

THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATION

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Christ died for his church. We celebrate this glorious truth together and say, “Amen!” When Christ died for his church, he died for the people, not for our church buildings. While our buildings are certainly a blessing, the church is still the church without the building. Christ died for those who were dead in their trespasses and sins (Eph. 2:1). All who are in Christ comprise the church universal. All of this is according to the wonderful plan of God, but God’s plan goes even further.

Throughout the world, Christ gathers his universal church into smaller groups of believers known as congregations forming local churches. These congregations contain men and women, young and old, clergy and lay members alike. They contain those in whom is all our delight (Ps. 16:3), “a people for [God’s] own possession” (1 Pet. 2:9), and those “who are loved by God and called to be saints” (Rom. 1:7).

From the members of each congregation, God calls some to govern the church. These are the elders, men who are equipped and called

by God but affirmed by the very congregation from which they are selected. One is not better than the other and there is no difference in value. The distinction between elder and congregant is one of function rather than significance or rank.⁶²

The Scriptures have a number of clearly defined and thorough descriptions for the role of elder in the local church (1 Tim. 3, Titus 1, etc., see BCO 2.3). If the governing responsibilities rest with the elders alone, what role does the congregation play in the life and health of the local church? To facilitate the church's health and welfare, Christ calls the congregation to function and thrive in at least these three ways: commitment, accountability, and support.

Thrive in Commitment

Naturally, this commitment begins with a full-hearted devotion to Christ as our glorious Bridegroom (1 Pet. 1:8). But such devotion goes further and overflows as it expresses itself in action.

Committed to Attend

The first and primary expression of commitment is attendance at the gatherings of the church (Heb. 10:25). Being present for the preaching of God's Word, for the edification of the other saints in the congregation, and to lift in praise the great name of the Lord our God is a fundamental and primary responsibility each member of every congregation carries.

⁶² The SGC Book of Church Order explains that "the historical distinction between 'clergy' and 'laity' is an unbiblical idea that creates an illegitimate dichotomy within the body of Christ" (BCO 4.2).

Committed to Serve

One primary elder responsibility is to equip the saints for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:12). This could only result in failure if congregations do not subsequently and faithfully exercise their gifts by serving. This includes serving the local church as an organization as well as the individuals within the local congregation. Churches that rest on the work of the elders are churches in trouble. But those churches whose congregations carry the lion's share of the work, with each member active in service, are churches fully committed to mission.

Committed to Unity

The church has an enemy who delights to sow doubt and division. Therefore, each member of the congregation must be committed to maintain unity within the body of Christ (Eph. 4:3). For this reason, we are called to conduct ourselves in a manner that preserves and protects unity: humility, gentleness, patience, and bearing with one another in love (Eph. 4:1-2). We are called to overlook sin (Prov. 19:11), even choosing to be wronged rather than risk our unity (1 Cor. 6:7). We know that we cannot stand if we are divided against one another (Matt. 12:25), so we commit to fight for unity.

Thrive in Accountability

The Proverbs teach us that wounds from a friend are a blessing (Prov. 27:6). Therefore, we welcome correction and adjustment shared by fellow believers. Such graces hold us accountable and keep us walking on the path of belief and faithfulness. So the congregation is called to thrive in receiving accountability.

Yet there is more to accountability than simply receiving. The congregation is called to provide accountability to one another and its eldership. This accountability can take many forms and have many different points of focus. Three of those areas are doctrine, character, and finances. It is crucial that the congregation carry out this responsibility with a spirit of love and humility, not seeking fault or sinfully judging, but eager to help in all truth.

Accountability in Doctrine

Elders are called to guard the doctrine of the church. At the same time, the saints in Berea are held out to us as an example of how a congregation can foster health in the local church by listening through the lens of Scripture (Acts 17:11). The congregation is not to hold elders accountable to preferences or any other extra-biblical standard. Rather, just as the Bereans did, congregations are to test teaching by the Scriptures to be sure it remains faithful to the will and Word of God.

