

## BASIC CHRISTIAN FAITH AND PRACTICE 18

### Church Matters: Church Government, Membership, and Discipline

#### Introduction

We have talked a lot about the Church in this Basics course. Why do you think that is? → That is because it is of the utmost importance. As we mentioned when we studied community, which is largely what Church is, it is basically the context in which we are to live the Christian life. Everything else we do in the Christian life is meant to be done in the context of the church to one degree or another and is to be informed by the church. We receive training and instruction and support and help with every aspect of the Christian life through the church. The Church is of tremendous importance to God. It is the only institution or organization that Jesus Christ established. It is his bride, and indeed, it is his body, what the Bible calls “the fullness of him who fills everything in every way” (Eph 1:23) and also “the household of God” and “the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim 3:15). Church community is the desire of God’s heart for his children and his plan for manifesting his glory. Therefore, it behooves us to think about what the Church is, how it is to be set up and to run, and how membership in it works. That is what this final study in our Basics course is about, with a special focus on how this local fellowship of Faith Community Church functions. We are basically looking at church government, membership, and discipline.

#### I. What Is the Church?

- A. The Greek term for “church” used by the NT is ekklesia (pronounced “eck-lay-see-ah” with the accent on “see”), which most basically referred to a gathering or assembly of people.
- B. When the Bible talks about the church, it is not talking about a building, but about people.
  - Does that mean we should not refer to our church building as a/the church? → No, that is fine and common usage. But the Bible uses the term differently, of people not buildings. We can use it in both ways.
- C. The Church Universal → What is that? → The whole body of those who, whether in Heaven or on Earth, have been savingly reconciled to God through Christ’s death and resurrection. (I.e., the whole body of the redeemed/saved/true people of God. This could be described in a variety of ways.) E.g., Matt 16:18; Eph 1:22-23; 5:23, 25-27
- D. The Extra-Local Church: Sometimes, the NT uses the term “church” of a group of Christians beyond the local church that is not in reference to the Church Universal. Acts 9:31
  - Do we sometimes use the term in that way? → Yes, we might talk about the church in Hampton or the church in the seacoast or the church in NH or the church America, etc.
- E. The Local Church → What is that? → A group of Christians who gather together regularly for worship and prayer, following the Lord together, proclamation of the word of God, walking in committed, loving relationships with one another, celebrating the sacraments of Baptism and Communion, and bringing the lost to saving faith. E.g., the various local churches the NT letters were written to; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 1:2; Acts 14:21-23.
  1. This is a definition of the ideal. At what point should a group that claims to be a church be regarded as a false church? It is hard to say exactly. One would think that normally, to be considered a true church,

that the church should at least believe and proclaim the Bible and hold to the essentials of the Christian faith, including the biblical gospel of salvation by grace through faith in Christ and his death and resurrection in addition to meeting regularly, seeking to walk in obedience to God and his word, and engaging in basic Christian practice such as worship, prayer, and the Sacraments.

2. The local church is a specific expression of the Church Universal.

-- Notice that there is one body of Christ (Eph 4:4), yet Paul tells the Corinthian church that they are the body of Christ (1 Cor 12:27).

- Why is the local church so important?

3. The local church is the main context in which we live the Christian life. (See the introduction above.) In order to live the Christian life practically, we have to live it out in community with specific brothers and sisters in Christ.

## II. Church Government

A. There are various views of church government among Christians, but we're not going over them here.

This study is focusing on Faith Community Church's view and practice. (The Bible is not super clear on all aspects of church government, and so there is room for differences among Christians on the matter.)

B. The most biblical form of church government is plural male-elder rule.

1. Elder = pastor = overseer. Each of these titles refers to the same office. Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pet 5:1-4

a. The titles themselves indicate authority, most obviously in English in the term "overseer."

b. But shepherds clearly lead sheep, and elders were the leaders in first-century Jewish society. The title elder in the early church itself indicated authority.

c. From our church bylaws: Elders are to pray for the church and are to provide spiritual care, counsel, guidance, teaching, preaching, leadership, protection, and an example of godliness/Christlikeness.

2. Elders/pastors/overseers govern/rule the church. In addition to the above verses: 1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17; cf. Heb 13:17

a. Not the congregation voting on decisions. We do not normally vote as a church. There are rare occasions when the church votes, such as on whether to install a new elder. We thought it made sense for the church to vote on the installation of elders since the church will be bound to submit to them.

b. While the elders have sole decision-making authority on almost all decisions, they seek the church's input and take it into account on major decisions+are willing to seriously consider it on any decision.

3. The church's eldership should be plural (ideally). I.e., Ideally, there should be a team of multiple elders pastoring and leading the church.

a. The NT normally speaks of church leadership in the plural. E.g., Acts 14:23 (elders appointed for each church); Phil 1:1; James 5:14

b. In our church, all the elders have equal authority and must agree for a decision to be put into effect. The Senior Pastor does not have more authority than the other pastors, but is merely considered the first among equals.

4. The church's eldership should only be male.

a. This goes along with Scripture assigning men as the head of the home. Eph 5:22-24

b. The NT speaks of overseers as men. 1 Tim 3:2, 4

c. 1 Tim 2:12

5. Our approach described in our church bylaws: We acknowledge Jesus Christ as the head of this church and believe that he exercises his headship through God-appointed leaders and the ministry of the Holy Spirit in the church body. Thus, this church will be ruled by elders who seek to be sensitive to how God might lead them in their decision-making through the church body. This does not mean that the elders will simply seek to implement the will of the church body in its decisions, but that all decision-making authority in the church will be in the hands of the elder(s) and that the elder(s) will seek the church body's input on major decisions and take that input into consideration in their decision-making. Faith Community Church is to be and operate as a church/spiritual family, with the elders serving the church and leading it in the will of God for the glory of God and good of the church, and church members submitting to the elders and supporting them in their leading of the church in the will of God.

