

AUTHORITY STRUCTURES IN THE CHURCH

INTRODUCTION

At Eastside, we are committed to letting God's word be the guide and standard for every aspect of our lives – both individually and corporately.

We **believe** that the Bible is God's trustworthy and final authority in all matters (Ps. 19:7-11; 2 Tim. 3:16; 2 Pet. 1:20-21). We desire to hold a biblical vision that honours the Lord. **We believe** that this will glorify God most and result in the flourishing of all members in our church.

As part of a commitment made when Eastside and Bayside became one church, it was agreed that after a period a new constitution would be developed. This 'discussion paper' is the last in a series of papers developed by the elders intended to stimulate biblical discussion and reflection among our membership. The papers in the series will include:

1. The Church & its purpose
2. Meaningful membership
3. Membership requirements
- 4. Authority structures in the church**

NEXT STEPS AHEAD

The release of these papers will be accompanied by teaching and opportunities for discussion. You will see that throughout the paper are questions for reflection and consideration. There are also resources for further exploration. We'd encourage you to submit your biblical reflections—positive and corrective—on these papers to the elders. These will then be used by the elders to develop the draft constitution that will be submitted to the members for consideration and approval.

AUTHORITY IN TROUBLED TIMES

Our culture has a troubled relationship with authority. While we don't like authority, we receive—often subconsciously—significant benefits. Imagine Australia for one moment without traffic rules, building codes, laws, hospital procedures, parental responsibilities or our justice system. Authority is the glue that holds our society together. Without it, life would be chaotic and unpredictable, shaped by individual preferences.

What's behind this troubled view of authority? Perhaps it is a result of our nation being birthed as a penal colony. Perhaps it is because we live in an age of radical individualism. Or perhaps—more seriously—it is because we have seen authority used in damaging ways. Despite the various factors that have created our current cultural attitude, the Bible gives the clearest assessment.

In Genesis 1-2, God's authority is used for the flourishing of humanity. But in chapter 3, humanity convinced itself that God's rule was unloving and attempted to become little rulers. And the sad result of sin is that humans can and do use authority for selfish reasons. But we must also realise that because of our sinful nature we naturally struggle to submit to authority—even when it is for our good.

God's intention was that authority would always be used as an expression of love, and as a conduit of blessing (Gen 1:18; 2:15). This vision is a far-cry from the confused relationship that our culture has with authority. As Jonathan Leeman points out, we have mistakenly driven a wedge between the two (love and authority) believing that: *“Authority restrains. Love frees. Authority*

exploits. Love empowers. Authority steals life. Love saves life."¹

But it is in the gospel that we are drawn back to God's good design. The gospel invites us to willingly live under the rule of King Jesus – "*The kingdom of God has come near. Repent and believe the good news!*" (Mk 1:15). Jesus made it very clear that *love* and *authority* are not two separate things: *If you love me, keep my commandments* (Jn 14:15). In other words, to love Jesus is to submit to his authority.

Following this, **we believe** that are called to be a counter-cultural community that doesn't toss the metaphorical 'baby out with the bathwater' on leadership. On the one hand, **we believe** that God expects us to be a people that willingly submit to leadership in the church. On the other hand, **we also believe** that leadership is a gift from God, not to be abused, but for the blessing of the church.

ULTIMATE AUTHORITY

We believe that Jesus has *ultimate authority* in the church (Col 1:18) and that he rules through his word. Jesus is God, and it is God's word that saves and sanctifies the church (Mat 4:4; Jn 17:17; Eph 5:26; 2 Tim 3:16). Jesus is also the very word of God and all of the scriptures are about him (Jn 1:1; 2 Cor 1:20; Heb 1:1-3). Put simply, what the Bible says is what Jesus says.

In contrast to this, during the Reformation (16th cent), the question of authority in the church was central. The Catholic church had a threefold authority structure: Tradition, Magisterium and Scripture. In contrast to this, the Reformers argued that *sola scriptura* (Scripture alone) was the *supreme* authority.

