, we could make a list for widows in our congregations who meet the requirements laid out in 1 Tim. 5. If the argument is we could make other lists about other things, sure, but that is not a formal procedure, the procedure in 1 Tim. 5 is *limited* to widows of a particular group. To extrapolate and create an entire structure around church membership is unnecessary and not a consequence of biblical exegesis.

The next point mentioned pertains to 2 Cor. 2:6, and I will address the issue of *voting* in the section on congregationalism, but this text also falls flat. 2 Cor. 2:6 nowhere states or implements a structure for local church membership. It's not there, and no matter how hard we try, the bible is not giving it to us via exegesis or inductive bible study. It is read into the text. In 2 Cor. 2:6 there are several ways that this text could be understood and none of them require biblical membership. The term that is relevant to us is the

*majority* since from the side of Thabiti, the argument is that the *majority* constitutes the “members” and therefore we need membership. Again, this does not logically follow. The “majority” in 2 Cor. 2:6 can simply be seen as the corporate church gathered, and the “minority” are the ones who disagreed with the decision.

Note the comment from Barnes:

“Paul had directed it to be done by the assembled church 1 Corinthians 5:4, and this phrase shows that they had followed his instructions. Locke supposes that the phrase means, “by the majority;” Macknight renders it, “by the greater number;” Bloomfield supposes that it means that the “punishment was carried into effect by all.” Doddridge paraphrases it, “by the whole body of your society.” The expression proves beyond a doubt that the whole body of the society was concerned in the act of the excommunication, and that is a proper way of administering discipline. *Whether it proves, however, that that is the mode which is to be observed in all instances, may admit of a doubt, as the example of the early churches, in a particular case, does not prove that that mode has the force of a binding rule on all.*”<sup>14</sup>

Barnes simply notes that the whole body (*the ones gathered in this place*) were concerned with the act of *excommunication*, but to now make this the rule or the mode by which the church ought to follow, he rejects *that* conclusion. I do as well. This is descriptive of what happened in this situation, and like 1 Cor. 5 all it does is discuss the topic and importance of *discipline*. It doesn’t undergird the premise of biblical membership in any way. Discipline can be practiced without a formal system in place. Jesus established the principle without formal membership in Matt. 18. More to say on Matt. 18 below.

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<sup>14</sup> Barnes, Albert. "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 2:6". "Barnes' Notes on the Whole Bible". <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bnb/2-corinthians-2.html>. Italics added by me.

Thomas Constable also notes something important here:

"The "majority" may refer to the whole church (Gr. hoi pleiones). The minority apparently held out for more severe discipline of this person. Thus Paul threw the whole weight of his apostolic authority behind forgiving as he had previously thrown it behind disciplining."<sup>15</sup>

If the "majority" refers to the "whole church," then a subset within the church that has the status of "biblical" membership or are put on a "list," is not a viable rendering of the text. It is also highly likely that the "minority" here were the ones rebellious against Paul.<sup>16</sup> So, the argument present here is not about members vs. non-members in the local congregation. This is just simply not present in the text, nor is this evidence for some sort of *voting* procedure put in place in the local church (more to say on this below). These arguments are deductions based upon no evidence and no biblical exegesis.

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<sup>15</sup> Constable, Thomas. DD. "Commentary on 2 Corinthians 2:6". "Dr. Constable's Expository Notes". <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/dcc/2-corinthians-2.html>.

<sup>16</sup> "But the silence was polite (**such a man**) and ominous (**of many**) – implying that a recalcitrant minority still rebelled against Paul." 1266. Wick Broomall, *2 Corinthians* in the Wycliffe Bible Commentary (Moody Press, Chicago, ILL, 1981), 1237. Bold in the original.

Ellicott also notes this possible interpretation, "Actually, *by the majority*. The decision, then, had not been unanimous. The minority may have been either members of the Judaising "Cephas" "party, resenting what they would look upon as St. Paul's dictation, and perhaps falling back on the Jewish casuistry, which taught that all the natural relationships of a proselyte were cancelled by his conversion; or the party of license, against whom the Apostle reasons in 1 Corinthians 6-8, and who boasted of their freedom." [https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2\\_corinthians/2-6.htm](https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_corinthians/2-6.htm). Italics in the original.

The Cambridge Bible for Schools and Colleges commentary also notes, "*which was inflicted of many* Literally, **by the majority**. Some, perhaps, may have declined to take part in it, for there were many, as the latter part of the Epistle plainly shews, who still refused to acknowledge St Paul's authority." [https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2\\_corinthians/2-6.htm](https://biblehub.com/commentaries/2_corinthians/2-6.htm). Bold added by me. Italics in the original.

What amazes me, is that after these very unconvincing lines of evidence are presented, Thabiti thinks that he has conclusively proven “some form” of biblical membership when he notes, “So while the Bible doesn't provide us with a biblical treatise on membership per se, there is enough evidence in the inspired record to suggest that some form of membership was practiced and was necessary to the church's operation.”<sup>17</sup> I mean, how he concludes this is beyond me, nothing in these texts establishes anything remotely close to what is practiced in churches today, the best you could do is argue that discipline was practiced, particular widows were added to a list, men/women should obey their leaders. To conclude that we need “local” membership is nothing but an argument from silence, predicated upon incredibly weak proof-texting and no exegesis.

The most frustrating part is that this work was recommended by godly men such as Sproul, Mohler, and MacArthur, and yet the evidence for “membership” in a local congregation is built off arguments from silence and non-sequiturs. I don’t understand why someone would accept this as viable, when the biblical evidence for membership is tied to our union with Christ, into His body, where all believers of the church age are incorporated. As you can see, I take issue with this.

One more thing before we move on to congregational polity that I want to address is Thabiti’s comments about *communion* and *baptism*. He notes on pg. 69 the following, “One privilege of church membership is participating in Christ’s ordinances—baptism and communion.”<sup>18</sup> The logical fallout of that comment is huge! It has massive

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<sup>17</sup> Thabiti M. Anyabwile, *What Is A Healthy Church Member?* (Crossway Books, Wheaton, ILL, 2008), 66. Underline added by me.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid., 69.

implications. From his perspective, the “privileges” of membership are that they [the members] get to participate in “baptism” and “communion.” Where does he get that from? Where does he get that the ordinances are only for this group that has signed on for membership? Is he honestly attempting to argue that *only* members of a local congregation can take communion, and those who aren’t designated as such, cannot? What is the rationale for this? As I noted, it creates a *classification* system that is disruptive to the church and creates division. It doesn’t sow harmony, it sows discord. Communion should be given to *all believers* who are *gathered* (whether members or non-members), this isn’t an exclusive club where only the VIP’s get communion. Also, baptism is not related to local church membership either. Baptism can be done at any time after one has proclaimed faith in Christ, it is not directly related to membership in a local church.

As we have seen, the evidence for local church membership is incredibly weak. There are no texts that explicitly teach that one needs to be “formally” joined to a local congregation through covenantal obligation, constitutional agreement, and/or foundations classes, etc. There are no texts that teach elders to implement such a rule for the church. There is nothing but proof texts that don’t at all allude to the practice, and non-sequiturs that even if you took them a particular way you wouldn’t conclude local church membership. It sows discord to elevate one group in the body above another, it creates a sort of elitism, and it softens the duty of the elders, since they only need to focus on those who have declared themselves as *committed* members.

One can affirm the importance of discipline, submission, and reject the concept of local church membership completely and do so with good intention. I am not convinced by

the very minimal evidence that is used to support this. To claim it is *helpful* to a church is one thing, to claim it is *biblical* is another.

## 2 – Congregationalism or Congregational Led Polity (CLP)

Let's dive right into this! Congregationalism is one of several options on the table for church polity, or essentially how a church should/could operate. Let's briefly look at some of the other options presently on the table.

An **Episcopal** polity is structured around an archbishop, bishops, and rectors. They have hierarchical and demographic practices.

A **Presbyterian** polity is structured around assemblies of elders and the pastor (sessions), Presbyteries which are made up of all ministers and elders from a given area. They make decisions regarding ordaining, installing, removing, or transferring ministers. Then you have Synods that are made up of several presbyteries.

A **Congregational-Led** polity is structured around self-governing churches (independent) and is governed by the church *members* which are *guided* under the direction of the local elders.

Baptists have generally chosen the “congregational” route<sup>19</sup>, and it is here that I want to spend my time focused upon. I am convinced that congregational led congregations *err* in several regards, which I hope to focus upon below.

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<sup>19</sup> There might be some exceptions.

**Issue #1** – The CLP reflects more modern *democracy* than the apostolic teaching given to us in Scripture and as far as I see the Scriptures nowhere demand that decisions be left up to the congregation through the means of *voting*.

