

Understanding the Congregation's Authority

by Jonathan Leeman

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.

Chapter 3 – Adam Had a Job (Part 1)

Introduction (p. 19)

"If I had 40 seconds with you on an elevator, and you asked me where congregationalism is in the Bible, I would say something like this:

Well, in Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus gives the local church final authority in a case of church discipline. Paul does the same in first Corinthians 5. He does not tell the leaders to remove the unrepentant adulterer from the church. He tells the church to do it. Then in Galatians 1:6-9, Paul treats the Galatian churches as capable of removing even him—an apostle!—if he teaches a wrong gospel. And in second Corinthians 2:6, Paul refers to a case of church discipline having been decided by a "majority." And all of this, I would say, argues that the gathered congregation possesses final authority over the *who* and *what* of the gospel.

I assume I could say that on an elevator, at least if the ride was longer than a couple of floors.

But suppose you knew something about Presbyterian or Anglican polity. You might step off the elevator, turn back toward me, and say in the time it takes the elevator door to close, 'but what about Hebrews 13:17: 'Obey your leaders and submit to them?'"

(p. 20) "The temptation is always to pick your favorite group of verses and ignore the other group. And everyone has their favorites. The Roman Catholics love Matthew 16 (*why?*). The Baptist, Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 (*why?*). The Anglicans and Presbyterians, Acts 15 (*why?*) and Hebrews 13 (*why?*). ...

But understanding what the Bible says about church government takes more than a 40-second elevator ride and reciting our favorite proof-text. As surprising as it may sound, we need to trace a story line that runs in the whole Bible, a story that is especially important for understanding the Congregational half of elder-lead congregationalism. In fact, it's that story line which provides the church member with his or her job title: *priest-king*."

How do you think we are to make sense of these different commands?

The Story of the Priest-King: Adam (p. 21)

“The whole-Bible story starts with God’s covenant with Adam. God created Adam and immediately installed him as a king over the rest of creation.”

Genesis 1:28

²⁸ And God blessed them. And God said to them, “Be fruitful and multiply and fill the earth and *subdue it*, and *have dominion* over the fish of the sea and over the birds of the heavens and over every living thing that moves on the earth.”

Genesis 2:15

¹⁵ The LORD God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to *work* it and *keep it* (*watch over, guard*).

(p.21) “Remarkably, this was the very same job description God would eventually give Israel’s priests—that is, to “work” and “watch over” the tabernacle/temple, keeping it consecrated to the Lord (Num. 3:7-8; 8:26; 18:5-6). To that end, priests were charged with naming things as “clean” or “unclean,” and “holy” or “unholy.” God specially dwells in the temple, and therefore the priests work was to maintain the temple as a holy place. Adam’s work was the same as the priest—maintain and protect the garden as a holy place, as the dwelling place of God himself.”

What is a Priest-King?

If a king rules, a priest-king rules on behalf of a greater king, God. That is, the priest-king *mediates gods* rule and works to protect what’s holy.

In what sense was Adam’s role that of king?

In what sense was Adam’s role that of priest?

(p. 22) “Besides being a real historical person, it’s important to realize that Adam was also *Everyman*, representing all of us.”

Psalm 8:3–6

³ When I look at your heavens, the work of your fingers, the moon and the stars, which you have set in place, ⁴ what is man that you are mindful of him, and the son of man that you care for him? ⁵ Yet you have made him a little lower than the heavenly beings and crowned him with glory and honor. ⁶ *You have given him dominion over the works of your hands; you have put all things under his feet...*

Abraham, Moses, David, and a New Covenant

Abraham

(p. 22) “God didn’t just command, “Be fruitful. Instead, he promised, ‘I will make you extremely fruitful and will make Nations in kings come from you’ (Gen. 17:6).

God himself fulfilled in Abraham what he commanded of Adam. Abraham would be this mediating king, or priest-king.”

Genesis 18:18–19

¹⁸ seeing that Abraham shall surely become a great and mighty nation, and all the nations of the earth shall be blessed in him? ¹⁹ For I have chosen him, that he may command his children and his household after him to keep the way of the LORD by doing righteousness and justice, so that the LORD may bring to Abraham what he has promised him.”

What is the context for these verses, what is happening in this passage?

In what way does this illustrate the mediating role given to Abraham?

Can you think of ways in which Abraham functioned like a king?

Moses

(p. 22) “God more fully explained “the way of the Lord” Through the covenant with Moses and the people of Israel.”

Exodus 19:5–6

⁵ Now therefore, if you will indeed obey my voice and keep my covenant, you shall be my treasured possession among all peoples, for all the earth is mine; ⁶ and you shall be to me *a kingdom of priests* and a holy nation.’ These are the words that you shall speak to the people of Israel.”

(p. 22-23) “What was an *individual* office became a *corporate* office.

The whole nation now would occupy the office of priest-king. Together they would demonstrate what holiness looks like by being a people consecrated to the Lord. Interestingly, the Mosaic covenant also separated out a class of citizens known as priests. The purpose of this office was to highlight the lesson of what it means to be holy or consecrated to the Lord.”

Can you think of ways in which Israel could *mediate* between God and the other nations and peoples of the world?

In what ways was Israel supposed to defend God’s holiness?

David

(p. 23) “God also separated out the office of King through the covenant with David (see 2 Sam. 7; Pss. 2; 110)...”

Take note what the kings of Israel were commanded to do:

Deuteronomy 17:18–19

¹⁸ “And when he sits on the throne of his kingdom, he shall write for himself in a book a copy of this law, approved by the Levitical priests. ¹⁹ And it shall be with him, and he shall read in it all the days of his life, that he may learn to fear the LORD his God by keeping all the words of this law and these statutes, and doing them,

(p. 23) “David’s job was not to be a priest, but his rule was to be priestly.

What do you think, is the author right, was David’s rule supposed to be “priestly?”

(p. 23) “Tragically, the story of Israel and its kings might be titled “The fall— Part Two.”... The lesson was plain: we cannot save ourselves or walk in righteousness. We need God himself to fix our guilt problem and our obedience problem.”

What do you think about the author’s over-all assessment of the Bible’s story-line so far? Is this a fair way to represent God’s big picture purposes for humanity first and then Israel?

How does the Bible describe mankind’s basic problem?

What are some examples of alternative answers given to this question in our culture? How could we go about having a conversation about it?

A New Covenant

(p. 23) “So God promised a new covenant, one by which God would make provision for the forgiveness of sins and enable the people to obey by placing his law on their hearts (Isa. 53-54; Jer. 31:31-34; Ezek. 36:24-27). The dwelling place of God’s people would again become ‘like the garden of Eden’ (Ezek. 36:35).

Prayer:

- ❖ Help us and others to see our need before God clearly
- ❖ Help to run to Christ for forgiveness and life
- ❖ Help us to point others boldly and with compassion to Jesus