

## Acts 6:1–6 — Principles of Church Government

### Introduction

Last week, we looked at Acts 6:1-7 and saw how Luke’s account of the appointment of six Hellenistic Jews and one Gentile proselyte to positions of leadership in the Jerusalem church fits within—and even advances—the unfolding redemptive-historical narrative of Acts. That’s the main point of this passage and therefore that’s the primary way in which this passage should be read and preached. But there are secondary implications of this passage that we can say are also ultimately intended by the divine Author—and that perhaps were also in the mind of Luke.

**Acts 6:1–6** — Now in those days, while the disciples were multiplying, there was grumbling from the Hellenists directed toward the Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving [of food]. So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not pleasing [to God] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, select seven men from among you who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this need. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word.” And this word pleased the whole congregation, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they stood before the apostles, and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

### I. Leadership and authority in the church

What we want to focus in on, here, is the respective action taken by “the twelve,” on the one hand, and the “whole congregation of the disciples,” on the other hand. The “whole congregation of the disciples” is a reference to the whole church—to the whole assembly [*ekklesia*] of baptized believers. “The twelve,” on the other hand, is obviously a reference to the twelve apostles who were the leaders of the church. There’s a sense in which the apostles represent here the principle of authority and leadership in the church. In Acts 15, we see the apostles working together with the elders:

- Acts 15:2, 6 — [T]he brothers appointed Paul and Barnabas... to go up to Jerusalem to **the apostles and elders** concerning this issue... **Both the apostles and the elders** came together to look into this matter...

In 1 Peter 5, the Apostle Peter says that he is a “fellow elder” [*sympresbyteros*] with the elders to whom he’s writing (1 Pet. 5:1). Since the apostles couldn’t be present in all the churches, and since they would be prevented by death from continuing perpetually in any church, it was necessary that there be elders in every church to oversee and shepherd God’s flock. This explains why, in Acts 14, we see Paul and Barnabas appointing elders in every church (Acts 14:23). Paul wrote to Titus:

- Titus 1:5 — For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you...

Paul summarized the role of the elders in Acts chapter 20 when he said to the elders of the church in Ephesus:

- Acts 20:28 — “Be **on guard** for yourselves and for all the **flock**, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** [*episkopos*], to **shepherd** [*poimaino*] the **church** of God which He purchased with His own blood.”

The apostle Peter wrote using the same language:

- 1 Peter 5:1–3 — Therefore, I exhort the **elders** [*presbyteros*] among you, **as your fellow elder** [*sympresbyteros*] and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, **shepherd** [*poimaino*] the **flock** of God among you, **overseeing** [*episkopeo*] not under compulsion, but willingly, according to God...

In both of these passages, the concepts of “oversight” and “shepherding” are combined. Shepherding assumes the presence of authority (there’s no such thing as a shepherd with no authority over the sheep), and so authority in the church is always for the purpose of shepherding (feeding, guiding, guarding). Even the Greek word for “oversight” carries within it the basic meaning of “to care for or look after, with the implication of continuous responsibility” (Louw-Nida; Heb. 12:15; cf. *episkeptomai* [Mat. 25:43; Lk. 1:68, 78 Acts 15:14; Heb. 2:6; James 1:27]). But again, this responsibility “to look after, to take care of, to see to,” necessarily presupposes a real authority. One cannot exercise true oversight without authority. One cannot shepherd without authority. In his letter to Timothy, Paul speaks of “the elders who **lead** [*proistemi*] well” and says that they “are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor at preaching the word and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). Similarly, Paul exhorts the Thessalonians:

- 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 — But we ask of you, brothers, that you know those who labor among you, and **lead** [*proistemi*] you in the Lord and **admonish** [cf. 1 Cor. 4:14] you, and that you regard them very highly in love because of their work.