As Timothy Ward says: "God has so *identified* himself with his words that whatever someone does to God's words...

they do directly to God himself."² In other words, to obey God's Word is to obey God himself. And vice-versa, to disobey God's Word is to disobey God himself. Practically this means that no Christian has a mortgage on spiritual authority. Further, all believers should be seeking the rule of King Jesus by studying and obeying Scripture.

ULTIMATE AUTHORITY BUT NOT THE ONLY AUTHORITY

Yet there is a difference between *sola* and *solo scriptura*. The Reformers were rightly claiming that Scripture was the *ultimate* or *supreme* authority (*sola*) not the *only* authority (*solo*). Marty Foord explains that the reformers held that "the Bible was the *supreme* authority that ruled reason and tradition because Scripture alone was infallible precisely because it is God's word. *All other authorities* (including church leadership) were fallible and must submit to Scripture. As Heinrich Bullinger said: 'As God's word is confirmed by no human authority, so no human power is able to weaken its strength.'"³

Therefore, **we believe** that the word of God is not the *only* authority in the church. Rather, all authority structures in the church must be accountable to Jesus through Scripture.

AUTHORITY FOR WHAT?

Unfortunately, when we talk about authority in the church, we are often merely thinking who has the final say in decision making (budgets, programs, etc). At this point, it is of absolute importance to pause and reflect on the *purpose* of the church.

Gilmore says: *The Church is not, and must never be regarded as, a democracy, for the power is not in the hands of the demos but of the Christos: it is a Christocracy. To grasp this delivers us from the worst kind of church meetings where the aim is not*

¹ Jonathan Leeman, The Rule of Love: How the Local Church Should Reflect God's Love and Authority, 2018.

² Timothy Ward, Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God, IVP, 2009

³ <https://au.thegospelcoalition.org/article/the-real-meaning-of-sola-scriptura/>

*so much to discover the will of God as to aim to gain a policy of one's own choosing by a majority vote.*⁴

We believe that because the church is *by* God and *for* God, all church authority must be derived from Christ and must be concerned with *promoting his agenda* (Mat 28:18-20). To divorce *church authority* from the *purpose* of the church is a serious mistake indeed.

JESUS AND CHURCH AUTHORITY

We believe that the local church is responsible for determining membership of the local church, both the addition as well as the removal of members.

In Matthew 18:15-19, Jesus gives final human authority to the *assembled congregation* – not a group of elders or Apostles alone – to determine whether someone should be removed from a congregation because of sin (v17). Greg Gilbert rightly concludes, “*The last step Jesus mentions is to “tell it to the church,” not “tell it to elders” or appeal to the college of cardinals or to the pope. What the church says goes.*”

The authority to bind and lose (i.e. the keys of the kingdom of heaven) is the authority Christ gives the local church to pass judgement on the gospel confession of its members. As Leeman points out: “*it means that churches can exercise the same authority that Jesus exercised with Peter in [Matthew] chapter 16, or that the local church exercises in [Matthew] chapter 18: the authority to stand in front of a gospel confessor, to consider his or her gospel confession and life, and to announce an official judgment on heaven's behalf: “That is/isn't a right gospel confession” and “That is/isn't a true gospel confessor.” Exercising the keys is rendering judgment on a gospel what and a gospel who, a confession and a confessor.*”⁵

In Matthew 16:13-20, Jesus shows that this authority (i.e. the keys of the kingdom of heaven to bind and lose) is about the proclamation and preservation of the gospel. Jesus' questions in v13 & 15 lead Peter to make his gospel confession that Jesus is Lord (v16). Leeman helpfully points out that Jesus seems interested in both a *what* and a *who* of the gospel (i.e. *What* is your understanding? And *who* of you knows this?)⁶. Jesus affirms Peter's confession and declares that the rock or foundation⁷ of the church is the people of God proclaiming this gospel (i.e. the confessor confessing the right confession).

