

IX

VOLUME VI

Church Matters

Polity

What It Is and Why It Matters

A Journal
for Pastors

Editorial Director: Jonathan Leeman
Managing Editor: Taylor Hartley
Editors: Alex Duke and David Daniels
Copy Editor: Judith Henderson
Executive Director: Ryan Townsend
President: Mark Dever
Cover Design: Odd Notion
Layout Design: Rubner Durais
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Church Matters: Polity: Why It Matters

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Biblical Thinking For

Building Healthy Churches

Why You Should Care about Church Polity

by Jonathan Leeman

“Church polity has become the absorbing topic of the Christian world.”¹ So remarked pastor theologian J. L. Reynolds in 1846. Not much to do in the evenings of 1846, I guess.

Yet it should absorb us more than it does, particularly as church leaders. That’s why we’ve devoted an issue of *Church Matters* to the topic. Polity is not the gospel, but it’s an outgrowth of the gospel, given by God to protect and promote the gospel, particularly over time.

Here are five reasons, pastor, you should care about church polity.

1. Polity Is Biblical

Making disciples involves “teaching them to obey everything” that Jesus commanded, including commands like these:

- “let him be to you as a Gentile and or tax collector” (Matt. 18:17);
- “go . . . baptizing them in the name of . . .” (Matt. 28:19);
- “When you gather in the name of the Lord Jesus . . . in the power of the Lord Jesus, hand him over . . .” (1 Cor. 5:4–5);
- “an overseer must be . . .” (1 Tim. 3:2);
- “obey your leaders . . .” (Heb. 13:17);
- “let us consider how to stir up one another . . . not neglecting to meet one another” (Heb. 10:24–25);
- “when you come together to eat, wait for one another” (1 Cor. 11:33).

The Holy Spirit has seen fit to reveal his will for how Christians should live together as churches, including what we do when we gather, how we organize ourselves, who should lead, what the ordinances mean, and so forth. The Bible doesn’t answer every question we might ask about organizing our churches, but it says the things we need, the important things, the essential things, the things that every church on the planet should have.

We should care about polity because: God said.

2. Polity Is Gospel Ethics

Look again at the list of verses mentioned above. Notice anything about them grammatically? They’re all imperatives. Churches build their governance structures on the imperatives and authorizations of Jesus and the apostles. Meaning, polity is ethics.

Yet here comes my longest and maybe most important point: polity is not just ethics, it’s gospel ethics.

Let me back up. It’s easy to view church government as an arbitrary “add-on” to the Christian life, like the scaffolding leaning against the outside of a historic building used for deep cleaning and restoration purposes. The scaffolding surrounds the building but is not a part of the building. It’s detachable. Isn’t that what the relationship between polity and Christ’s gospel people, the church, is like?

No. Our polity grows out of the gospel. Or let me put it like this: If you’re working through an old multiple-choice analogy section for the SATs (my teens tell me the SATs have dropped the analogy section) and you’re asked to pick the right analogy for *gospel: polity*, don’t pick *building: scaffolding*. Instead, pick *seed: flower*. Polity is to the gospel, what a flower is to the seed. The ethics of policy grow out of the seed of the gospel. The institution, I dare say, grows organically.

Most Christians in healthy churches already understand the *seed: flower* analogy for our individual gospel obedience. Faith shows itself in works. Gospel belief leads to gospel obedience. We get that. Now get this: polity, in the same way, is our social obedience. It’s what Christ requires of us *corporately*—in our life together.

And the corporate assignments aren’t arbitrary. They really do grow out of the gospel. How?

Let me back up a second time with a broader lesson: the beginning point of any organization’s polity is *not* who the leaders are, necessarily.

Rather, the beginning and most crucial element in any organization's polity is who makes the group a group, which includes declaring who the members are. The decision about whether a group exists and who its members are—far and away—is the starting point and the foundation for the rest, whether we're talking about a football team, a parent-teacher association, a business, a church, or a nation. For instance, the beginning of the American polity is not the president or congress. It's the "consent of the governed" of the Declaration of Independence and the "we the people" of the U.S. Constitution. The people make the nation what the nation is, not the elected officeholders.