C. Deacons: The other main leadership position in the church specified in the NT

1. The NT clearly identifies the office but does not clearly specify the function of deacons.

2. The title itself comes from the Greek word for servant. The focus of the office seems to be physical service.

3. Ideally, there should be a plurality of deacons as seems to have been the practice of the early church. E.g., note the plural in Phil 1:1.

4. Acts 6:1-4 seems to tell of the origins of the office, suggesting that the role came to be to assist the elders by taking care of the physical matters of the church so that the elders could focus on spiritual matters and governing the church.

5. 1 Tim 3:8-13 gives the requirements for deacons, and v. 11 seems to refer to deaconesses (female deacons), indicating that women can be deacons. (The verse comes within the section on deacons and does not seem to refer to deacons' wives since there is no corresponding section on elders' wives.)

6. Our view of deacons from our church bylaws: Deacons are to be specially recognized servants of the church who serve under the oversight and direction of the elder(s) so that the elder(s) may focus on their primary calling of caring for the spiritual life and needs of the church. The specific duties of the deacons at any given period of time are to be determined by the elders. But the general vision for the role of the deacons is that, under the oversight and direction of the elders, they are to give care to the physical needs of the church. However, as assistants to the elder(s) with exemplary godly character, they might be called on to minister to the spiritual needs of church members as deemed fitting by the elder(s).

### III. Church Membership

- A. The NT does not really discuss church membership but simply seems to depict believers (who are assumed to have been baptized) as members of the body of Christ and of the local church.
- B. Practically, we consider any believer who regularly attends Faith Community Church to be a member of the church. That is, we treat believers who attend the church as members, which includes considering their input and expecting them to function as members of the church. (See our Statement of Church Life on the handout and read over that together.)
- C. But for legal reasons connected to our legal status as a corporation, to be a voting member of the church, one must be at least 16 years old and (1) confess and trust in Jesus Christ as Lord and Savior, (2) have been baptized in water, (3) regularly attend the church's worship services and/or Bible studies/prayer meetings, and (4) have the approval of the elders for membership. But, the church almost never votes, as discussed earlier.

### IV. Church Discipline

#### A. Matthew 18:15-20

- Brother (15)? → Fellow believer
- Some translations include "against you" and some don't because some Greek manuscripts differ. What's the difference? → One would suggest holding fellow believers in the church accountable for sin generally while the other suggests only for offenses against oneself.
  - But the earliest and best manuscripts lack "against you." Moreover, the NT does indicate elsewhere that church members are to hold one another accountable and that the church is to practice church discipline, and this passage sets forth a process that is protective and limiting in relation to consequences. And so, if one is going to practice accountability and church discipline at all, then this process provided by Jesus himself makes best sense.
- Why just between the 2 of you (v. 15)? → There is a principle in this passage of seeking to keep accountability of this sort as private as possible, presumably for the protection of reputation, limitation of conflict, and making it as easy/comfortable as possible for someone to consider the message and to own wrong and repent.
- Win your brother (v. 15)? → Win them to repentance and spiritual well-being/right relationship with God. Paul uses this word of bringing people to saving faith (e.g., 1 Cor 9:19).
- So what is the process? → (Pretty straightforward. Delineate it from the passage.)
- What do you think the role of the witnesses are? → To confirm the person is in sin. They could conclude that the person is not in sin, and ideally that would settle the matter and end the process.
- Treat him as you would a pagan or tax collector (v. 17)? → As an unbeliever. To Jesus's audience, this would mean to not associate with the person (Jews did not associate with pagans and tax collectors). The church is to regard and treat the person as an unbeliever who is not to be associated with. Other passages in the NT confirm that disassociation from the person was part

of church discipline at a certain point in the process (e.g., 1 Cor 5:9-13; no need to read this if time is short). This is known as excommunication.

- Why treat him as an unbeliever? → He is in sin and stubbornly refusing to repent, indicating that he is not trusting in Christ as Lord.
- Binding and loosing (v. 18)? → Binding/shutting people from the kingdom of God and its forgiveness and salvation vs. loosing/opening/granting entrance to the kingdom of God and its forgiveness and salvation.
- Verse 19 affirms that the decision of the church is backed by God.

## B. Purposes of Church Discipline

- What are the purposes of church discipline?
  1. The holiness of the church
  2. The spiritual health of the church and each of its members
    - a. Seeks to win the erring believer to repentance and right relationship with God so that they persevere in faith and salvation.
    - b. Protects the church/other believers from sin.
      1. From the influence of the erring brother or sister
      2. By way of warning and example of consequence
    - c. Exposes sin
  3. The testimony of the church to the World
  4. The glory of God
- See our church bylaws for our official policy on church discipline.
- See the Bible Study in Basic Christian Faith and Practice page on our website for a handout on church discipline.

## Conclusion

- Questions?
- May the Lord help us to live out the basics of the faith and equip us with everything good for doing his will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory for ever and ever. Amen. (See Heb 13:21; NIV.)