In order to build his church, Jesus gives Peter the keys of the kingdom of heaven which can bind and lose. Peter accomplished this binding and losing by proclaiming the gospel already given to him (see Acts 2:36-41). As DA Carson explains: “*Whatever [Peter] binds or looses will have been bound or loosed, so long as he adheres to that divinely disclosed gospel. He has no direct pipeline to heaven, still less do his decisions force heaven to comply; but he may be authoritative in binding and loosing because heaven has acted first (cf Acts 18:9-10). Those he ushers in or excludes have already been bound or loosed by God according to the gospel already revealed and which Peter, by confessing Jesus as the Messiah, has most clearly grasped.*”⁸

Thus, **we believe** the church is built on the people of God proclaiming the gospel. Christ gives the local church the responsibility and final authority to pass judgement on members' gospel confession. Church members are called to take responsibility for other church member's holiness. In doing so, the gospel is proclaimed and preserved.

⁴ A. Gilmore, *The Pattern of the Church -*

A Baptist View, (London: Lutterworth Press, 1963), 143

⁵ Leeman, Jonathan. *Understanding the Congregation's Authority* (Church Basics). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁶ Leeman, Jonathan. *Understanding the Congregation's Authority* (Church Basics). B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

⁷ The context of the passage is crucial in determining what the word *foundation* is specifically referring to because in 1 Cor 3:11 Jesus is the foundation of the church but in Eph 2:19-20 the apostles are. In Matt 16 the context shows that *foundation* is referring to a correct confession of the gospel.

⁸ Carson, DA, Matthew

EXAMPLES OF CHURCH AUTHORITY IN THE EPISTLES

If this position is correct, we should rightly expect to find throughout the NT examples of local churches using Christ's authority to make decisions about the *what* and *who* of the gospel. And we do!

- Paul exhorts the Galatian church to *excommunicate* false teachers because they were preaching a *false gospel* (Gal 1:8-9).
- Paul commands the Ephesian church⁹ to judge elders fairly and *reprove publicly* those who are sinning (1 Tim 5:19-20). This reflects Matt 18 – Christ gives his *authority* to the church to determine the validity of a church member's confession.
- Paul exhorts all church members to commit to caring for one another's lives, by *warning* those who are idle and disruptive (1 Thess 5:14-15).
- As a leader, Paul has already passed judgement on a church member living in sin and he now expects the Corinthian church to *put him out of fellowship* and have nothing to do with him (1 Cor 5:1-5; 11-12).
- Probably referring to the same man, Paul speaks about the "*punishment inflicted on him by the majority (i.e. the church members) is enough*" (2 Cor 3:5) and that now they (i.e. the majority) must forgive and comfort this person (v6). Notice the similarity of Paul's words in v10 to Jesus' in Matt 18:18 – "*anyone you forgive, I also forgive*". It's also important to see that although the Apostle Paul has an opinion about what to do with this person and advises the church, he insists that the church must make the final decision.
- In Acts 2:41, new converts were added to the church number (i.e.

membership) by a correct confession of the gospel.

- The Ephesian church had a list of genuine widows who needed care (1 Tim 5:9-11). The church had the authority to exclude younger widows on this list because it was not good for their discipleship.
- The Apostle Peter exhorts the church (i.e. all its members) to be on guard against false teachers. This implies they could do something about them too (see 1 Peter 3:1-2, 17-18). In other words, the church had a responsibility to preserve the gospel and Christ's authority to make it happen.

THE VITAL ROLE OF ELDERS

We have seen that the *final* human authority in the church resides with the membership. The question remains: what about elders-pastors? Doesn't Hebrews 13:17 say: *Submit to your leaders*? That sounds like authority too!