As MacArthur and Mayhue note in their systematic theology:

“Democratic political values often prompt modern churchgoers to be suspicious of elder rule, opting instead for a congregational form of church government. But this runs contrary to the clear New Testament paradigm for spiritual leadership within the church, which calls for elders to take the primary responsibility for serving and leading God’s people.”<sup>20</sup>

The bible is clear that a church should be elder-led and elder-ruled<sup>21</sup>, there is no indication that *power* is left in the hands of the congregant or in this case the “member.” Remember, a CLP is building off the idea of local church membership. If there are no formal members, then the current way things are structured becomes untenable and unbiblical, and since voting is predicated upon membership and *only* “members” get a vote we run into an immediate issue. If you reject this formalized process above, you run into issues with a CLP.

Not only that, but the idea that casting a *vote* for any decision (*including the selection of elders and deacons*) is absolutely beyond me! Why have we established a *democratic* consensus to validate anything?

Nuttall is correct when he states:

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<sup>20</sup> John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Crossway, Wheaton, Ill, 2017), 769.

<sup>21</sup> Act. 20:28 (oversee, shepherd), 1 Tim. 3:2 (overseer), Heb. 13:17 (watch over your souls, they give account), 1 Pet. 5:2 (shepherd, oversee). Elders *protect, lead, shepherd, mentor, guide, oversee* the church.

“Minorities are often, if not more often, right. To run over the minority with a majority decision is to ignore body life. It destroys the congregationalism we seek. This breaks down unity and oneness, rather than building it up. The concept of voting as practiced in the majority of churches is tragic. It builds hostilities and anguish and promotes carnality. The only happy people in this humanistic, political game are the winners...Strangely enough there is not one passage of Scripture that would hint of a majority vote system as we know it today. All the scriptures used, such as Acts 6, 13, and 15 are demonstrations of seeking God’s will through God’s leadership in a congregational/body life manner.”<sup>22</sup>

I fully agree with Nuttall, often minorities are right, and often minorities are ignored. In how many cases of voting are the minorities engaged with in a discussion after a vote has been cast, probably not many? Why did they cast a vote against the elders recommendation? Maybe the elders hadn’t considered their thoughts, or maybe there was more to consider in general? Nuttall is right that it does create *hostility, anguish*, and promotes *carnality* in the church and all this is based upon what, a desire to uphold *democracy*, so that all feel like they have a say? The foundation of the church was not built upon a democracy, and neither should our church’s polity. The church is grounded upon a top-down structure (*Christ -> Elders -> Deacons -> Congregants*). The elders rule, not the congregants, this is backwards.

The real tragedy is the absolute *lack* of evidence for voting. We will get more into specifics later.

**Issue #2** – The CLP places far too much responsibility in the hands of the congregants (i.e., members) and not enough in the hands of the church elders as per the witness of

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<sup>22</sup> Clayton L. Nuttall, *The Weeping Church: Confronting the Crisis of Church Polity* (Regular Baptist Press, Schaumburg, ILL, 1985), 43.

the New Testament. The New Testament is clear when it states that the church elders are *the* governing authority meant to oversee the local congregation (Rom. 12:8; 1 Tim. 3:5, 5:17; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24), meaning that the elders should make the *final* decisions and not the congregation.

Alexander Strauch's comments are accurate here, he says:

“The humble-servant character of the eldership doesn’t imply, however, an absence of authority. The New Testament terms that describe the elders’ position and work—“God’s stewards,” “overseers,” “shepherd,” “leading”—imply authority as well as responsibility... As shepherds of the church, **elders have been given authority to lead and protect the local church** (Acts 20:28-31).”<sup>23</sup>

Strauch correctly notes that *elders* are the ones that *oversee*, *shepherd*, and *lead*, which implies at the strongest level that they are in charge. The bible doesn’t teach that members are told to oversee, shepherd, or lead anywhere in scripture. This task is *exclusively* given to the elders of the congregation. The bible is filled with language of elders leading, this need not be disputed, the issue and error is giving the *power* into the hands of the members.

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<sup>23</sup>Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Lewis and Roth Publishers, Littleton, CO, 1995), 97. Bold added by me.

MacArthur and Mayhue make a similar comment: “On the other hand, many forms of congregationalism also insist on a democratic approach to leadership, in which all church members (rather than just the elders) are involved in church decision making. Though popular in the American church, where democratic values are reflected in secular politics, that kind of congregational rule ignores the prerogative and responsibility that the New Testament gives to elders to lead and shepherd the flock.” John MacArthur and Richard Mayhue, *Biblical Doctrine: A Systematic Summary of Bible Truth* (Crossway, Wheaton, Ill, 2017), 770.

**Issue #3** – The CLP wrongly gives the congregants the right to make final decisions for two important biblical offices (*voting in elders and deacons*) which I believe runs contrary to scripture. Nowhere in scripture is an elder placed into office by the congregation’s vote, but rather elders are *ordained* by *other elders* (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim. 4:14, 5:22; Tit. 1:5). The laying of hands is the ordination of a man into the pastorate, not a *vote* done by the congregation. This gives the congregation the ability to usurp the elders put forward, and it gives the congregation the ability to decide who they want to lead them. Just as we didn’t choose the shepherd in our salvation as the sheep, the sheep do not decide the shepherd over the local congregation, other shepherds make this important decision because they know what is best for the congregants.

In terms of deacons, Act. 6:5 is used as a proof-text for congregational selection. First these aren’t elders [so it doesn’t follow that we apply this to the other office], second, there is no proof within the text that these deacons were selected by and through the congregation via a vote, but rather the congregation recognized these men as godly and qualified for the role of serving the tables, yet it was the apostles who appointed them for the task, not the congregation. I see no indication that elders or deacons were chosen by the means of church members voting or affirming the suggestion made by the leaders.

Ted Bigelow in his excellent work *The Titus Mandate* (from whom we will be citing frequently) addresses this very proof-text and responds accordingly.

He notes:

“Actually, the text shows the opposite the congregation submitted to the apostles’ authority. To begin with, Luke states that the apostles “summoned” the disciples (v. 2). This word describes a call from those in authority to those under their authority. He then explains that the twelve

apostles determined all the selection criteria (v. 3), not the congregation. Finally it was the apostles, and not the congregation, who laid their hands on those selected (v. 6). Since the laying on of hands was a symbolic act of conferring authority and appointment, Luke shows that the congregation did not confer any authority on the seven men. As a result, when Acts 6:5 is read in context, it describes a submissive congregation involved in decision only to the extent that their leaders have determined wise.

To see this more clearly, let's consider some alternatives. What if the congregation had demanded to select some women to serve the widows? After all, if the congregation has the ultimate authority in the church granted them by Christ as adherents of congregationalism maintain, why couldn't they? But no. Such an idea would have been rejected, for the apostles told the congregation to select only men (Acts 6:3). Any demand for women would have been irreverent, rebellious, and rejected.

Or, what if the congregation thought that men with a background in food preparation should be included as one of the selection criteria? Again, the apostles would have said "no." Nor could the congregation decide to overrule the apostles and select ten, fifteen, or one hundred men to serve tables. No, only seven could be chosen, because the apostles said "seven." Nor could there be votes, amendments, and debate from those in the congregation who believed that the problem required the apostles themselves to do the ministry of feeding the Hellenistic widows. In Acts 6 the role of the congregation was limited, specific, and submissive. All the authority stayed with the apostles who, in unanimity, said, "pick out from among you seven men... whom we will appoint to this duty" (v. 3). The passage teaches godly authority enabling congregational involvement, not congregational polity.<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ted Bigelow, *The Titus Mandate: Rescue, Protect, Restore*, (Self-Publication, United States of America, 2011), 261-262.

Bigelow could not be more on point here, that is why it was worth quoting him in full. The evidence is simply against those using this text to form a polity built around the congregation.

It should also be noted that we must be careful when dealing with Acts and distinguishing between something that is *prescriptive* vs. *descriptive*. Is this text establishing a hard fast rule that the church is to implement on a global scale, or is this text describing events and how under a unique circumstance the apostles would deal with a particular issue? We need to be careful about lifting things out of Acts and automatically applying them to us as a practice, this was a transitory period in church history.

**Issue #4** – The CLP wrongly places the elders (meant to function as leaders) as *subservient* to members decisions and makes the elders and deacons merely those that provide *suggestions* and not *commands*. The bible teaches that the elders oversee the local congregation and make decisions on how to shepherd the congregation (Act. 16:4).