The Greek word for “lead” means “to be at the head of” (BDAG) and so it conveys, on the one hand, the idea of leading, guiding, and directing (going before). But this same Greek word also assumes the presence of authority in order to make this leading possible and effectual. Paul says in 1 Timothy 3:

- 1 Timothy 3:1–2, 4–5 — [I]f any man aspires to **the office of overseer** [*episcopus; (fem.); cf. Acts 1:20*], he desires a good work. An **overseer** [*episkopos (mas.)*], then, must be... **leading/guiding/managing/ruling** [*proistemi*] his own household well, having his children in **submission** [*hypotage*] with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to **lead/guide/manage/rule** [*proistemi*] his own household, how will he attend to [the needs; *epimeleomai*] of the church of God?

Notice how “overseeing” and “leading” are both in the service of “attending to the needs” of God’s church. But notice, also, how the corollary to “leading” is “submission” and “obedience” (cf. Louw-Nida; 2 Cor. 9:13; Gal. 2:5; 1 Tim. 2:11). So the writer of Hebrews exhorts his readers:

- Hebrews 13:17 — Obey [*peitho*] your leaders [*hegeomai*; cf. **Mat. 2:6**; **Acts 7:10**] and submit [*hypeiko*] to them—for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account...

We must not ignore the redemptive-historical uniqueness of the apostles' authority in the church. The apostles held the authority of a commission received directly from Christ while the authority of the elders is derived through the apostolic teaching. The apostles exercised an authority over all the churches (and still do, today, through the inspired apostolic writings of the New Testament) while elders hold authority only in the local church in which they serve and only for as long as they live and remain in office. And yet insofar as the apostles were also “fellow-elders,” and insofar as the apostles and the elders worked together in the church, and insofar as the need for elders arose because the apostles could not and would not always be present in person, we can say that there's a sense in which the apostles, here in Acts 6, represent for us the principle of authority and leadership in the church.

## **II. Congregational participation**

We're focusing, here, on the respective action taken by the leadership of the church, on the one hand, and the “whole congregation of the disciples,” on the other hand. So let's read again in Acts 6:

- Acts 6:2–5a — [T]he twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, “It is not pleasing [to God] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, select seven men from among you who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this need. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word.” And this word [*logos*; this plan of action; this proposal] pleased the whole congregation...

On the one hand, this was a *proposal* (a *recommendation*) insofar as even the apostles were not presuming to unilaterally impose these new leaders on the church. Notice how the apostles summoned the congregation of the disciples, explained their reasoning, and then called upon the congregation to select seven men from among themselves. Notice also how Luke tells us that “this word pleased the whole congregation.” Even though the authority of the apostles was real and God-given, it was not for the apostles to “force” submission (this wouldn't be true submission). Likewise, the apostles never exhorted the elders to see to it that the church submitted to and obeyed their leadership. Instead, they exhorted *the church* to honor and obey and submit voluntarily to their leaders (1 Thess. 5:12-13; 1 Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:17). On the one hand, then, this was a recommendation, insofar as even the apostles were not presuming to unilaterally impose this on the church. On the other hand, there's a sense in which this “recommendation” is also an “expectation.” This is so because of who the recommendation is made by—not just by any disciple, but by those who hold a position of real authority in the church. The imperative mood (“*select* from among you seven men”) doesn't necessarily indicate a unilateral “command,” but it does reflect, here, the presence of real authority and an expectation that the congregation “ought” to (and in a healthy situation *will*) confirm and act upon this “word.” This expectation, however, isn't ultimately grounded in the “bare” fact of authority, but in the demonstration of that which is “pleasing” in God's eyes.

- Acts 6:2–4 — “It is not pleasing [to God] for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables... select seven men from among you who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom... we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the service of the word.”

What do the apostles do? They summon the congregation, they explain their (“biblical”) rationale, and they make a carefully worded recommendation, expecting that the congregation ought to submit to their authority in this matter. But now notice what else the apostles do—and don’t do. They don’t select the seven men. Instead, they call upon the “congregation of the disciples” to do the selecting themselves—according to the criteria established by the apostles.