Throughout the NT, we can see the very high value God places on the work of elders in the local church. First, we see this in their appointment: "*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you*" (Titus 1:5). God intends for every local church to have a team of elders who will shepherd its members. Secondly, we see this through the many important aspects of their work. Scripture calls elders to be qualified men able to lead and govern the affairs of the church (1 Tim 5:17; Tit 1:7), teach God's Word (1 Tim 3:2; 2 Tim 4:2; Tit 1:9, Heb 13:7; Acts 20:27), determine doctrine (Acts 15:6), be examples (1 Tim 4:16; 1 Pet 5:3; Heb 13:7), pray for the sick (Jam 5:14), help the weak (Acts 20:35), counter false doctrine and teachers (Acts 20:28-31), and equip the church for ministry (Eph 4:11-12). They must do all this without pursuing dishonest gain or lording it over the church (1 Pet 5:2-3; 2 Cor 1:24). And finally, we see

⁹ Paul insisted that 1 Timothy be read publicly to the entire church (1 Tim 5:27)

the importance of elders in the call God makes to every church member: *Have confidence in your leaders and submit to their authority, because they keep watch over you as those who must give an account. Do this so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no benefit to you.* (Hebrews 13:17).

We believe elders are appointed by God through the membership to lead, govern and care for the church. It is the responsibility of the church membership to carefully appoint elders who meet the qualifications outlined in Scripture. Elders should always function in teams. At Eastside we view our pastors as full-time elders.

HOW DO ELDERS RELATE TO THE AUTHORITY OF THE CONGREGATION?

So how does the authority of the congregation and the authority of the elders interact? Perhaps the best place to see this is in *discipleship*, Jesus' great agenda for his church.

In Eph 4:11-16, we see that God gives elders-pastors to his church *“to equip his people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ”* (v12-13). The elders-pastors equip but *in no way do they diminish* the responsibility of the body to engage in gospel work. *“From him the whole body, joined and held together by every supporting ligament, grows and builds itself up in love, as each part does its work”* (v16).

We believe the *authority of elders* must lead but not remove the *responsibility and authority* Christ has given to the whole church. Leeman says: *“We can say that the whole church, elders and members together, possesses the power of the keys. But the elders possess an additional authority to teach and to set the pattern for how the*

*keys should be employed. Instead of a distinction between possession and exercise for comparing congregational and elder authority, we need to distinguish between possession and leading in the use.”*¹⁰

Practically, we see this looking as follows:

1. **Elders are installed and removed by the will of the congregation.** Even though they should have considerable authority over the congregation, they are finally accountable to the congregation and their continuance in office depends on the consent of the congregation.
2. **The congregation should trust and follow their elders in matters of Christian discipleship.** The New Testament commands church members to obey and submit to those in authority over them (Heb 13:17, 1 Thess 5:12, 1 Pet 5:5).
3. **Elders have the “authority of counsel.”** They lead the congregation by teaching the Word. Their authority is ministerial and declarative. They teach the Word of God and so authoritatively instruct and lead the people. Their authority depends on their faithful teaching of Scripture and obedience to Scripture as they lead the church.
4. **Congregations have the “authority of command.”** That is, the elders' authority is finally advisory in matters of membership, discipline, and even doctrine. They cannot effectually unite Christians to the church, or discipline them from it. They cannot give themselves office. The elders teach, but the church is ultimately accountable to God for what they believe and who they listen to (Gal 1:6-9). The elders oversee people's lives and lead the church in dealing with sin, but the congregation finally decides whom

¹⁰ Leeman, Jonathan. *Understanding the Congregation's Authority (Church Basics)*. B&H Publishing Group. Kindle Edition.

to accept into membership and whom to exclude (Matt 18:17; 1 Cor 5:12). While the church recognizes its elders precisely so that they can lead them by teaching the Word to them and watching over their lives, God holds the church finally accountable for its membership, discipline, and doctrine.

We **believe** that a local church should have a congregational-rule and elder-led structure. Unfortunately, when discussing authority structures in the church, one side is often elevated over the other: *“Either the rule of the congregation is elevated at the expense of the leadership, or the authority of the leadership is elevated without acknowledging the final authority of the congregation.”*¹¹ If the church is functioning as it should, then there will be a healthy balance between the leaders and the congregation.

The New Testament is clear that there should be a relationship of trust and mutual respect between the elders and the membership. Greg Gilbert rightly explains that: *“Jesus intends the relationship between elders and local churches not to be one fraught with tension and conflict, but a beautiful one of trust and love. After all, the Bible says elders are gifts to the church, given by the King from the throne of heaven.”*

WHAT ABOUT DEACONS?