Members can certainly be flawed in their decision making for a variety of reasons:

- a) They may be *immature* or *new* believers to the faith, making massive decisions in ignorance of what the bible teaches,
- b) They may have *biases* that will influence the vote they cast,
- c) They are not *tasked* biblically to make such important decisions such as selecting elders or deacons,
- d) They may be *persuaded* to vote in a specific way based upon other influences,
- e) They may not even choose to vote by remaining silent,

- f) They may be *too young* to make a logical case for their voting, this is why even in a democratic system there are limits on when someone can vote,
- g) They are not necessarily *instructed* on why a vote is necessary, or what criteria is necessary for their selection,
- h) They are not necessarily *walked through the process*, they may not understand the pre-requisite for testing a new elder or deacon,
- i) They may be *silenced* by other older and more powerful voices,

There are several reasons we should be concerned with voting. Remember, we are not just talking about members voting for new chairs or a new coloured paint on the wall, but rather we are talking about members voting in new elders and deacons. These are massive decisions that should not sit in the hands of the congregants, no matter their age. The elders are the ones that should oversee those decisions.

**Issue #5** – The CLP confuses congregational *participation* with congregational *rule*. The congregation should always be able to provide input, speak with elders about their conduct, possible sin in the church, or other issues in the congregation, but they are not to rule over the elders.<sup>25</sup>

**Issue #6** – The CLP is essentially a reaction to the single elder-led congregations that have given all the power into one leader. This is a tragedy, where you have one man

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<sup>25</sup> "...the local congregation must recognize that the church is *not* a pure democracy, that elders/overseers, once elected, do not hold their office simply to carry out the congregation's will. They are to rule and to oversee the congregation, not primarily in agreement with the will of the congregation but primarily in agreement with the revealed Word of God, in accordance with the authority delegated to them by Christ, the head of the church." Robert L. Reymond, *Perspectives on Church Government*, (B&H Academic, Nashville, TE, 2004), 134.

dictate the show, one man making all the decisions, but this is not a healthy church. The elder-led rule (via a plurality) should solve this issue.<sup>26</sup> If there are good leaders brought into leadership positions, they should be able to resolve this issue when one of the elders begins to hog power to himself. Swinging the pendulum toward a CLP goes too far the other direction, in which the congregation is now given all the power.

I believe that the words of Richard Swartley are worth noting in full here:

"If we adhere to the New Testament method in our churches, elders will be appointed only by other currently, fully qualified elders. As Paul explained to Titus, "For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). The congregations did not elect elders in the New Testament period: Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders for them in every church, [and] having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed" (Acts 14:23). This was not accidental, but in accordance with the apostolic order, "as I directed you" (Titus 1:5). Those elders selected by the apostles, in turn, appointed other qualified men as elders again, as they had been commanded: "Entrust these [the things which you have been taught] to faithful [reliable] men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2) ... My view is that the biblical model prohibits the election of elders by the congregation.

Reasons for this conclusion are:

- The elder is not an elected representative of the congregation. He is that man who has been recognized by other elders as having been appointed by the Holy Spirit to shepherd the flock of His church: "The Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God" (Acts 20:28).
- An individual congregant (who is not an elder) cannot be expected to pass authoritative judgment on whether the qualifications of the elder appointee under consideration are sufficient that is, whether he meets the high standards set forth in Scripture. Requiring church members to do so is equivalent to asking the community of his patients to certify their medical specialist, instead of insisting that he is board-certified by his peers.

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<sup>26</sup> Pro. 11:14 Where there is no guidance the people fall, But in abundance of counselors there is salvation.

- The individual congregant does not possess and cannot obtain sufficient firsthand knowledge of each and all of the elder candidates to be added to the council. The qualifications for eldership are so extensive and stringent, that facts on each man must be gathered by a careful process: "Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thereby share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin" (1 Tim. 5:22).
- If the congregation elects elders, it is not held accountable, individually or corporately, for its decisions, because, in the normal format of a congregational meeting, the individual voters do not have to explain the rationale for their decisions. But, Scripture teaches it is the elders "who will [be required to] give an account" (Heb. 13:17).
- If congregations elect elders, there exists the possibility of rule by a small minority of people. In a church that has at twenty-five percent quorum requirement (in order to do business at congregational meetings), a matter can be decided by as little as thirteen percent of the congregation. If the stated percentage required to approve an elder is raised above a simple majority, the situation is even worse. In the case of a two-thirds vote of ratification, a mere nine percent of the congregation can determine who serves as elders. This means that anywhere between nine and thirteen percent of the members of a church have the power to unseat an elder (governance by minority).
- Churches that practice congregational voting to affirm the elder council may put women in the position of exercising authority over men: "But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man" (1 Tim. 2:12, italics added). Even among complementarian scholars, opinion is divided on whether a woman's participation in a church corporate decision is an exercise of authority. However, if we believe that elders exercise authority through the corporate decisions of the council, then it follows that the same thing occurs when a woman participates in a congregational corporate action, the affirmation of elders. This being true, this practice actually makes the church responsible (through its bylaws) for requiring women members to be in authority over men and to take action actually forbidden in Scripture. Corporate decisions on budgets, building programs, ministry initiatives, and the like do not entail the problem of involving women in the decision to seat or unseat elders.<sup>27</sup>

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<sup>27</sup> Richard H. Swartley, *Eldership in Action: Through Biblical Governance of The Church*, (ECS Ministries, Dubuque, IA, 2005), 50-52.

Gene A. Getz says this practice would have been nearly impossible in the early church, "There are some who assume that elders/overseers were somehow selected and appointed in these various New Testament churches by an official "congregational vote." We know this approach emerged at some point in church history, but it would have been virtually impossible for churches to function this way during the early years of the church since it takes strong spiritual leadership in the first place to develop

Everything Swartley said is spot on! Please re-read this if you read through it quickly, he identifies several of the issues that I am pressing.

To conclude, there are several issues that relate to a CLP. These issues should not be overlooked, ignored, or set to the side. We as believers can do better than what has been proposed above and it is high time that we consider alternatives as Baptists.

## **Appendix 1: CLP Proof-Texts**

Several important proof-texts that are used by a CLP will be discussed below. I have not picked out all of them, since Bigelow addresses them all in more detail in his work, but I will try to narrow in on what I believe are the stronger arguments for the position:

### **Matthew 16:18-19 – Argument from the Keys of the Kingdom**

18 And I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.19 I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

For a treatment of the keys from a CLP perspective, I refer you to the work of Jonathan Leeman.<sup>28</sup> Leeman argues that the “keys” given to Peter in vs.19 pertain “to authority in matters of doctrine and discipline”<sup>29</sup> He then goes on to shape the discussion around

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a body of Christians who are mature enough to make this kind of decision. In other words, local groups of believers don’t simply “organize themselves” around spiritual values without intense spiritual guidance.” Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church*, (Moody Publishers, Chicago, Ill, 2003), 207-208.

<sup>28</sup> <https://www.9marks.org/article/putting-in-a-good-word-for-congregationalism/>

<sup>29</sup> Ibid.

different kinds of authority, so that authority is not limited to just the elders (a point I strongly disagree with), he states, “why assume that oversight given to the overseers is the be-all, end-all of authority in the church?”<sup>30</sup> He further notes that there is “kingdom authority vs. authority of oversight.” To embrace this, one must accept the categories set forward by Leeman, which I don’t see as helpful, since it creates an unnecessary categorical division that pits Paul against Jesus. He says that Matthew 16 & 18 both have “kingdom” connections, this is why they are called “the keys of the kingdom.” He notes that “their binding and loosing ability binds and looses *in the kingdom*.”<sup>31</sup> The crux of his argument comes in the next statement,

“Nowhere is the discussion of elder authority in Acts or the Epistles tied to the kingdom (that I’m aware of) or to the keys. And nowhere in Matthew 16 or 18 are elders mentioned. Exegetically, in other words, there’s no reason to think that the authority of the keys is the authority of oversight.”<sup>32</sup>

Basically because of his two-fold division and the lack of “elders” mentioned in a very early (pre-established church) setting he believes it therefore follows that the authority of the keys is the authority of oversight, meaning that the church (congregation more specifically) has the right to hold the keys and use them. This is a non-sequitur fallacy if I have ever seen one.

First, I reject the categories he’s using to divide two groups out here, since this muddies the waters. He doesn’t exegete the text of Matt. 16 in his link above, he reads congregational conclusions into the text. He doesn’t explain what the kingdom is here

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<sup>30</sup> Ibid.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid., italics in the original.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.

or in the Gospels, he doesn't explain why the keys were given to Peter (exclusively) in Matthew 16. He doesn't show how Peter is then giving the keys to the congregation (by which elders are in submission to them). Nothing in this text extrapolates to the degree that Leeman wants it to. You can tell when someone is stretching a text to fit their preconceived beliefs into the text and not letting the text say what it says. I will show why his logic doesn't follow in a moment.