The apostles were not, themselves, the church, and therefore even the apostles could not speak *for* “the church.” They could speak for Christ, but not for the church. If the apostles were called to “speak” in leading, the congregation was also called to “speak” in voluntarily submitting. The submitting is to be just as active and purposeful and vocal a thing as the leading. In a truly healthy situation, apart from both the leaders and the “whole” congregation speaking (whether formally or informally), there will be a sense in which “the church” has not truly spoken. Notice what the apostles say:

- Acts 6:3 — “*Therefore, **brothers**, select [episkeptomai] seven men from among you who are well-attested, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom **we** may put in charge of this need.*”

And then notice how Luke describes the outcome of the matter:

- Acts 6:5–6 — And this word pleased the whole congregation, and they [the whole congregation] chose [eklegomai] Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they [the whole congregation] stood before the apostles, and after praying, they [the apostles] laid their hands on them.

While it was the whole congregation, then, that “selected” and “chose” these men, it was the apostles who approved this selection by “appointing” them with the laying on of hands. Paul wrote to Timothy:

- 1 Timothy 4:14 — Do not neglect the gift within you, which was given to you through prophetic utterance **with the laying on of hands by the council of elders** [*presbyterion/presbytery*; sing., neut.].

Remember the Scripture we read earlier:

- Acts 14:23 — And when [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed [*cheirotoneo*] elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

I don’t believe we’re meant to assume that Paul and Barnabas unilaterally selected, chose, *and* appointed these elders (ex officio). Instead, they appointed elders [cf. the laying on of hands] “for them” (*autois*) almost certainly after the congregation itself had selected and chosen from its

own midst those whom they recognized to be fitted and qualified for the office (according to the apostolic criteria). We assume the same scenario when Paul says to Titus:

- Titus 1:5 — For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint [*kathistemi*] elders in every city as I directed you...

We see in both of these passages that a local church can exist without elders (proving again that the elders are not the church and cannot speak for the church [*ex officio*]). But it's also clear from both these passages that a church without elders has not yet been fully organized ("set in order") according to the mind of Christ. In a new church plant, elders must be selected/chosen by the newly constituted church body and would then ideally be appointed by the elders of an already existing church or churches.) In a church with already existing elders, the congregation must select elders by nominating and voting, but this must not be done independently of the leading and authority of the elders.

We see this beautiful "synergy," then, between the leadership in the active exercise of authority and the congregation in the voluntary (and active) exercise of submission. If the elders are called to "speak" in leading, the church is called to "speak" in voluntarily submitting. The elders cannot speak for the church (*ex officio*). Instead, it's as the "whole" church actively submits in unity and oneness to the elders' leading that the church itself speaks. It's this same principle that appears to be at work in Acts 15.

- Acts 15:1–3a — Some men came down [to Antioch] from Judea and began teaching the brothers, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved." And when Paul and Barnabas had not a little dissension and debate with them, the brothers appointed/designated [*tasso*; cf. Mat. 28:16; Acts 13:48; Rom. 13:1] Paul and Barnabas and some others of them to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue. Therefore, being sent on their way **by the church** [by the *whole* church]...

In what sense were Paul and Barnabas sent on their way "by the church"? Not in the sense that the elders acted, "*ex officio*," independently of the church (the elders are not the church and the church is not the elders). But we must also not imagine the congregation acting independently of the elders. Instead, it was the church, acting together in unity and oneness under the leadership and authority of its elders, that sent Paul and Barnabas on their way. Luke tells us:

- Acts 15:4 — When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received **by the church** and the apostles and the elders...

In verse 12, Luke seems to indicate that it wasn't just the apostles and the elders who were present at the deliberations.

- Acts 15:12 — And **all the congregation** kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul...

And then notice how Luke relates the conclusion of the matter:

- Acts 15:22 — Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them... to send to Antioch...

Earlier in Acts, Luke said:

- Acts 11:22 — Now the news about [the Gentile converts at Antioch] reached the ears of **the church** at Jerusalem, and **they [the church]** sent Barnabas off to Antioch...

Similarly, Paul writes in 2 Corinthians 8:

- 2 Corinthians 8:18–19 — [W]e have sent along with [Titus] the brother [who] has... been appointed **by the churches** to travel with us in this gracious work...

Even at the Jerusalem council, then, where the apostles were all present, the apostles and elders didn't speak independently of the church; ultimately, it was the whole church—"the church" itself—that spoke in unity and oneness *in full submission to the leadership and authority* of the apostles and elders (cf. Acts 15:22-23; 16:4).

