

Understanding the Congregation's Authority

by Jonathan Leeman

Chapter 1: Provides an overview of what elder-led congregationalism is.

Chapter 2: Provides the big picture of what elder-led congregationalism looks like in the life of a church.

Chapters 3 & 4: Focus on the congregationalism half: your job.

Chapter 5: Focuses on the elder-led half: the elders' job training.

The Conclusion: Lists of your job responsibilities.

“The goal of this book is to help you understand from Scripture what your responsibilities are.”

Chapter 1 – Jesus' Discipleship Program

Introduction – Elder-Led Congregationalism!?

A Change of Subject?

Does this sound like a change of subject to you?

What do you think elder-led congregationalism is about?

“Elder-led congregationalism is about church government, yes, but it is also the “program” that Jesus established to make the whole church responsible for the whole church, and to train very member for the work. It is Jesus' discipleship program.”

1. Church Polity

- **Pastor or elder-led congregationalists** say the Bible gives this final authority to the gathered congregation as led by the pastors or elders.
- **Elder-rule** advocates say final authority belongs to the elders of an independent church.
- **Presbyterians** give authority to gatherings of elders over several churches.
- **Episcopalians** (Anglicans, Methodists, Roman Catholics, etc.) give a bishop authority over several churches.

“People in all four positions acknowledge that Jesus and his Word possess *final* final authority. What divides these positions is who makes final decisions on matters like receiving members, church discipline, removing a disqualified elder, changing a statement of faith, approving a budget, and so forth.”

2. Biblical Congregationalism is Not a Democracy

“What we want is biblical congregationalism, and biblical congregationalism is *pastor* or *elder-led*. *Final* final authority, I said, belongs to Jesus and his Word. And the pastors speak for this Word. Where pastors lead, therefore, congregations should ordinarily follow. We will come back to the relationship between congregational authority and elder authority in chapter 5. For now, we can say that the church maintains final say on decisions concerning *what* they believe and *who* they are, or what I will unpack as the *what* and the *who* of the gospel in chapter 4; but the elders must lead the congregation through those very decisions.

This, I propose, is Jesus’ discipleship program.” (bold ours)

To review, in what way is he claiming that elder-led congregationalism is Jesus’ discipleship program?

The [First] Half of Jesus’ Program: Congregational Responsibility

“The *congregationalism* half requires you, the average church member, to take responsibility for other church members. It gives you this job. In order to do your job, you must know the gospel. You must study the gospel. You must protect the gospel’s ministry in your church. And you must work for the gospel’s progress in the lives of your fellow church members and with outsiders.”

Do you agree that this is your responsibility?

Along with the Gospel, what else will you need to know well in order to encourage fellow members in this way?

The Second Half of Jesus’ Program: Elder Training

“That brings us to the *elder-led* half of Jesus’ discipleship program. The congregation needs its leaders to train them in doing their jobs.”

Elder-led	➔	Gives you job training
Congregationalism	➔	Gives you a job

“Is biblical congregationalism a democracy? No, it is a mixed government— part monarchy (rule of the one), part oligarchy (rule of the few), part democracy (rule of the many). Jesus is King through his Word; the elders or pastors lead; and the

congregation has final (human) say on certain crucial matters. And it is precisely the dynamic between the one, the few, and the many that cultivates a culture of discipleship, and that guides immature church members toward maturity.”

What kinds of training do you think elders/pastors need to provide in order to equip their congregation to do their job?

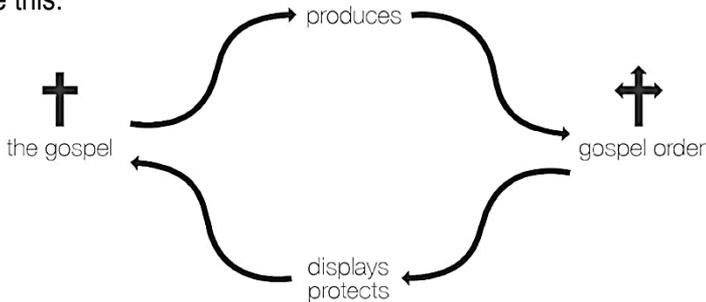
Not Just the Church Business Meeting, But All of Life

“What members do in those meetings should connect to what they do in their everyday lives by building relationships with one another. There should be a back-and-forth between making decisions and building relationships...”

Why is building relationships so important for church decision-making?

From the Gospel to a Gospel Order

“The relationship between the gospel and our gospel-life together is not accidental. Rather, the gospel makes certain demands on the saints and our togetherness. The gospel produces a gospel order (by which I mean a church’s governing structures), and that gospel order in turn displays and protects the gospel, like this:



If you believe in the gospel, you will bind your life to other Christians. You will exercise a priestly care for the holiness of your fellow members. You will promote the gospel witness of your church in your community. And you will train to do this work by submitting your discipleship to fatherly guides, or shepherds. This isn’t just the work of Sunday. This is a job that lasts all week.”

Do you agree? What questions does this raise?

Conclusion

“...elder-led congregationalism is Jesus giving you a pastor to train you for the work of ministry.

When practiced biblically, elder-led congregationalism is a gospel powerhouse. It...

- guards the gospel,
- matures the Christian disciple,
- strengthens the whole church,
- fortifies its holy integrity and witness,
- and equips the congregation to love their neighbors better in word and deed.”

Do you want to grow in your discipleship to Christ, and protect the *who* and the *what* of the gospel? Then step into your congregational responsibilities as led by your pastors.