His last relevant statement pertains to "earthly/heavenly" sanctions. He says, "Institutionally speaking, the main difference between congregational authority and elder authority is that the congregation has an earthly sanction while the elders have a heavenly sanction."<sup>33</sup> At this point, he has not developed how the congregation gets authority, he has merely *presupposed* that they do, and he states that "The congregation, like the state, has an earthly sanction ("Whatever you bind on earth...")."<sup>34</sup> Notice the leap? Did you catch it? The binding is given to the congregation, but that is nowhere stated in Matt. 16:19. He jumps from Peter being given the keys, to the idea that the congregation is doing the binding as an earthly sanction. His dualism is negated by the fact that the church (although on earth) is a heavenly people, with our citizens in heaven, not earth. We are all sojourners in some sense waiting for the resurrection of the body, for the creation to be restored, and for us to be brought into the New Jerusalem. The leap should be noted, it's not even implied, it is read into the text.

Let's get into what Jesus means. I want to preface the fact that I will not take Rome's interpretation of the text regarding the rock, *however*, I think we do need to press that

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<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.

the “keys” are given to Peter (exclusively) in this passage: “I will give *you* (Peter) the keys of the kingdom of heaven, and whatever *you* (Peter) bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever *you* (Peter) loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.” Peter is an important figure in the discussion, but the error of Leeman is taking the keys here and not just transposing them from Peter to the other apostles, not just from the apostles to the elders of local churches, but from the elders to the congregation and submitting the authority of the elders under the congregations rule. The discussion here has nothing to do with the congregation or elders at all, and to read this into the text is nothing short of eisegesis. Jesus is not speaking broadly here about the church, as he was in vs. 18, he is specifically talking about Peter’s responsibility that will come with building the church. This will be key to understanding the *keys*. We first start with the context, not assumptions about ecclesiology.

Jesus in vs. 13 comes into the district of Caesarea Philippi, and He asks the disciples “Who do people say that the Son of Man is?” The disciples respond in vs. 14 that “some” are saying that the Son of Man is John the Baptist, others Elijah, maybe Jeremiah, or one of the prophets. Jesus, not caring about the reasons that some have adopted these views, asks what “they” (the disciples) think in vs. 15. Peter (the bold proclaimer) speaks up. He says in vs. 16 that Jesus is “the Christ, the Son of the living God.”

We will lean in on vs. 17 with Jesus’ ***first*** declaration, “Blessed are you, Simon Bar-Jonah, because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but My Father who is in heaven.” Jesus blesses Peter, not the congregation, not the church or elders by extension, but Peter and Peter alone. Why? Because flesh and blood did not reveal this to you, but

the Father. Jesus acknowledges that Peter's conclusion is based upon "divine illumination from the Father."<sup>35</sup> Peter didn't just deduce something from his own logic, but the Father divinely illuminated Peter. This must be taken seriously here to understand the relationship to vs. 18-19.

Jesus, after stating that Peter was divinely illuminated makes his **second** declaration. This time Jesus says, "And I also say to you, that you are Peter." Catch that? Again, Jesus in vs. 18 emphasizes Peter, it is Peter that is being spoken of here, not elders and certainly not the congregation. Jesus declares that upon this rock "I" (Jesus) will build "my" (Jesus') church. Let's unpack this statement briefly, because it is important to debate between Roman Catholics and Protestants. The first phrase is "you are Peter" [σὺ εἶ Πέτρος]. Petros [Πέτρος] is a masculine noun which means "small stone or piece of rock." Jesus' point here is to say that Peter is a small stone (petros), like the stones in the stream of Banyas. However, Jesus uses a different Greek word petra [πέτρα] when he says, "and on this rock" he will build his church. He doesn't say, "upon the petros" that he will build the church, but upon the "petra" he will build this church. Petra is a feminine noun, which basically means a "cliff" not a "small stone." There is a bit of a challenge here regarding petros and petra, and this is why interpreters are all over the place on this text. The issue pertains to the identification of this "rock." Is it Peter, Peter's confession, or Jesus? No matter how you look at, there are pieces of truth associated with each one of them. Peter is instrumental to the building of the foundation of the church (Eph. 2:20; Rev. 21:14), so this is a viable option. We also

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<sup>35</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah From a Messianic Jewish Perspective*, Vol 2, (Ariel Ministries, San Antonio, TX, 2017), 584.

know that Christ is the cornerstone and the rock (Dan 2:45; Eph. 2:20; 1 Pet. 2:7). We also know that Peter just made a confession and it could be upon that confession [i.e., that doctrinal conclusion] that Peter made that the church is built upon (1 Cor 3:11; 1 Pet. 2:4).

I think the strongest argument brings together *all* the evidence (certainly not in the direction of apostolic succession or the infallibility of the church – contra Rome):

- 1.) It is upon Peter's *confession* [the rock-petra] that the church would be built upon.
- 2.) Peter [the rock-petros] will be instrumental to the establishment of its foundation.
- 3.) Jesus will function as the corner stone of the church, its builder, and its head.

All three of these points are valid considering the context. Peter's confession is in view and should be the grounds upon which the church is built.<sup>36</sup> Peter is called blessed, in that the Father gave him a particular illumination. Peter is not *the cliff*, he will not do it all himself, it will take many *stones* to build the church, but Peter will be given the “keys” which will initiate the growth of the church, and lastly, Jesus cannot be set aside in this discussion, since the church is His program, He alone is head of the church, He alone will build His church through the work of the Spirit. I believe all these points are instrumental to the discussion, Peter's confession, Peter's role, and Jesus' function. All are true, what is not true is what Rome has done in making Peter's role part of some

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<sup>36</sup> “A better view is the one which holds that the rock is the truth of Peter's confession. It is the truth of Christ's person and work upon which the church shall be built. This fits the use the Lord makes of *ταύτη* and also the sense of *πέτρᾳ*.” Stanley D. Toussaint, *Behold the King: A Study of Matthew*, (Kregel Academic and Professional, Grand Rapids, MI, 1980), 202.

form of apostolic succession, which is just patently false and not at all implied. Peter is certainly important here, and he will be instrumental to the cause, but there is no apostolic succession here.

Now that we have grounds for moving forward, we can note that Jesus makes his ***third*** declaration, that the church will not be overcome. There is nothing tied to gates of Hades [*signifying death*] that will overcome the church, not the death of our Lord, not the deaths of the apostles, nor the deaths of their disciples. Nothing. The church will not be defeated.

The ***fourth*** declaration comes in vs. 19, which is the contention of the debate. What does it mean that Peter (the subject) is given the *keys* of the kingdom of heaven? Notice, it is Peter, not other apostles that is given the keys, this is where Peter [the petros] will have a significant role.

First, what are the keys? The keys represent “authority” in Scripture (cf. Isa. 22:20-22), so Peter has been given *authority*. The language implies *opening* and *closing*, which is not “dissimilar to ‘bind and loosen’ here in Matt.”<sup>37</sup> Peter is authorized to open and close something? But what? Keys are tied to *doors* and Peter is authorized to open and close doors with the keys. The doors of what? Well, vs. 18 just told us, the keys of the church or in another sense access to the future Davidic kingdom. Peter is given a unique role for opening the doors of the church here, and this will become more obvious in Acts, but

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<sup>37</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah From a Messianic Jewish Perspective*, Vol 2, (Ariel Ministries, San Antonio, TX, 2017), 588.

suffice to say for the moment, the discussion is restricted to Peter, contra Leeman who makes it about everything but Peter.

Remember, that in Matt. 10:5-6, there are *three* groups mentioned in total. Jesus instructs the 12 not to go the way of the **Gentiles**, nor the **Samaritans**, but only to the lost sheep of the **house of Israel**. This means the three groups in view are: **Jews**, **Samaritans**, and **Gentiles**. These three groups Peter holds the keys over. He will need to open the door to each and prepare yourself because in Acts that is exactly what is going to happen. Peter is *instrumental* in opening the way for each of these people groups in Acts, when the church is built.

An important note before moving forward. The goal of Peter's work the body of Christ is to bring all people groups (Jew, Samaritan, and Gentile) into one group (i.e., the body of Christ), and this is done via Spirit baptism, which as you will know starts in Acts 2. This is the first time the Spirit is poured out, and this is the first time that people begin being added to the body of Christ (cf. 1 Cor. 12:13), this is the initiation of the church.<sup>38</sup> As Fruchtenbaum notes,

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<sup>38</sup> "And it was Peter who, using the **keys of the kingdom**, opened the kingdom for the Jewish people (Ac 2), the Samaritans (Ac 8), and the Gentiles (Ac 10), so that Jesus' prophecy about Peter seems to have actually come true in that he does function as the foundation of the Church." Michael G. Vanlaningham, *Matthew* in The Moody Bible Commentary, (Moody Publishers, Chicago, Ill, 2014), 1483. Bold in the original.

Also, "Peter used these keys when he "opened the door of faith" (Acts 14:27) to the Jews (Acts 2), the Samaritans (Acts 8), and the Gentiles (Acts 10)." Warren Wiersbe, *Wiersbe's Expository Outlines on the New Testament*, (Victor Books, Wheaton Ill, 1992), 63.

