

Church Basics



Understanding Church Leadership

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CHURCH BASICS SERIES PREFACE

The Christian life is the church life. This basic biblical conviction informs every book in the Church Basics series.

That conviction in turn affects how each author treats his topic. For instance, *Understanding the Lord's Supper* maintains that the Lord's Supper is not a private, mystical act between you and Jesus. It is a meal around the family table in which you commune with Christ and Christ's people. *Understanding the Great Commission* contends that the Great Commission is not a license to head into the nations as Jesus' witness all by oneself. It is a charge given to the whole church to be fulfilled by the whole church. *Understanding the Congregation's Authority* observes that the authority of the church rests not only with the leaders, but with the entire assembly. Every member has a job to do, including you.

Every book is written *for* the average church member, and this is a crucial point. If the Christian life is a church life, then you, a baptized believer and church member, have a responsibility to understand these basic topics. Just as Jesus charges you with promoting and protecting his gospel message, so he charges you with promoting and protecting his gospel people, the church. These books will explain how.

You are like a shareholder in Christ's gospel ministry corporation. And what do good shareholders do? They study their company, study the market, and study the competition. They want the most out of their investment. You, Christian, have invested your whole life in the gospel. The purpose of the series, then, is to help you maximize the health and kingdom profitability of your local congregation for God's glorious gospel ends.

Are you ready to get to work?

Jonathan Leeman
Series Editor

Books in the Church Basics series

Understanding the Great Commission, Mark Dever

Understanding Baptism, Bobby Jamieson

Understanding the Lord's Supper, Bobby Jamieson

Understanding the Congregation's Authority, Jonathan Leeman

Understanding Church Discipline, Jonathan Leeman

Understanding Church Leadership, Mark Dever

For further instruction on these topics
from these authors (B&H):

Don't Fire Your Church Members: The Case for Congregationalism,
Jonathan Leeman

Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership,
Bobby Jamieson

*Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional
Age*, Mark Dever and Jonathan Leeman, editors

Preach: Theology Meets Practice, Mark Dever and Greg Gilbert

The Church: The Gospel Made Visible, Mark Dever

Introduction

The issue of leadership in the local church is a crucial topic.

Consider, after all, Christ's love for the church. He gave himself for the church. He identifies with it as his own body. He continues to care and provide for it through his Word, Spirit, and ministers. And he promises to reveal the church on the last day as his resplendent bride. If all this is true, those who lead the church have a high and holy responsibility. Think of how *care-full* a bride's attendants are as they prepare her to walk down the aisle.

Christ wants his leaders no less careful as they prepare his bride. For this reason it is worth spending time in studying, reflecting on, and praying through what God's Word says about church leadership.

The Next Big Thing

To be sure, church leadership can be a divisive issue. You can well imagine the kind of reactions a young pastor in an old church gets when he recommends changing the leadership structures. A few years ago, retired pastor of First Baptist Houston John Bisagno observed that the topic of church government is one of the most divisive issues in Baptist churches today.

Part of the problem is that every few years pastors' conferences and publishers get everyone excited about *the next big thing*. And often

the next big thing comes from the corporate world. Here is one pastor—from the 1950s—describing his own leadership structure. Is he describing a church or a bank?

The first step I undertook when I became pastor of Druid Hills Church was to set up the Pastor's Cabinet, composed of the heads of all the departments of the church life—Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Board of Deacons, Chairman and Vice-Chairman of the Finance Committee, Chairman of the Trustees, Chairman of the Board of Ushers, Clerk, Treasurer, Chairman of the Relief Committee, Superintendent of the Sunday School, Director of the Training Union, President of the Woman's Missionary Society, President of the Brotherhood, Minister of Music, Chairman of the Music Committee, Chairman of the Guest Book Committee, Chairman of the Youth Council, Librarian, and Members of the Church Staff.¹

What confidence we can have in our corporate organizational structures!

Would the Christians of earlier eras have approved of the plethora of non-biblical offices in our churches? Well, they certainly recognized that some matters of leadership and governance must be left to prudence. The 1742 Philadelphia Baptist Confession observes that the Scriptures “expressly set down” everything necessary for faith and life, which includes how churches should be organized. But then the confession goes on to acknowledge that “there are some circumstances concerning the worship of God, and government of the church, common to human actions and societies; which are to be ordered by the light of nature, and Christian prudence, according to the general rules of the word, which are always to be observed.” In other words, church government is a matter in which some latitude is appropriate. Christians have always acknowledged this.

At the same time, Christians have also recognized that Scripture contains specific instructions about the local church's polity. And before we spend lots of time thinking about ways that leadership

changes between one context and another, we should begin by considering what the Bible says for everyone.

Purpose of This Book

What model of leadership does the Bible recommend?

Several years ago I was asked to contribute to a “multiple-views” book on the topic of church government. The purpose of the “multiple-views” book is to ask representatives of different traditions to present their viewpoints. They can be useful, but I declined. The difficulty was, the editor asked if I would offer either the “senior pastor” view, or the “congregational” view, or the “plurality of elders” view. In fact, I believe that Scripture commends all of these! Congregations benefit from having a senior or lead pastor *and* a plurality of elders lead *in the context* of congregationalism. We need a happy helping of each, coexisting and reinforcing each other in the life of the local church.

In his book *Understanding the Congregation’s Authority*, which belongs to the same series as this one, Jonathan Leeman spends most of his time discussing congregational authority. But he concludes by placing the discussion into the context of plural elder leadership. In this book, I will do the opposite. I will spend most of my time discussing plural elder leadership (together with diaconal service), but will conclude by placing this conversation into the context of congregationalism. Who are the deacons and elders? What do they do? How do they relate to one another, and how do elders relate to the congregation as a whole? In case you have read my earlier book *A Display of God’s Glory*, you will find much of that material here, albeit reshaped around the topic of leadership.

Speaking personally as a Baptist pastor for a moment, I have found having a plurality of elders immensely helpful in equipping the members of the congregation to fulfill their congregational authority and responsibility. Why have one teacher and shepherd when you could have a number of them? More gifts! More equipping getting done! More saints being built up to do the work of the ministry!

Our church's contributions to our Baptist denomination (the Southern Baptist Convention) have not fallen; they have increased. My pastoral leadership has not been compromised by serving with these other men; it has been enhanced. We have never once been tempted to baptize infants! And our congregation has not become more passive in ministry, but more active. Each elder is a gift of Christ to his church.

On the Gift of Authority

Of course, it is not always easy to view those in authority as a gift. Ever since the Fall, authority has often been abused, and it is healthy to acknowledge as much. Power apart from God's purposes is always demonic.

At the same time, it is not good to suspect all authority. If we are to live as God means us to live, we must be able to trust him, and this includes trusting the ones made in his image whom he has placed in positions of authority. Everyone in the Bible from Adam and Eve to the rogue rulers in the book of Revelation show their evil fundamentally by denying God's authority, and usurping it as their own.

It is a great privilege to be served by godly leaders. And godly leadership is a gift. To reject authority, as so many in our day do, is short-sighted and self-destructive. A world without authority would be like desires with no restraints, a car with no controls, an intersection with no traffic lights, a game with no rules, a home with no parents, a world without God. It could go on for a little while, but before long it would seem pointless, then cruel, and finally tragic.

Despite our tendency to ignore it, godly and biblical leadership is crucial to building a church that glorifies God. Our exercise of leadership in the church relates to God's nature and character. When we exercise proper authority through the law, around the family table, in our jobs, in the Scout troop, in our homes, and especially in the church, we help to display God's image to creation. This is the call on a church's leaders. What a privilege it is to lead, and what a privilege it is to support their work!