Accountability in Character

All Christians are called to exemplify the mind and character of Christ. Yet, those who hold offices in the church—the elders and deacons—are to be identified by their character (1 Tim. 3). For this reason, it is imperative that the congregation knows its pastors and deacons, able to affirm their godly character in an ongoing way. Also, when pastors or deacons are added to those already serving, it falls to the congregation to testify to the elders' selections for those offices.⁶³

⁶³ See BCO 4.4.

Accountability in Finances

The management of money is an element of church administration that requires great care and integrity. Wise elders lead with transparency and welcome financial scrutiny knowing how important it is for trust to be established and maintained between them and the congregation. Thus, financial accountability is a wonderful responsibility of grace that falls on the shoulders of the congregation. This doesn't mean every member of the church shares in this equally. It simply means that the elders are not only accountable to God for their financial management, but to the congregation as well.

Thrive in Support

Graciously, the Scriptures balance the congregation's role of accountability with the call of enthusiastic support of its elders and the mission of the church. In this way, the tone does not become primarily one of critique or investigation, but one of appreciation and support. Generous giving is perhaps the most obvious way that congregations can thrive in supporting the local church and her mission (2 Cor. 9:6-7, Mal. 3:10). But there are at least three other ways congregations can support their leadership: encourage, follow, and pray.

Support by Encouraging

The call to eldership is a weighty one. It is filled with work and responsibility, making the elders accountable to the congregation and to the Chief Shepherd himself. It contains the great joy of administering the Word of God through preaching and counsel, but it also comes with the weight of caring for the saints in their various forms of brokenness and sin. This is why faithful members

of a congregation will express gratitude to their elders regularly (Heb. 13:7). They will not simply wait for an encouraging thought to occur to them, but they will intentionally encourage those who are watching over their souls.

Support by Following

While elders are accountable, they are also “overseers” (1 Tim. 3:1) and “leaders” (Heb. 13:17), called to “exercise oversight” (1 Pet. 5:2) and “rule” (1 Tim. 5:17) in the church. A congregation will follow and obey its leaders, making it a great joy for them to serve (Heb. 13:17). This is for the sake of the leader, the sake of the congregation, and the sake of the name of Christ. Making a leader’s job difficult only makes for discouraged leaders, which is of no gain to the congregation. In our age of individualism and self-sovereignty, we as congregants must work at this trait. Few of us default toward following and even fewer of us default toward joy. We must strive to follow our leaders in joy, with our hope and faith set on the God who placed them in leadership over us.⁶⁴

Support by Praying

The enemy knows that striking the shepherd will scatter the sheep (Matt. 26:31). Additionally, your elders will also be held to a higher standard since they teach you the Word of God (Jas. 3:1). When you add to these sobering truths the reality of the troubles found in any church and the difficulty of life in general, you will soon discover that your leaders need your prayers. Paul’s pattern of

⁶⁴ Naturally, I’m not including corruption in this call. If there is corruption, then the congregation’s call is to accountability, as expressed above. (See BCO Part IV for details and instructions on how SGC handles these situations.)

asking for prayer reveals the great need our leaders have for the support of our fervent prayers.

Relationship between the Congregation and Her Elders

In light of the role of the congregation, it is imperative for the relationship between the congregation and her elders to be one of openness, honesty, humility, graciousness, patience, and faith. As godly pastors humbly lead with the Word of God, a godly congregation will respond with faith, trust, and support. As a healthy eldership invites feedback, a healthy congregation brings it in humility and kindness, wrapped in genuine and specific encouragement. As we all—pastors and congregation—seek to honor Christ and his Word, the entire church will breathe the air of joy, humility, and grace.

When this relationship is marked with charity, the welfare of the church is protected and secured. When doubt or suspicion is tolerated in this relationship, division and destruction are not far behind. As elders are called to love their congregations well, congregations are called to love their elders. With the members and elders each doing their part, may the household of God thrive and may his name be made great!