“There is an inseparable connection between this baptism and the existence of the church; one cannot exist without the other. Peter, the keys, and Spirit baptism would all come together for each of the three groups.”<sup>39</sup>

Let’s briefly look at what Peter’s role would look like at the various stages and why his involvement will be instrumental.

### **1<sup>st</sup> Key – Acts 2: Door Opens for the Jews**

Peter in Acts 2 will open the door for the Jewish people, remember that the gospel that Paul proclaimed first came to the Jew in Romans 1:16,

For I am not ashamed of the gospel, for it is the power of God for salvation to everyone who believes, *to the Jew first and also to the Greek.*

The moment that a Jew believed, he was baptized into the body of Christ, added to the numbers in Acts 2. When Peter, with his authority opened this door, the door would stay open. The way for the Jew was opened, they were the first converts to the faith and added to the body.

### **2<sup>nd</sup> Key – Acts 8: Door Opens for the Samaritans**

In the interaction with Philip and the Samaritans (Act. 8:4-40) he shared the gospel to the people in Samaria, they were regenerated by the Spirit but were not yet incorporated in the body of Christ, this is because Philip didn’t have the keys. Notice, that Peter and John, but note Peter specifically, are sent from Jerusalem to Samaria, why? Acts 8:14-16 tells us:

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<sup>39</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah From a Messianic Jewish Perspective*, Vol 2, (Ariel Ministries, San Antonio, TX, 2017), 589.

14 Now when the apostles in Jerusalem heard that Samaria had received the word of God, they sent them *Peter* and John, 15 who came down and prayed for them that *they might receive the Holy Spirit*. 16 For *He had not yet fallen upon any of them*; they had simply been baptized in the name of the Lord Jesus.

Notice the point here, Philip was faithful in his proclamation to the Samaritans, but the door had not yet been opened to them. They were baptized in the name of Jesus, but they had not “received” the Holy Spirit, meaning that they had not been baptized by the Spirit. Peter had the keys and was the enabler here for this monumental event as Acts 8:17 records:

Then they began laying their hands on them, and they were receiving the Holy Spirit.

From that point forward, once a Samaritan believed, they were baptized into the body of Christ. Peter opens the doors with the keys.

### **3<sup>rd</sup> Key – Acts 10: Door Opens for the Gentiles**

In Acts 9, you recall that Paul is converted and commissioned to be *the* apostle to the Gentile people, which is a massive calling. Paul didn’t have the keys either, as he was not instructed by our Lord to loosen or bind, again this was given to Peter. Peter in Acts 10 will now set the missionary work in motion via the baptism of the Spirit for the house of Cornelius. It is in Acts 10:44-48 that we see this:

44 While Peter was still speaking these things, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the word. 45 And all the circumcised believers who came with Peter were astounded that the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out on the Gentiles also. 46 For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and magnifying God. Then Peter answered, 47 “Can anyone refuse water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we

did?” 48 And he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ. Then they asked him to remain for a few days.

Peter, in accordance with the keys he had been given, opened the way for the Jew, Samaritan, and Gentiles to be incorporated into a singular body, the body of Christ.<sup>40</sup> This is why Peter is instrumental. This text has nothing to do with congregationalism, it has to do with Peter being instrumental for building the body of Christ and its foundation. He had a unique role that was given to him based upon his proclamation.

The **fifth** declaration pertained to the ability to *bind* and *loosen*. The declaration was given to Peter that allowed him to bind things on earth, and the binding of these things would also occur in heaven, this happened with loosening things on earth, they would be loosened in heaven. What does this mean though? Peter was given “the authority to bind and loose both legislatively and judicially.”<sup>41</sup> This means that Peter was given the right to permit things that were forbidden and to forbid things that were permitted.

## Legislatively

- Binding (forbid)
- Loose (permit)

## Judicially

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<sup>40</sup> 1 Cor 12:11 But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills. 12 For even as the body is one and *yet* has many members, and all the members of the body, though they are many, are one body, so also is Christ.13 For also by one Spirit we were all baptized into one body, whether Jews or Greeks, whether slaves or free, and we were all made to drink of one Spirit.

<sup>41</sup> Arnold G. Fruchtenbaum, *Yeshua: The Life of the Messiah From a Messianic Jewish Perspective*, Vol 2, (Ariel Ministries, San Antonio, TX, 2017), 592.

- Binding (punish)
- Loose (not to punish)

We see this very clearly in Act. 10:3-15, 28. Peter, in the vision that he sees is told to “slaughter and eat” in vs. 13, but he refuses. He says in vs. 14 that he will not eat what is defiled and unclean. However, the voice that he hears says in vs. 15, “What God has cleansed, no longer consider defiled.” There was a radical shift that was happening here which Peter was attempting to wrap his head around. Things that were practiced in the OT were being “loosened” (permitted) through Peter. Peter was struggling to grasp this, but Peter was responsible and had this authority. He could say yes or no to things, he could forbid an action and allow an action, he could also punish actions. In Acts 5 Peter passed the death sentence upon Ananias and Sapphira. Peter “bound them for punishment, and they each dropped dead at his feet.”<sup>42</sup>

This role of binding and loosening, as well as the authority of the keys are given to Peter in the context of Matthew 16. It is not for us to impose an ecclesiological structure on the text, the text needs to be unpacked exegetically. Peter has a unique role that is made clear to him by Jesus.

Fruchtenbaum in his commentary believes that “this authority was given to the apostles alone and they kept it until the end of their lives.”<sup>43</sup> However, in the context of Matthew 18, a text we will address next, it seems that the church also has *some* authority as well. They also could bind and loosen, but this seems restricted to the area of *discipline*, and as Fruchtenbaum notes, it is “not to the same degree as the apostles, who could issue a

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<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid., 645.

death sentence.”<sup>44</sup> There does seem to be evidence that the church could bind and loose only in a *judicial* sense not in a legislative sense. Fruchtenbaum notes,

“The church can bind and loose to the point of breaking or not breaking fellowship with a sinning believer. It can excommunicate or not excommunicate.”<sup>45</sup>

The church can pass a *judicial* decision and excommunicate someone as per Matt. 18:17, but they do not have the keys, and their function is limited as Fruchtenbaum has already alluded to.

In conclusion, the text is not teaching what Leeman has proposed above, at all. The text exclusively gives Peter (no one else by extension) this unique role with the keys, which ceased in the early church with Peter’s death. Peter had the keys (authority) to open the doors to the Jew, Samaritan, and Gentiles, Peter and the other apostles could bind and loosen (legislatively/judicially). Matthew 18 will not give the keys to the church, Matt. 18:18 will allow for the church to make binding/loosening decisions based upon judgment passed as it pertains to discipline, which pertain to the realm of judicial authority which is limited in scope.

### **Matthew 18:15-20 – Argument from Discipline**

The next text that is commonly appealed to from CLP is Matt. 18:15-20, which reads:

15 “Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault, between you and him alone; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. 16 But if he does not listen to you, take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. 17 And if he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the

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<sup>44</sup> Ibid.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.

church, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector. 18 Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven. 19 “Again I say to you, that if two of you agree on earth about anything that they may ask, it shall be done for them by My Father who is in heaven. 20 For where two or three have gathered together in My name, I am there in their midst.”

Since we have established in Matt. 16 some of the backdrop here, the ability to work through this text should be a bit easier.

In this text, we are discussing what happens when a brother “sins.” There are **4 steps** here in how to approach *discipline*. Remember, we are arguing against a CLP, so we want to see if there are better readings that do more justice to the text.

Here in Matthew 18, we are dealing with what will become an issue at the local church level. Jesus is going to set a paradigm for the church on how to discipline a brother who is caught in sin.

**1<sup>st</sup> step** – If a brother sins, you are to go to him and show him his fault, just between the two of you, and if he listens, you have won your brother. An offended brother is responsible for approaching the offender one-on-one to point out the sin.

An important point that Fruchtenbaum makes here is that “this passage does not concern moral sin, as is the case in 1 Cor. 5:1-5, where Paul tells the elders to immediately remove the immoral member from the congregation. This passage addressed a personal issue where one member has offended another.”<sup>46</sup> So, we must

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<sup>46</sup> Ibid., 643.

immediately be careful with grouping those two texts together and just assuming a direct correlation.

**2<sup>nd</sup> step** – It is possible that the brother will not listen to you, so now you are to take one or two more with you, “so that by the mouth of two or three **witnesses** every fact may be confirmed.” This confrontation is important because it adds numbers to the seriousness of the claim. If he repents, then again, fellowship would be restored. If not, we proceed to step 3. Remember that they are called *witnesses*, this will become important.

