

Understanding the Congregation's Authority

by Jonathan Leeman

Chapter 2 – The Big Picture

Introduction

Learning in Real Life - Read the Scenario (pgs. 11-12) for discussion

Elder Training in Real Life

- Let's reflect on this...

"It was a real, live family crisis in the church. It was as real and present and tangible as mom sitting down at the dinner table with the kids and saying, "Daddy has left." Now the elders were asking the congregation to sit down at that table with that family. To be there. To comfort the children. To weep with the wife. To admonish the abandoner. To mentally and emotionally process the whole situation for themselves, and to manage their way through it together. ...

The elders followed Jesus' instruction to "tell the church" (Matt. 18:17), and then they trained the congregation to respond according to the gospel. **Their leadership taught the church at least five lessons.**" (Bold ours)

1. "...we are saved by grace alone through faith alone."

Why were they pursuing Dale with the hope that he would repent?

2. "...we are saved by faith alone, but the faith that saves is never alone."

If Dale has real, saving faith will he turn from his sin...eventually?

3. "...the gospel saves not just individuals, but a body."

Who in this scenario is experiencing the pain of this sin?

4. "...the elders' leadership taught the congregation what gospel love looks like."

How do we find the balance between holding people accountable and showing them compassion & mercy?

"It does not look like live-and-let-live. It is not divorced from truth, holiness, and obedience. Nor does gospel love look like self-righteous finger-pointing or angry, furrowed brows. Rather, gospel love looks like forgiven sinners warning against the way of death and pointing to the way of life. It speaks truthfully, sometimes with tears, always with prayer and compassion."

5. "...what it means to act with gospel courage."

"So fast-forward two months. The next members' meeting came. Nothing had changed in Dale's life. He resisted all the church's efforts to call him to repentance. So the church voted to remove him from membership and the Lord's Table. We excommunicated him, to use some older language. **This means we were no longer willing to affirm him publicly as a Christian.** This brings us to a fifth lesson that the whole exercise taught the church: **what it means to act with gospel courage.** Saying "yes" to removing someone from membership can be scary. It makes you swallow hard." (highlight ours)

Note the Box: What Is Excommunication? (Read)

What do you think the author means when he speaks of, "gospel courage"?

"By obeying Jesus' command to "tell it to the church," the elders disciplined the congregation through all five of these lessons and probably more. And each of these lessons would transmit to the rest of life. Maybe another wife in the church is dealing with her husband who claims to love Jesus but demonstrates a pattern of deceit. Maybe a friend with whom you've been sharing the gospel claims to have become a Christian but won't join a church or stop getting drunk. Maybe you call yourself a Christian, but you are living in unrepentant sin of some form. The few lessons the church learned in this situation come into play in all sorts of ways. We learn the importance of discerning between godly sorrow and worldly sorrow. We learn the courage of speaking honestly and drawing lines with tenderness and tears. Working through gospel-life issues corporately trains us in handling them individually. When these meetings occur behind closed elder-meeting or bishop doors, such training does not occur.

Elder-led congregationalism, in short, requires the elders to teach and to disciple, both for the good of those directly involved but also for the good of the whole congregation." (highlight ours)

Does anyone have any questions or comments at this point?

Congregational Responsibility

"Of course, the foundation of this whole discipleship process was the fact that every member jointly owned final responsibility for whether we would continue to affirm Dale's profession of faith. That is the second thing to notice in this snapshot of Jesus' discipleship program... The elders led the process by making their

recommendations at each step. But **the church still had a decision to make and an action to take.**" (See 1 Cor. 5:3, 12)

"So it was in my church. We elders had pronounced a judgment among ourselves concerning Dale in our Thursday night elders meetings. Then we turned to the congregation and asked them to exercise the same judgment for themselves in our Sunday night members meetings. We placed the decision back into their hands because we understood from Scripture that responsibility finally belonged to them." (underline & highlight ours)

Do you see the congregation's responsibility here?

Making Decisions and Building Relationships: A Virtuous Cycle

"Focusing just on a two-hour meeting, however, might cause you to miss the bigger picture. **The church's responsibility to act in the meeting is part and parcel of their larger responsibility to care for one another throughout the week.** The fact is, if you only focus on the meeting, you're just glancing at a photograph. What we really need is a video camera that records the members' lives together before and after the meetings."

"As it turns out, Dale..." (Read to the end of the section, pgs. 16-17)

Does this illustration help you get a clearer picture of what it means to be a member of a local church?

Congregationalism Versus Non-Congregationalism

"Now, I have used an illustration for Elder-lead to Congregationalism involving excommunication. But there is much more to a congregation's work, most of it joy-giving, like choosing elders or receiving members. The essence of congregational authority revolves around what we believe and who we are, or what I will characterize in chapter 4 as **the what and the who of the gospel.** Every member must know the gospel well enough to protect it. Every member must know other members well enough to help them remain faithful to the gospel. Every member must work to help a church remain faithful from one generation to the next, consecrated to the Lord. ... Elder-led congregationalism is fundamentally about living out and guarding the gospel." (highlight ours)

(Compare with other polities: Episcopal, Presbyterian, Elder-rule)

“In elder-led congregationalism, the weekly gathering is for job training. It is where the pastors equip the members to know the gospel, to live by the gospel, to protect the church’s gospel witness, and to extend the gospel’s reach into one another’s lives and among outsiders. The pastors equip the saints to build up the church, says Paul (Eph. 4:11– 13). Who builds up the church? The members. ... All week long...”

The Bottom Line: You Have a Job to Do

“Together with the other members of your church, you are finally responsible for the church’s gospel faithfulness. Your elders are responsible to train you to carry out that job.”

Does anyone have any questions or comments before we close?

Prayer:

- ❖ That the Elders would own/be diligent in their responsibility to, “equip the saints”.
- ❖ That the Spirit would enliven our entire membership to own the mission we have been given.
- ❖ That we would be protected from the world the flesh and the devil