

### Weekly Reflection: Church Structure part 3

#### The Jethro Principle: Exodus 18:13-23

- Colorado Christian University – “The "Jethro Principle" is a foundational leadership and delegation framework based on the biblical advice that Jethro gave to his son-in-law, Moses (Exodus 18). It teaches that a leader cannot do everything alone and must establish a structured, tiered system of trusted, capable delegates. It highlights that leadership is not about maintaining control over all tasks but rather designing a system where decision-making authority is pushed out to the most effective level.”

1. Jesus is head of His church.
2. We're all priests and ministers. (The priesthood of all believers.)
3. Elder-led congregational ruled.
4. Some, not all, are called to be leaders in the body.
5. Elders and deacons.

#### Elder-led congregational ruled.

There are truths in the Bible that on the surface can feel almost paradoxical. For example, a few weeks ago, we talked about service. In the one hand the Bible clearly calls us servants of God, roughly 120 times the Bible refers to us as servants of God, and in the other hand the Bible clearly says Jesus did not come to be served but to serve (Matthew 20:28) and God is not served by human hands (Acts 17:25). This takes at least a little thought, but if you do, you ask the question, “So how do I serve a God who I can't serve with human hands and actually said I didn't come to be served but to serve you?” Answer, “We serve God by allowing Him to serve us and allowing Him to serve others through us.” Or Paul says, “I worked harder than all of you, yet it was not I but the grace of God that worked in me.” So, yes, we work hard, we serve, we put forth effort, and yet all this work, effort, and service is done by grace from God, by God serving us. All that to say that we are talking about some Biblical truths that can feel a little paradoxical and odd, but I think if we're willing to think through it, we can come away with some understanding.

#### Who is the final authority in the local church?

Under Christ and His Word, who is called to lead the local church today, who has final authority, who makes the decisions? Now, it is very clear on the question of the final authority in the church: Christ is our head. However, beneath Jesus and the Word of God, is it the gathered congregation of the church or the correctly appointed leaders (pastor-elders) of the church who have the final say? Many good, healthy churches are congregational (ruled, under Christ, by the gathered church), and many good, healthy churches are elder led (ruled, under Christ, by the elders). And it's not hard to see why this is; there is a dynamic in the New Testament that runs in both directions.

#### Hebrews 13:17 seems to cut both ways.

Hebrews 13:17 captures those two impulses, in one verse: ***“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.”*** First notice the appeal to the people, the congregation: “for that would be of no advantage to you.” We see that the congregation is the focal point, this is written to the congregation. The people do not exist to serve the leaders. Rather,

the leaders have been called to serve the church. And yet, who can miss “obey” and “submit”? So, Hebrews 13:17 cuts both ways (though, to be fair, slightly more in the direction of elder rule).

### Elder-led Passages

Paul writes to the church in Thessalonica, ***“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13)*** Their leaders are “over you in the Lord,” and Paul calls the church to “respect” those leaders and “to esteem them very highly in love.” They are working. They are giving of themselves, expending energy and focus and time for the church’s good. And so, the church should “esteem them . . . because of their work.”

***Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Timothy 5:17)*** One of the roles of an elder is to rule well, and to rule means to have authority over. This verse seems clear that elders are to use their God given authority to lead the church.

### Congregationalist Texts

To begin with, the simple fact that most of the New Testament is addressed to congregations, not their officers, is instructive. In the book of Revelation, Jesus addresses His words, through John, not to pastors but to the seven churches in Revelation 2–3.

For congregationalists, Jesus’s straightforward directive in Matthew 18:17-18, in the context of church discipline, is significant: ***“If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.”*** So the church, the congregation, is the final court of appeal in matters of church discipline where decisions about membership are made. I don’t think there could be a weightier matter to decide. If the church is the final authority in determining who is in the church or out of the church, it seems like the church is the final authority under Jesus. Charles Spurgeon said this about verse 18, “Each church has the keys of its own door. When those keys are rightly turned by the assembly below, the act is ratified above.”