Now back to the church: who has the authority to make a church a church and individual members of it?

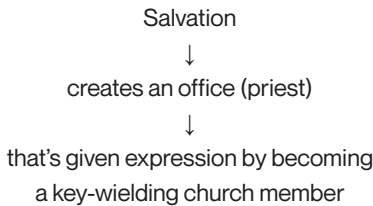
To answer, we have to start with the new covenant promise that "no longer shall each one teach his neighbor and each his brother, saying, 'Know the Lord,' for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, declares the Lord" (Jer. 31:34). That means, no longer will a special class of priests mediate membership and right standing among God's people. We're all priests now. Therefore, membership and right standing among God's people must be "by mutual agreement," as the First London Baptist Confession puts it. Membership and the existence of a visible church occurs when "two of you agree" and "where two or three are gathered in my name," as Jesus puts it (Matt. 18:19–20). Two or three

priests (gospel believers) must agree with one another before a church can exist.

The white-hot center of church authority is not at the Vatican, the general assembly, a presbytery, or the office of senior pastor. It's in two Christians *agreeing* with one another. Drop two Christians down on a desert island with a Bible, and they can form a church. Stare at that word "agree" in Matthew 18:19. That agreement is the key-wielding (verse 18) judicial glue (verse 16—with Deuteronomy 19:15 in the background) that binds a church together.

Who makes a church a church? It's two or three Christians (read: new covenant priests) agreeing on what the gospel is, agreeing they will regularly gather to proclaim it, and agreeing to affirm one another's professions of gospel faith through the ordinances. They can do this on a desert island. They can do this in downtown Washington, DC. The second that someone says bishops or presbyteries or elders make a church a church, you've gone back to the old covenant and established a separate line of priests. You've gone against the new covenant gospel, which makes us all priests. Galatians 1:6–9 and 1 Corinthians 5 tell the same story.

The New Testament is remarkable. Jesus saved us with his gospel and by that same gospel he gives us a job to do: be priests. We Christians then undertake that job of priest by gathering together and affirming one another in the gospel through the keys of the kingdom and the ordinances. Like this:



Again, our gospel polity grows out of our gospel salvation.²

What about deacons? How do they grow out of the gospel? Deacons display the service at the heart of salvation. To transliterate the original Greek, Jesus did not come to *be deaconed*, but to *deacon* and give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

What about elders? How do they grow out of the gospel? They teach and lead us according to the gospel, but in another sense, elders don't grow out of the gospel. Their existence testifies to our already/not yet eschatology and the fact that we're not perfected priests, as we will be one day. Priest is our status and job now, but indwelling sin remains. Therefore, Jesus has given the gifts of men who are "above reproach" and "able to teach" who can lead us into greater conformity with the gospel. Then, when Jesus comes back and we're perfected, they'll be out of a job.

What does the gospel look like in my life individually? It looks like me striving for holiness. What does the gospel look like in our life corporately? It looks like affirming one another as fellow church members through the ordinances, helping one another to fight for holiness inside that membership, exercising church discipline when occasion requires, honoring the example of our deacons, and submitting to the example of our elders.

We should care about polity because: the gospel makes demands on our life together as churches.

3. Polity Creates the Local Church

In *Going Public*, Bobby Jamieson writes, "A church is born when gospel people form a gospel polity."³ Polity makes the invisible visible.

The bigger picture here is, Protestant churches are formed in two steps:

1. *Step one.* God the Spirit works through the preached Word to give life and faith, and the Spirit's work accompanies God's preached Word. God's Word creates God's people. The trouble is these people remain invisible and unrecognized. You cannot see Holy Spirit-belief in someone's heart. Are you a Christian? Am I? Are they? A second step of public recognition is therefore necessary.
2. *Step two.* Gospel believers recognize one another by organizing as a church. Faith adopts an order. By mutual agreement, they organize and mark themselves off as Christ's people through the ordinances. Like this:

Step one	Step two
New covenant people	→ Public recognition
Invisible church	→ Visible church
Faith	→ Order / Polity
Preaching the gospel	→ Practicing ordinances

The existence of a church begins with the gospel, but then those gospel believers must organize or polity-ize.