It's important to point out here that the congregation doesn't need to formally assent/submit to everything that the elders do. Our constitution wisely acknowledges that confirmation by the membership is not required for the elders to fulfill their biblical role of shepherding the flock, leading through example, teaching and exhorting, refuting those who contradict the truth, and in general, "managing the Church of God" (cf. 3.3.3.1.).

### **III. The power of the keys of the kingdom**

Apart from selecting and choosing its own leaders, where the church speaks the most powerfully is in its exercise of the "power of the keys." Jesus said to Peter:

- Matthew 16:18–19 — "[Y]ou are Peter [*petros*], and upon this rock [*petra*] I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it. I will give you the keys of the kingdom of heaven; and whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven."

Peter—with the rest of the apostles—possessed the "power of the keys" only insofar as it was upon the foundation of the apostles that Jesus said He would build His church (cf. Eph. 2:19-20). Ultimately, the "keys of the kingdom" were entrusted not to the apostles independently of the church, but to the apostles as members of and leaders of the church. This means that the keys of the kingdom were not lost when the apostles passed from the scene. Neither does their continuance require an apostolic succession in the chair of Peter. The keys of the kingdom were vested ultimately not in the leadership of the church (not even in the apostolic office), but in the church itself duly organized and functioning according to the mind of Christ. So Jesus says in Matthew 18:

- Matthew 18:15–18 — "Now if your brother sins, go and show him his fault, between you and him alone; if he listens to you, you have won your brother. But if he does not listen to you,

take one or two more with you, so that by the mouth of two or three witnesses every fact may be confirmed. And 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 the Gentile and the tax collector. Truly I say to you, whatever you bind on earth shall have been bound in heaven; and whatever you loose on earth shall have been loosed in heaven.”

What does this “telling it to the church” and the church speaking look like? Given the authority of the elders which has been entrusted to them for the sake of “leading” the flock (cf. Acts 20:28-31; Titus 1:9-11) we shouldn’t imagine that they’re not leading in this process—or that the church, in speaking, is not acting in submission to the elders. In the end, it’s not the elders who speak *for* the congregation [ex officio] and neither is it the congregation that speaks independently of the elders; rather, it’s the church as a whole that speaks in unity and oneness under the authority and leadership of its elders. The Apostle Paul addressed his first letter to the Corinthians:

- 1 Corinthians 1:2 (cf. 2 Cor. 1:1; Gal. 1:2; 1 Thess. 1:1; 2 Thess. 1:1; Phil. 1:1; Col. 1:2; Rom. 1:7; Eph. 1:1) — To **the church of God** which is at Corinth, to **those who have been sanctified in Christ Jesus, called as saints, with all who in every place call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ**, their Lord and ours.

Paul addressed this letter not to the elders of the church at Corinth, but to the whole church. It’s in this letter, then, that Paul deals with the issue of an unrepentant man guilty of a serious sin. He writes to the church:

- 1 Corinthians 5:4–5, 13 — [I]n the name of our Lord Jesus, **when you are assembled**, and I with you in spirit, with the power of our Lord Jesus, deliver such a one to Satan for the destruction of his flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord... **Remove the wicked man from among yourselves.**

In a properly ordered church functioning according to the mind of Christ, it will be the elders leading and initiating and it will be the church as a whole—in unity and oneness—that speaks with authority as it voluntarily acts in submission to the elders’ leading. We see, then, that this “submission” is by no means an empty “rubber-stamping” of whatever the elders say; rather, it’s the means by which the church exercises the power of “the keys of the kingdom.” Just as the congregation’s submission isn’t a “rubber-stamping” of whatever the elders say, so also the elders’ “recommendations” must not be seen as mere “suggestions.” To reject an elder recommendation is, in principle, to refuse to submit to the authority of the elders in leading the church. In saying this, we also remember that the elders cannot “force” submission. If they could, this “submission” would not be voluntary, and the church would not be speaking. This is confusing to many because in our political and cultural context a vote automatically communicates the idea of individual autonomy and majority rule. In the church, however, a vote ought to be the means of voluntary submission to the leadership. In exceptional cases, a “no” vote to an elder recommendation (and therefore a refusal to submit to the authority of the elders) may be necessary, but this must always be accompanied with a real fear and trembling and preceded by diligent communication with the elders. Similarly, the elders must never make

recommendations pertaining to the exercise of the power of the keys without a real fear and trembling and without careful and thorough communication with the congregation.