**3<sup>rd</sup> step** – This is where a CLP will step in. The text says that if he refuses “tell it to the church.” From the CLP perspective, this means that the entire church is the final authority in dealing with cases of discipline. At first glance, this proposal doesn’t seem unreasonable, but I will show why it is not tenable.

Bigelow makes an important point in response,

“A closer reading of the text shows that the church is not being given authority, but is being called to submit to the established evidence of the witnesses. The lord only calls the church to affirm the witnesses’ judgment since they have already “established the evidence” (v. 16). Based on their evidence the congregation must confront the unrepentant member.”<sup>47</sup>

He continues,

“It is the Lord Himself who placed the determinative authority of church discipline in the judgment of the two or three.”<sup>48</sup>

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<sup>47</sup> Ted Bigelow, *The Titus Mandate: Rescue, Protect, Restore*, (Self-Publication, United States of America, 2011), 244.

<sup>48</sup> Ibid.

Did you catch it? The *authority* is not given into the hands of “the church” as if they suddenly become *the authority* in the matter over elders, they are simply called to **submit to the evidence of the witnesses**. That’s a clear argument against a CLP, since a CLP is arguing that the church *is* the authority collectively. This text is not making any such argument. This is why the words in (vs. 19-20) regarding the **two or three gathered** point back to the **two or three witnesses**. The judgment arrived at by the witnesses stands. There is no vote regarding the determination of step 1-2, so why do we think when it gets to step 3 a vote is needed? These are witnesses who have evidence of sin, having approached the situation one-on-one, established that this is not resolved in a “your word against mine” situation, then more are brought forward that are **witnesses**, that confront the sin, the evidence has been established at this point, as Bigelow notes, “the church members are commanded by the Lord to respond to the established evidence of sin, not to vote and make their own new judgment of it. The church actually comes to no new judgment in the matter, but only responds to what the two or three witnesses have already established as fact.”<sup>49</sup>

There is simply no evidence or grounds for the interpretation that “bringing it to the church” means that we need to **vote** on this situation, the church here is responsible to react and respond to the evidence that has been brought to bear by the witnesses.

I would also add that this is done with respect to the elders of the church.<sup>50</sup> The elders should never be kept in the dark in this situation, they would have a say in this situation

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<sup>49</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>50</sup> “The elders are called by Christ to oversee and shepherd the flock (1 Timothy 3:1, 1 Peter 5:1), so the witnesses must meet with one or more elders to inform them of the situation. Prior to telling the church of someone’s sin, the elders will look into the matter themselves according to the

as well, but their response is not to run a vote, but to follow the Lord's words that they submit to the facts presented by the two or three witnesses.<sup>51</sup> As Bigelow notes, "If they vote they violate His clearly revealed will."<sup>52</sup> Elders should mull over the information and facts, and step in from that point forward, since they are called to govern the church. If they are not able to make headway toward repentance with the individual, they will then "tell it to the church." This means that the elders will step forward with the gathered assembly, will name the unrepentant sin, and the name of the unrepentant sinner. No votes are cast. The church from here is to perform step 4.

**4<sup>th</sup> Step** – This is where if there is no repentance, they are to be treated like the Gentile and the tax collector. The church is to disfellowship or disengage from them. They are to be ***put out (excommunicated)*** and placed at a far from the congregants and considered an outsider of the church. Until they repent, they are to be viewed as an outsider (*sinning brother*), who does not know the Lord and needs the gospel.<sup>53</sup>

### **Acts 6:2-6 – Selection of Deacons**

We have already seen in the above section that Act. 6:2-6 is a typical argument for voting, but let's dig a bit more into the text. Acts 6:2-6 should be quoted in full:

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nature of the situation and the skill of the witnesses. Their role requires them to make certain of impartial evidence and proper confrontation as described by the Lord in Matthew 18 and other New Testament passages." Ibid., 250.

<sup>51</sup> 1 Tim. 5:20 notes the elders involvement: ***Those who continue in sin, reprove in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful.*** It is clear that there will be those who continue to sin, following steps 1-3, but the elders are to *reprove* them in front of all, this is what it looks like to bring it into the eyes of the congregants.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 247.

<sup>53</sup> Ted's section from pg. 253-256 is excellent! It is titled: *How Bad Polity Can Create Sin*.

2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not pleasing to God for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. 3 Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this need. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word.”

5 And this word pleased the whole congregation, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. 6 And these they stood before the apostles, and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

The argument set forth from the CLP is that the apostles placed themselves under “congregational” authority and voted in seven good men, and that Acts 6 grounds all future actions that pertain to the election of deacons and elders. Here, the leaders are to submit to the will and requests of the congregation.

At first glance, again, this might seem plausible, but as we work through the information here, we will see why this just doesn’t work.

The first thing we need to do is work through the text and not assume an ecclesiological framework if we are to try and be objective. The first thing we see is that the apostles (**note this**) *summoned* the disciples. Already, there is a clear *authority* in the text. The apostles were that authority, it was the apostles that summoned the disciples forward, not the summoning of the apostles by the congregation to do their bidding. The apostles knew that there were issues because their widows were being overlooked (vs. 1). The apostles acted. They said, “It is not pleasing to God for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables.” They knew that there was a priority here, their priority was the Word of God, and that they should not be tasked with dealing with the widows that were being overlooked, so they had to *delegate*. What did they delegate? They

delegated (as an authority does) to the disciples to serve tables. In vs. 3 the *criteria* was set by the apostles, not the congregation “Therefore, brothers, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this need.” Because of this need, at this point in the history of the church (*remember this is descriptive of what happened*), the apostles set forth that seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, who would oversee this need. Again, it wasn’t **8 men**, it wasn’t **5 women**, the apostles set the parameters, because they were in charge and the disciples submitted to that. In vs. 4 the apostles devote themselves to prayer and the service of the word. This pleased the congregation (vs. 5) and they chose seven able men: Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. The last thing to mention is that the apostles (not the congregation) laid hands on those who were selected. As Bigelow notes, “Since laying on of hands was a symbolic act of conferring authority and appointment, Luke shows that the congregation did not confer any authority on the seven men.”<sup>54</sup>

As we can see from a cursory reading, it was the apostles that summoned the congregation, it was the apostles who set the parameters of selection, it was the apostles who laid hands on the men selected. This is hardly proof for a CLP. In a CLP, what would happen if the congregation rejected the criteria of seven men, what if they wanted 12 women? Who would be correct here? In a CLP, the congregation has the final say, and this can usurp the authority of the elders or in this case the apostles. What does the

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<sup>54</sup> Ted Bigelow, *The Titus Mandate: Rescue, Protect, Restore*, (Self-Publication, United States of America, 2011), 261.

congregation do biblically? They submit to the leaders and select seven men. There wasn't debate, there weren't votes casted, the apostles laid the groundwork for the requirements and the congregation simply brought forward the men that met this criterion. Period.

Now, does this set a parameter, since the various churches hadn't even begun to be established? There were no formal structures, with a plurality of elders, we don't see this until later, or does this become prescriptive for the *office* of deacon, let alone for the elder? I mean, again, a description of events as they pertained to a particular issue doesn't set in motion a "hard and fast" rule by which the church follows.

Sure, at minimum we can say that the leaders set parameters for the congregation to follow, but it doesn't lead to the conclusion that a CLP advocates for. A side-by-side comparison shows this.

### **Acts 6 (Biblical Account)**

Apostles call the congregation (disciples) based upon an issue → Apostles layout the solution and requirements → Congregation follows the requirements and obeys → Apostles lay hands.

### **Congregational-Led Polity**

Congregation (or maybe the elders and/or deacons) bring forward an issue → Congregation (or maybe the elders and/or deacons) propose solution → Congregation votes but can usurp the Elders → Elders submit to the decision of the congregation.

First, the situation in Acts 6 has apostles. That is not all comparable to what we have today, we don't have apostles, we have elders and deacons. Second, this issue was outlined, and a solution was set forward by the apostles. It was a command, not a suggestion. Third, there are no votes cast in Acts 6 as there would be today. Fourth, the congregation was submitting to the apostles, this isn't comparable today since under a CLP, the elders submit to the congregation. Fifth, the apostles set their approval by laying hands, the congregation didn't set the approval. So, this text doesn't prove a CLP at all. Not only that we cannot bring one scenario in that isn't equivalent and make that the standard. In this situation where there were many people, apostles busy doing what they were called to do, asked for seven men to assist. That's it.

As Bigelow notes,

"The passage teaches godly authority enabling congregational involvement, not congregational polity."<sup>55</sup>

Remember, our rejection of a CLP is predicated on the grounds of congregation *rule*. There is nothing that prohibits a congregations *involvement*, but we reject that in these texts the congregation is given the *right to rule*.