We should care about polity because: it creates a church.

4. Polity Is Discipleship

If polity is gospel ethics, then learning to live according to those ethics is a crucial part of our gospel discipleship. Which means, polity is also discipleship.

Think again of the Great Commission. We make disciples by baptizing and teaching our churches to obey everything Jesus commanded. Part of what Jesus commanded is how to become a church, govern a church, and live as a church. As such, learning to live inside of those polity structures is how we grow in discipleship.

Do you want a healthy church filled with maturing and healthy Christians? Practice meaningful membership and church discipline. Raise up biblical elders and deacons and equip them to do their work.

We should care about polity because: it's crucial to our discipleship.

5. Polity Is Witness

Making the church visible is essential for creating the church's witness. To be sure, I can become a Christian, live a changed life, and share the gospel all by myself. But I won't be able to do those things very well. My faith and witness will remain weak. I need other Christians to be strong.

Not only that, I need other Christians to testify to a new community, a new people, a holy nation, a heavenly culture. Think of how Jesus explained that it was our love for one another that will show people we're his disciples. How will we do that? By loving one another as he has loved us—with

a forgiving and forbearing love (John 13:34–35). It's in the life of a visible binding and loosing church that we display the gospel.

We should care about polity because: it serves our evangelism and witness.

This Issue of *Church Matters*

For these five reasons and more, we're pushing polity in this issue of *Church Matters*. Most of the articles point toward elder-led congregationalism, like this introduction does. Yet we felt it was fair to have a Presbyterian brother and an Anglican brother make the case for their perspectives.

We've also tackled the topic of polity from a host of angles that we hope will be helpful to you as a pastor or church member—from defining it, to applying it, to considering its fruit and how it works in members meetings, to examining it in other contexts.

A good opening story for the entire issue appears in Dave Russell's article on polity and evangelism. A fellow pastor asks Dave how his church has so many baptisms. Dave's answer surprised the fellow pastor: "Church membership." Wait, what? Dave's explanation and his article as a whole is as good a place as any to jump in.

1. J. L. Reynolds, "Church Polity or The Kingdom of Christ, in its Internal and External Development," in *Polity*, ed. Mark Dever (Washington, DC: Center for Church Reform, 2001), 296.

2. For a fuller explanation of the movement from salvation to priesthood to church

membership, see <https://cf.sbts.edu/equip/uploads/2019/09/SBJT-23.1-Leeman-Priest-hood-of-Believers-Rev1.pdf>.

3. Jamieson, *Going Public: Why Baptism Is Required for Church Membership* (Nashville, TN: B&H Academic, 2015).



Jonathan Leeman edits all 9Marks titles as well as *Church Matters*. He is the author of several books focusing on ecclesiology. Jonathan earned his MDiv from Southern Seminary and a Ph.D. in Ecclesiology from the University of Wales. He lives with his wife and four daughters in Cheverly, Maryland, where he is an elder at Cheverly Baptist Church.

Section One

Polity Defined

IX 9Marks

Building Healthy Churches

IS YOUR CHURCH HEALTHY?

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Polity is a clunky word.

And whatever that word means, can it really be that important for Christian discipleship?

A church's polity is its governing structures. It concerns what makes a church a church and how it organizes itself. The trouble is many churches today believe the Bible doesn't say much about polity. Each church decides what works best for them.

Yet this issue of *Church Matters* argues that Scripture does prescribe a polity and that man-made polity puts the gospel at risk. Polity is crucial for Christian discipleship because it specifies our individual responsibilities to one another. Not only that, biblical polity protects and promotes the gospel.

Are you interested in the holiness of the saints as well as the integrity and power of your church's witness? Then you might attend to your church's polity.

“The world learns who Jesus is from what it sees in churches, and what it sees is shaped by polity.”

Dave Russell

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