Similarly, in the context of church discipline, Paul appeals to the church, that the decisive act of excommunication happens “when you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus” (1 Corinthians 5:4). In other words, under Christ, the final authority on earth is the gathered assembly of the church, not the elders. The gathered church, not the elders alone, remove the unrepentant sinner from the household of faith.

Congregationalists also point to Acts 15:22, ***“Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers.”***

### Acts 6:1-6

One further passage that is noteworthy for our purposes for showing, alongside Hebrews 13:17, the dynamic between elder-led and congregational rule, is Acts 6:1-6. Here “the whole church” plays a part in the choosing of the seven, and that with the apostles themselves on the scene (as in Acts 15). When a complaint arises in the early church from the Greek-speaking minority against the Hebrew majority “because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution” (verse 1), the twelve don’t simply take the bull by the horns and fix it themselves. Instead, they summon “the full number of the disciples”

(verse 2). And instead of the apostles deciding for themselves, they say to the congregation, “You choose” (verse 3).

Track with the back and forth. First, the complaint arises from the people to the leaders. Then, the twelve take the initiative to gather “the full number.” Next, the twelve charge the people to choose: **“pick out from among you . . .”** The apostles guide the process: “. . . **seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty**” (verse 3). The twelve are careful not to overextend their reach beyond their calling: **“we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word”** (verse 4). And the whole gathering responded to the leaders’ initiative and guidance: **“what they said pleased the whole gathering”** (verse 5). Once the people have chosen, they bring their seven back to the apostles for their blessing: **“These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them”** (verse 6). It’s a glimpse of the healthiest dynamic in the local church, where the leaders don’t demand obedience, but seek to work with and encourage the people from the heart, and the people aren’t just dutifully obedient, but desiring and eager, to work with, obey, and trust their pastors.

### In the Church Today

The pattern we’ve seen in the New Testament, and the dynamic that is evident in Hebrews 13:17 and Acts 6:1-6 gives us a picture of church life and leadership that resists two extremes. Neither congregations nor church officials rule by command in the New Testament. Whether one ends up on the congregational or elder-led side of the line, local-church authority, under Christ, is not simple. The very nature of the church is that Christ has given her leaders and appointed that they teach, lead, watch over, and provide for the local church. Churches need leaders to thrive. And the leaders need to remember they are there for the people, the entire congregation has the final authority under Christ. For me, what we might call “elder-led congregational ruled” church governance makes the best sense of the whole picture. This means the gathered church has the final say, under Christ. Yet God gives pastors to His saints to watch over them and teach them and persuade them and lead them and calls the saints to submit and obey the elders.

Something I thought about was why this makes sense. With a dictatorship (elder-led) or even with a business and a boss, that person makes the decisions, has the authority, in that setting love is not necessary, you don’t need to be loving to run a good business. You don’t need to be patient or kind. Or think about a democracy (congregational ruled), you don’t need love or patience or kindness there either, just get enough people buying what you’re selling. You can do that by lying, manipulating and bullying; whatever works. But this structure of elder-led congregational rule will only work effectively if the heartbeat is love, kindness, patience, forgiveness, and trust.

### Christ, Our Head

Local-church life and leadership is complex. The church, under Christ, has its own Christ-honoring model. Christ doesn’t intend for His church to borrow its structures from the business world, or from the world whatsoever. But otherworldly as the dynamic between the congregation and the leaders might seem, there is this simplicity: Christ is the one head of the church (Ephesians 1:19-23). He is the one with “all authority” (Matthew 28:18). He is the one who builds His church (Matthew 16:18). He is the church’s one foundation (1 Corinthians 3:11) and cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). He is the one chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4). One way of acknowledging and preserving and honoring Jesus’s unique and exclusive place as “head of the church” is that both the pastors and the people sense and respect the limits of their authority, first under Christ, and second in relation to each other.