### **1 Corinthians 5:2-4, 13 – Purging the Evil from Within**

I briefly mentioned 1 Cor. 5:2 above in the discussion of membership, but we will narrow in a bit more closely to this text. As Bigelow notes, "Almost every writer who

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<sup>55</sup> Ibid., 262.

defends congregational polity refers in some way to 1 Corinthians 5.”<sup>56</sup> So, we should tackle these texts.

2 And you have become puffed up and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst. 3 For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present: 4 in the name of our Lord Jesus, when you are assembled, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, 13 But those who are outside, God will judge. Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.

As we have noted with other texts, it is merely assumed here that a CLP is derived from these texts, but again, as we have seen above, this will be shown to be incorrect. The question that must be addressed here is whether Paul has in mind congregational *rule* as it pertains to excommunication via a vote.

It should be first noted that this is a *command* by an authority that is above the congregation, and Paul wants them to *submit* to him in this situation. The immoral man must be removed from the church. It is irrelevant whether some have questioned this command, Paul is the authority here. Paul doesn’t leave this as a request for the church to come together, make a vote, go through some formalized process. They must obey Christ.

Paul rebukes the church for its arrogance in vs. 2, he continues this rebuke through vs. 6-8, and vs. 12. He does this as Bigelow notes to, “humble them.”<sup>57</sup> The response should

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<sup>56</sup> Ibid., 279.

<sup>57</sup> Ibid., 280.

not be to gather the church together for a vote, it is to obey Paul's command (as a gathered entity which includes elders) to *purge* the evil from within (vs. 13).

As Bigelow notes,

"None of the writers who defend congregational polity take notice of the fact that Paul's command in vs. 13 completely strips the congregation of authority. Paul is not asking the congregation to be the final authority regarding the removal of the immoral man, but instead is demanding their repentance and obedience to Christ."<sup>58</sup>

Paul nowhere in this chapter commands that the church make a vote. He doesn't "run it by the congregation" he *commands* that this be dealt with. The church in Corinth did not deal with this man in his unrepentant sexual immorality. They knew who he was, and they did nothing, and Paul is bringing the hammer on them (as *their* authority) to address this issue. Their disobedience stems from an unwillingness to follow Christ's own words in Matthew 18.

As Bigelow notes,

"The congregation was not granted authority, but the opportunity to submit. Their only choice was between obedience or disobedience."<sup>59</sup>

This is key, Paul doesn't leave it to the congregation, they have an opportunity here to either obey his authority or be disobedient against his authority. This is not a proof-text for the congregation to rule at all.

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<sup>58</sup> Ibid.

<sup>59</sup> Ibid.

We need to consider here that from a congregational perspective, Paul is the problem. He isn't allowing the church to function autonomously, as its own entity, making its own decisions by vote. He's stepping on their toes and demanding that they obey him. Isn't this backwards for the CLP? As Bigelow notes again,

“Thus congregational polity makes Paul the arrogant part instead of the church, which violates verse 2. It makes his rebukes to the church condescending and rude, and his commands to them incompatibly with their alleged authority.”<sup>60</sup>

Spot on from Bigelow! He understands that what Congregationalists have done which is (a) brought in their own authority into the text, (b) ignored the fact that this is Paul's command, (c) ignored the fact that the congregation has two options (rebel or obey Paul), and (d) that a CLP reverses Paul's work here.

## **2 Corinthians 2:6 – The Majority**

The last common proof-text used by Congregationalists is 2 Cor. 6:2. I have already addressed what I think the “majority” is, but I would like to add a few brief comments here, since under that section it was about membership, here it is about polity. The text reads as follows:

Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which was inflicted by the majority

A CLP invokes this text as the ground for a *majority* rule. It is assumed that some sort of “voting” happened here in 2 Cor. 6:2.

As Bigelow notes,

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<sup>60</sup> Ibid.

“Nothing is said about a majority vote in 2 Corinthians 2:6. It would be just as fair to claim that a majority of the church closed a door in his face, issued a restraining order, or stayed away from his meat business. It’s all conjecture. The claim that a vote was taken only reads into the text what one hopes to find.”<sup>61</sup>

This is precisely the problem! There is just nothing said about a vote, but here we need to determine what Paul means by the majority. As I indicated above, it is quite clear that the *majority* can simply mean that most congregants inflicted reproof (punishment), and that some did not agree to inflict such punishment. The *majority* gave the man a spoken reproof (punishment) and corrected his behaviour. They essentially followed through on Matthew 18:17. Also, think about it this way, if there was a minority that didn’t vote in favour, why weren’t they punished, especially if this is related to the issues in 1 Cor. 5 (as some believe). Is this not a direct violation of Paul’s command and therefore a sin? Again, this is where voting simply causes more of an issue than it solves.

We’ve addressed several proof-texts here, none of which ground a CLP. There are more texts that a Congregationalists uses, but I found that these were the most compelling, or the texts that need to be taken more seriously.<sup>62</sup>

## **Appendix 2: If not a CLP, then what?**

Since I reject a CLP then what? Do I just reject all forms of polity? No, not at all, but I want a biblical model and one that does justice to the requirements of a plurality of elders and elder-led/rule!

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<sup>61</sup> Ibid., 298.

<sup>62</sup> For more information, see Bigelow’s work where he tackles *all* relevant texts to the discussion.

I will set out a few points that I consider fundamental to what a biblical polity looks like:

- 1.) **Plurality of Elders** – There must be a plurality of elders, this is the Titus mandate. These must be men who are of an appropriate age, with appropriate experience, that meet the biblical requirements for the office. Elders should *rule, lead, shepherd, and oversee* the local church that they govern. All elders should be able to teach/preach on a Sunday when the church is gathered, and elders should be raised up from within the church not sought outside the church. The church congregants must submit to and obey their leaders. Decisions are made by the elders, but those congregating can be consulted.
- 2.) **Deacons** – There must be several deacons (*depending on the size of church*) that are able to serve the church in various capacities.
- 3.) **Voting** – There should be no voting on matters of the two offices mentioned above (*deacons/elders*).
- 4.) **Church Autonomy** – The local church must be autonomous/independent following the structure laid out in the Epistles and Revelation 2-3. The church is not governed by another structure above itself. There are no apostles that oversee the local church, each local church functions on its own.
- 5.) **Membership** – Based upon a proclamation of faith, a believer should be welcomed to serve within the body of Christ. Elders should sniff out new attendees, get to know them, see their gifts, and determine where they can best serve. No one should be required to sign a formal covenantal binding, take a

foundation class, or agree to a constitution. Let your yes be your yes and your no be your no.

6.) **Discipline** – Discipline should be followed in accordance with Matthew 18 and the requirements laid down by our Lord.

At a very basic level, this is what I see the bible as demanding regarding practice. This could be called the “Elder-Led Polity” (ELP) or something along those lines.

### **Appendix 3: Who Should Really Be An Elder?**

If you have followed me this far, kudos! I know it is a lot to work through and there is a lot to think about. This last appendix is important because I think we have created far too much flexibility in who should be an elder. This isn’t written to hurt anyone, but to draw us back to the biblical text.

It is important that we consider “who” qualifies for the *office* of elder. Despite Paul’s explicit statements, I still find many who want to slightly *alter* Paul’s words to allow for deviations.

Let’s start with the qualifications in 1 Tim. 3:1-7:

It is a trustworthy saying: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a good work. 2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, 3 not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but considerate, peaceable, free from the love of money; 4 leading his own household well, having his children in submission with all dignity 5 (but if a man does not know how to lead his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?), 6 *and* not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation of the devil. 7 And he must have a good

reputation with those outside *the church*, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

I will draw out the criteria so you can see it more clearly.

- Must be above reproach
- The husband of one wife
- Temperate
- Sensible
- Respectable
- Hospitable
- Able to teach
- Leading his own household well
- Having his children in submission with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to lead his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)
- Not a new convert
- Good reputation with those outside the church

These are the biblical criteria for an elder of a local church. I think most would agree with the ones that I have marked as green above, it is the ones in red that there are disputes about.

The first one that I want to look at is the “**husband of one wife**.” Some have taken this to mean elders must be married, others that elders must not be polygamists, other elders

may marry only once, or elders must be maritally and sexually above reproach.<sup>63</sup> I hold the position that elders must be married.<sup>64</sup>

Think logically through this for a moment, an elder that is married has several advantages to the church (and this will pour into vs. 4-5):

1.) A husband can speak into the lives of the congregants in a way that those who are single cannot. He has front-line experience in dealing with marriage, and if he is an older man (implied by the term elder) he will know how to deal with the complexities of marriage. This places him in a far more useful position when he oversees marriages in the congregation (which he will need to do as an elder).

From practically the age of 19 forward to death, married couples and families will become the largest demographic in the church.

2.) A husband can lead by example in his marriage.<sup>65</sup> He can show the congregation how a man loves a woman, how to lead in the home, how to speak to his wife,

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<sup>63</sup> Taken from Strauch, Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Lewis and Roth Publishers, Littleton, CO, 1995), 190.

