

Conversations for Change

Article #8

Eldership, Decision-Making and Communication

We finally come to the last article in this series. It has been my aim with this series to demonstrate how my own thinking has changed with regard to the nature of the church. The major change is a presuppositional change. No longer will we regard the local church as an institution. And with this shift in presupposition, other aspects will need to be adjusted as well. Some of those aspects are bigger than others. It is paramount that we come to see the place of baptism and membership beneath this new way of thinking. Those are major aspects of change. But others will be minor. We will discuss some of the minor changes as we talk it through in public conversation.

There is one last item that is a major shift from my past and it has to deal with decision-making within the local church. What is the nature of the relationship between the elders and the congregation? There are extreme positions that answer this question. On the one extreme is congregationalism where every decision is made through a popular vote. The majority rules. On the other extreme is elder rule where the elders make all the decisions in isolation, apart from the congregation. When it comes to settling this issue of church government there are some things that are very clear in the Bible and there are more things that are less clear. We want to begin with the things that are very clear and be flexible with the things that are less clear.

The clearest statement about the relationship between the elders and the congregation is found in Hebrews 13:17:

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

Clearly, elders lead and congregations submit. We can make this idea of leading even more clear when Paul writes to Timothy, “*Let the elders who **rule well** be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching*” (1 Tim. 5:17). Scripture teaches that elders rule and congregations submit.

When we package the data in such clear terms as “elders rule, congregations submit,” fear immediately grips our hearts. We are all afraid of tyrants. We innately hold leaders in contempt. We are a people who have been convinced through evil politicians and manipulating pastors that leadership cannot be trusted. We are, in part, conspiracy theorists at our core. We assume that there is always an agenda. No one says what he means or means what he says. Such fear is justifiable with an unregenerate government but the Bible assumes a regenerate church where the Holy Spirit reigns! There is no room for tyrannical leaders or conspiracy theories in congregants.

Church as Family

One of the clear requirements for eldership is that each and every elder must be able to rule his home well (1 Tim. 3:4 uses the same word for “manage”). Elders are to model their ruling abilities in the home before they ever take charge of the church. That makes sense, because as I wrote earlier, the church is not organized as an institution but like a large family. The key component that makes any family successful is communication. It

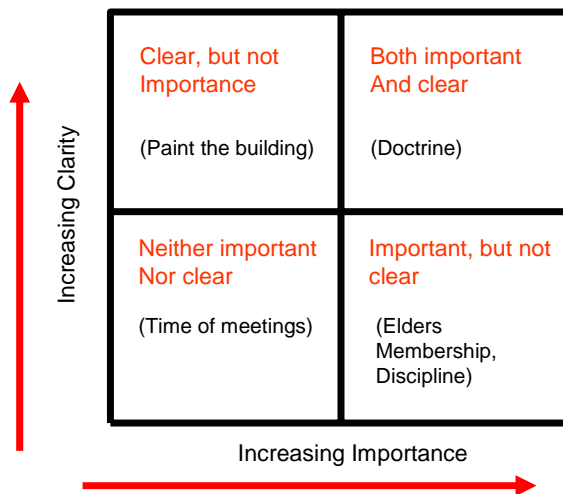
is equally true to say husbands rule, wives submit. But how does a husband rule his home? My answer is that he rules the home with warm, loving communication. Of what value is a husband's rule if he does not take into account the opinions and concerns of his wife? Of what value is a father's rule if he does not include within his decision-making process the opinions and needs of older more mature children? The kind of leadership that is most effective within the home-as-family and the church-as-family is leadership that thrives on communication. *Fathers and elders make decisions by leading their families in a conversation so that the wisdom of the decision is clear to all.* But at the end of the day, it is not the wife or children or congregation who decides, it is the fathers and elders.

Be Persuaded

There is a very good thread of evidence that points to this reality that elders lead by careful conversation. Hebrews 13:17 uses two words when addressing the responsibility of a congregation to its elders. Those two words in English are “obey” and “submit.” In English there is very little difference between the two words. In fact, we might think that the writer was being redundant. However, there is another possible translation to one of these words. The Greek word translated “obey” can also be translated “to be persuaded.” The writer may be saying, “Be persuaded by and submit to your elders.” This seems to be on track with the way the rest of Scripture talks about elders leading through a teaching role. The elder's role is to make a case for certain decisions – to persuade the congregation of a particular direction. The congregation's role, on the other hand is to hear the case and interact with the case. The command to the elders is: Persuade your people. The command to the congregation is: Be persuaded by your elders.

With the give-and-take of a healthy, Bible-saturated, God-centered, joy-pursuing conversation, the direction will become clear to all. The elders lead the church in a careful conversation where the net result is an informed congregation and a trusted eldership.

Don't get me wrong, there will not always be clear Scripture for every decision. When there is no clear Scripture, only pragmatic wisdom, then the leaders talk with the congregation to gain their thoughts and insights in order to make a good decision and the congregation submits to the decisions made by the leaders. When decision-making issues arise, it seems there is a



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sliding rule to be followed. Within the pages of the Bible there are some aspects that are very clear and very important (doctrinal issues). There are other aspects that are less clear but still very important (wisdom issues). But then there are certain aspects the Bible will never address. Some of those issues are less important and less clear while some are less important but very clear.

This means that we take the best part of congregational government, the conversation and communication, and couple it with biblical elder rule so that the net result is an informed congregation and a trusted eldership. Just as it would be foolish for a husband not to lean on the wisdom of his wife, so too, it would be foolish for a church's eldership not to lean on the wisdom of its people. When issues arise that are increasing in importance, the elders should earnestly seek the wisdom of the congregation. When decisions are being made by the elders that are less important and less clear, the congregation should earnestly trust the wisdom of the elders.

Be Submissive

I want you to understand the change-dynamic here. Once again, even in the area of church government we want to make a shift so that relationships are enhanced. We want to make the church a vital relationship, even between the elders and congregation. We want to emphasize the informal, conversational dynamic of decision-making. *Robert's Rules of Order* and formal business meetings will not exist within the paradigm we are suggesting. Instead, decisions will be made in the context of a family of believers. This seems to be more in line with the way Paul directed the church in Philippi. He wrote that believers who share in the comfort and affection that come by the Spirit are a people who "do nothing from rivalry or conceit" (Philip. 2:1-2). Instead, they do not look to their own interests but to the interests of others as they consider others as more significant than themselves (Philip. 2:3-4). It is too easy to hide behind *Robert's Rules*. We need to say what we mean and mean what we say out of love for one another. If we love Jesus Christ, then we will submit to the elders in the decision-making process within the church (1 Pet. 5:1-5). This means that not even the elders can make decisions that serve their own interests but the interests of the flock. They lead by example. "Clothe yourselves, all of you, with humility toward one another, for 'God opposes the proud but gives grace to the humble'" (1 Pet. 5:5).

Eldership exists to serve the church. Elders serve the church in ministering the Word (Heb. 13:7). They serve the church by watching for your souls (Acts 20:28; Heb. 13:17). They serve the church by guarding it from error (Acts 20:29-30; 1 Tim. 6:20; 2 Tim. 1:4). They serve the church by leading it down paths that accord with a consistent handling of Scripture.

Church, let us serve you with joy! We fight for your joy! Will you fight for our joy?