Now, if it's the church as a whole that must speak when the power of the keys is exercised "negatively" (in excluding), then it's also the church as a whole that must speak whenever the power of the keys is exercised "positively" (in restoring and/or including [welcoming into church membership]).

## **Conclusion**

The biblical pattern that we've described here is in contrast to the episcopal and presbyterian forms of church government, on the one hand, and all "democratic" forms of church government, on the other hand.

**Episcopalianism** "is the rule of the church by monarchical bishops. That is, one man may govern those under him (whether members or other elders), and he need not be chosen by the people to be their leader, but can be appointed by a higher agency. Authority thus rests in the one human priest at the top (a pope or archbishop), is then communicated to his subordinates, and extends from there over all of the congregations" (Bahnsen). We reject the episcopal form of church government because we believe it ultimately reduces "*the church*" to its leadership, and thus is unbiblical.

**Presbyterianism** affirms that the elders must be chosen by the people to be their leaders, but also holds to governing bodies called "presbyteries" and "general assemblies" that can exercise authority over the internal affairs of individual member congregations and their "sessions." Also, in Presbyterianism, the congregation does not participate formally in receiving or excluding members (etc.). We reject the presbyterian form of church government because it denies that the *full* authority of Christ and the *full* power of the keys has been *fully* entrusted to each local church duly organized and functioning according to the mind of Christ (cf. SP 4; LBCF 26.7). We reject the presbyterian form of church government because it denies the essential role of the congregation in exercising the power of the keys.

There are many forms of church government that go by the name "congregationalism" which amount to nothing more than "majority rule" or some form of democracy. One Presbyterian writer says:

"Congregationalism... is the rule of the church by every member... Authority now rests with *the many*... Technically speaking, for any given decision which the church may make, every member within the congregation has the same authority as every other; ruling boards [often the senior pastor and a deacon board] are simply an administrative convenience ([elected to represent and do the will of the congregation] whose decisions can be overthrown [vetoed with impunity] by the congregation as a whole)" (Bahnsen; OPC.org).

This modern, Americanized brand of "congregationalism" we reject as wholly unbiblical since it denies the real authority of elders as "under-shepherds" and therefore—in a sense—even the



authority of Christ Himself, the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet. 5:1-4). Historically, though, **Congregationalism** (Savoy Platform, 1658; LBCF, 1689) has carefully acknowledged both the real authority of the elders in shepherding, leading, and overseeing the church of God (SP 9, 11; LBCF 26.8-9) and the active role of the congregation in selecting/choosing its leaders (SP 11; LBCF 26.9) and in exercising the power of the keys in full and voluntary submission to the elders (SP 17-19). It's in this biblical model of the government of the church that we see most clearly the awesome privilege and responsibility of church membership and therefore the sinfulness of neglecting this privilege and responsibility. It's in this biblical model of the government of the church that we see most clearly the beautiful unity and oneness of the church and therefore the true evil of all insubordination and sowing seeds of division. It's in this biblical model of the government of the church that we see most clearly the true power of the keys as that power has been vested in the church even unto the end of the age.

Brothers and sisters: PRAY for your elders, that they will lead faithfully, “exercising oversight not under compulsion, but willingly, according to God; and not for dishonest gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to [them], but being examples to the flock” (1 Pet. 5:2-3). PRAY also for the congregation, that we will be in submission to our leaders as those who keep watch over our souls and will give an account (Heb. 13:17). Pray that we will be “diligent to keep the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (Eph. 4:3). PRAY that as a church, we will be not only organized but always functioning according to the mind of Christ—stewarding faithfully the keys of the kingdom. Just to hold these keys is, indeed, an awesome responsibility. Let us rejoice to know that God, having raised Jesus from the dead, has put all things in subjection under His feet, and given Him as “head over all things to THE CHURCH, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all” (Eph. 1:20-23).