<sup>64</sup> Strauch disagrees with this possibility because of the encouragement of singleness in 1 Cor. 7:32-35, but I don't find this compelling. Paul is not required to expand upon the usefulness of singleness and its relationship to the office of elder, since these two things are unrelated. This assumes a direct overlap with the two points (one in 1 Cor. 7 and one in 1 Tim. 3). He isn't required to explain what this has to do with singleness. There are two different contexts that must be looked at, and it is completely reasonable that Paul holds the unique office of elder to a higher standard, the standard of leading as a married man. The office of elder is not on par with singleness of an individual, it has to do with a multi-layered role within the church that is meant to oversee the church. It requires a prerequisite for entry, and we would expect that entry to the office would be extremely difficult to attain, so that not all would strive for it. This is a higher standard; it is elevated above anything in 1 Cor. 7:32-35. Singleness has its usefulness, and God can do a lot through an individual that is single, but it is conjecture to assume that Paul is rebutting his own statement in 1 Cor. 7 because he establishes a higher standard for the office of elder.

<sup>65</sup> 1 Peter 5:3 nor yet as lording it over those allotted to you but being **examples to the flock**.

how to care for his wife, how to set healthy boundaries, and how to respect his wife. This bodes well when the congregation looks at him as an example, since he is one.

- 3.) A husband's wife can be a sure support for women in the congregation and a source of comfort and trust for those who want a respected woman's input, since this also bodes well for the wife and her respected husband.
- 4.) A husband's wife can keep him accountable in a way that other elders cannot, and in way that a single man cannot. She keeps watch over him at home, whereas a single man has no accountability at home.

Suffice to say, there are good reasons for believing that a man should be married.

I believe the point regarding polygamists seems a bit far-fetched as if Paul would even need to mention this, also past marriages (if handled appropriately and biblically) doesn't seem to exclude a man from the office. The last statement is almost a redundant statement since the previous clause says "he must be above reproach" meaning that he must be above reproach in *all* areas, which includes sexually and maritally.

I do believe that Paul is indicating that a man must be married to one woman and to be above reproach means he also must be faithful to that one woman his whole life. This marriage will function as an important keystone to his leadership on multiple levels. A single man, however, does not have the luxury of anything I said above, and places him at an extreme disadvantage to engage and interact with married men and women. Would you feel comfortable with your wife seeing a single elder by herself, or would you feel more comfortable with your wife speaking to the elders wife, or that the elder could have

his wife present in a one-on-one situation? The safeguards here are incredibly important and should not be dismissed on a whim.

The second point I want to look at is the “**able to teach**” clause. This clause has been reduced to a pastor being hired to preach the word on Sunday and elders might teach Sunday school every once in awhile. I mean how we got here is scary! All elders should be able to get up on a Sunday morning and preach from the Word. This notion that there are two categories “preaching/teaching” is just beyond me. Some will go to 1 Tim. 5:17 which says,

The elders who lead well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor at preaching the word and teaching.

They divide out leaders who “lead well” and “especially those who labor at preaching the word and teaching.” If you note all elders should “lead well” it would be silly to say that only some would do that, and it should be noted that within the plurality of elders, there are going to be those who are *more* focused on laboring with regards to preaching and teaching, but both go together. They aren’t subdivided here as two different things. An elder preaches and teaches, they do both. What I see today is a lack of desire for elders to preach. We have given the preaching to the “paid” pastor and reduced the elders down to “teaching” on a Sunday morning in a Sunday school class. From my perspective this is disappointing. If you are a pastor, you are an overseer, an elder, you are equal among elders, since all elders are pastors and all pastors are elders. Elders should be able to teach and preach the word, there is nothing that subdivides these two categories out. Yes, some will be more focused on that, but if your elder/pastor is absent one week, an elder should be able to step in, instead, most churches I have been to have

one “paid” pastor, and if he’s gone, we need an outside replacement. From my perspective, this is just backwards.

The third point I want to bring out is two-fold “**leading his own household well and having his children in submission with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to lead his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)**”

This will tie back into why I see marriage as so instrumental in the plurality of elders. The text says that he needs to lead his own household well. How does one lead a “household” as a single man?<sup>66</sup> This very text presupposes that elders are married men, that lead their own household well.<sup>67</sup> Ironically, after Strauch has rejected the idea that a married man is in view above he says,

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<sup>66</sup> I appreciate the comments of Coffman here: “The emphasis in this verse is not upon procreative ability, but upon the ability to rule, **a well-disciplined family being the surest evidence of such a trait in one considered for the eldership**. Some, discerning this, have gone so far as to declare that:

The requirement is not that an overseer must have children, that a childless man could not be chosen, but that when he has a family, as most men have, any children, should be in subjection. R. C. H. Lenski, op. cit., p. 586.

**Even if such a viewpoint is true, which this author doubts, it would be far better to choose able family men with children...** Coffman, James Burton. “Commentary on 1 Timothy 3:4”. “Coffman’s Commentaries on the Bible”. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bcc/1-timothy-3.html>. Abilene Christian University Press, Abilene, Texas, USA. Bold added by me.

**67** Barnes notes, “One that ruleth well his own house - **This implies that a minister of the gospel would be, and ought to be, a married man. It is everywhere in the New Testament supposed that he would be a man who could be an example in all the relations of life.** The position which he occupies in the church has a strong resemblance to the relation which a father sustains to his household; and a qualification to govern a family well, would be an evidence of a qualification to preside properly in the church.” Barnes, Albert. “Commentary on 1 Timothy 3:4”. “Barnes’ Notes on the Whole Bible”. <https://www.studylight.org/commentaries/bnb/1-timothy-3.html>. Bold added by me.

“The key measurement when evaluating a man’s management of his household is his children’s behavior... This means he must be a responsible Christian father, husband, and household manager.”<sup>68</sup>

So, on one hand he doesn’t have to be a married man, but on the other hand he needs to be a responsible Christian father, husband, and household manager? Do you see the inconsistency? On one hand Strauch says the requirements above don’t require a man to be married, since this isn’t the best rendering, but then comes back to the fact that he should be a “responsible Christian father, husband, and household manager.” To say that he can be single, and at the same time be a Christian father, husband, and household manager is a contradiction, which is why it is better to see the earlier clause as a married man. What logically follows from the fact that he is a married man is that he manages and oversees his own home well. This includes him overseeing finances, his family, their emotions, their spiritual health, etc. Not only that, Paul adds the statement that this elder should have **children that are in submission**, but how would that work as a single man? This is untestable and untrue for this man, and he becomes an exception nowhere mentioned in the text. How about a man that can’t have kids that is married, or a man that doesn’t want kids? It seems clear that we can’t test the clause in vs. 4 accurately if that is the case, and thereby disqualifies them from the office. This is not to sound harsh, because I know there are men that struggle with this in their personal walks, but the bible tells us that one of the ways we test that our elders are fit for the work of the office, is that they have children in submission, and we can’t test that for single men, nor men who don’t have children. It makes a lot of sense for us to test a

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<sup>68</sup> Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Lewis and Roth Publishers, Littleton, CO, 1995), 199.

married man by how he manages his household. The clause in brackets reiterates this point: (but if a man does not know how to lead his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?). If he can't manage his household, and we can't see evidence of this management, or it is mismanaged, how will he take care of others?

The logic here is seamless:

**P1.** He is to be a husband of one wife, a married man.

**P2.** He is to lead the household well (which includes the care of his wife and children)

**P3.** His children are to be in submission with all dignity

**C.** Therefore, if he is unmarried, he doesn't lead his household well, he doesn't have children or his children are not in submission, he is disqualified from the office.

I think we have let **(a)** men that are young, **(b)** men that are not married, and **(c)** men that either don't have children or don't have children in submission far too often into the office and have not considered the serious repercussions. I think this is a cause for concern.<sup>69</sup> I think there are good reasons for having a family man in the church leading as an elder, and I think this should be true for the entire plurality.

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<sup>69</sup> Even with the lack of able men in our various settings we are not justified to break with what Paul has issued to Timothy. We cannot start bending rules because of the lack of men available. Part of the reason for this lack of able-bodied men is that there is no discipleship, there is no mentoring, and elders are not being raised up and prepared ahead of time. We look outside when we should always look from within the congregation.

We are also not justified to put a woman into the role of elder, if there are no able men. God knows what we need, He is building the church, we are to be submissive to His word and His requirements.

I personally want to be led by men that have families, that are examples to me, men that I can talk to about marriage, children, and other important things. I believe we need to stop inserting “if” clauses into the text. There is no “if they are married” or “if they have children.” There is nothing that insists that these are possible situations and that there are all these grey areas. I am convinced from the text that we need married men, who lead their households well in the position of elder.