Besides elders, the other church office we find in the NT is that of *deacons* (1 Tim 3:8-13; Phil 1:1; Rom 16:1). The word *deacon* is usually translated *servant* and is used widely across the NT. For example, in John 12:26, we would hear Jesus saying, “If anyone *deacons* Me, he must follow Me. Where I am, there My *deacon* also will be. If anyone *deacons* me, the Father will honor him.” In Matthew 20:26, we would hear him saying, “Whoever wants to be great, must be your *deacon*.” And in Matthew 23:11: “The greatest among you

will be your *deacon*.” On one hand, Jesus calls every church member “*to deacon*” (i.e. to serve) one another. But the NT makes it clear that sometimes the church will appoint *deacons* for the leadership coordination of non-Word ministry.

In Acts 6:1-7, which many consider to be the prototype of the role of *deacons*, the church appointed seven people of significant spiritual maturity and character to “*serve tables*” (v2), i.e. – oversee the massive ministry of care for the widows of the church in Jerusalem. This freed up the elders to focus on prayer and the ministry of the word (v4). We should be careful to maintain this distinction between the ministry of elders and deacons. Both elders and deacons should *serve* the church. In Acts 6, the seven “*deaconed*” tables so that the elders could give their attention to prayer and the “*deaconing*” of the word. Its highly instructive that same the root word is used for both offices.

We **believe** that qualified men and women¹² can fulfil the office of deacon. While the character qualifications of elders and deacons greatly overlap, the key difference is that elders must be “*able to teach*” God’s Word (1 Tim 3:2b; Tit 1:9).

Practically, we see this looking as follows:

1. **The nominations of deacons should be led by the elders.** This includes the definition of the leadership role and the evaluation of the potential candidate.
2. **The church membership should affirm that the nominated candidate meets the character qualifications given in Scripture.** Deacons must be qualified in characters (1 Tim 3:8-13) and of course ability to oversee key needs or ministries in the church.

¹¹ Dever, Mark and Leeman, Jonathan. *Baptist Foundations – Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*. B&H Publishing Group.

¹² We believe 1 Tim 3:11 teaches that both men and women can be deacons. See the church’s position paper on Men and Women in Ministry.

3. **Deacons are responsible to the elders and therefore to the church membership.** We do not read of a diaconate (a gathering of deacons) as a second leadership group in the church. The elders alone are responsible for governing the affairs of the church (1 Tim 5:17) while the deacons are responsible to the elders and therefore the entire congregation for their service.
4. **The office of deacon is not for everyone serving or for every leadership position.** It is for the leadership coordination of key needs or ministries that will remove the burden of responsibility from the elders and pastors so they may give “attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4).
5. **Growth Group Leaders are not deacons** because primarily this is word-based ministry. This does not mean that deacons cannot be involved in the word-based ministry. Stephen, who was appointed to serve tables in Acts 6:5, preaches the word in ch. 7.
6. **The appointment of deacons helps the church to know who is trusted and has authority to carry out leadership roles.** The mobilisation of God’s people in service leads to the spreading of God’s word (Acts 6:7).
7. **The term of a deacon is not perpetual** but will continue while the need continues. The elders will review the roles to deem whether the appointment of a deacon is still required.

Consequently, we believe that with the help of the Holy Spirit we should be a community in which the love and authority of Jesus are on display. This means that authority is not to be abused, but neither should it be dismissed. Indeed, it is essential for the peace, order and right conduct of the church (1 Cor 14:33; 1 Tim 3:15). As we are reminded in 2 Samuel, the right use of authority brings blessing to the people of God:

*When one rules over people in righteousness,
when he rules in the fear of God,
he is like the light of morning at sunrise
on a cloudless morning,
like the brightness after rain
that brings grass from the earth.
(2 Sam 23:3-4)*

FINAL THOUGHTS

Sadly, God’s intentions for authority have been marred by sin. Yet, through the Gospel we see that *authority* and *love* are not two separate things but rather two sides of the same coin. Jesus came into our world to use his authority to love and serve the church.