



1

The New Testament's Witness to Congregational Authority Cont.

- Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5 | The Keys *without Elders*
- NT Occasional Letters – Most Often Addressed to *the Church*
- The *Eklessia* in Greek Thought
- **So, Where Does Authority Lie? A Summary List of Arguments for Congregationalism**
 - Final court of appeal in church discipline is the church, not only elders (Matt. 18:17)
 - The church can be the final court of appeal because it possesses and can exercise the keys with the pre-authorization of heaven, not just elders (18:18).
 - Jesus locates his authoritative presence in a gathering of believers—two or three minimum—not in a church sub-group or a group outside the church (Matt. 18:19).

2

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- There is no mention of bishops or elders in Matt. 16 or 18, the two chair texts for understanding the possession and exercise of the Keys.
- Paul invokes the language of being assembled together with the authority and presence of Christ when he charges the entire Corinthian church, not just the leadership, to publicly hand a man over to Satan (1 Cor. 5:4-5).
- Paul tells the entire congregation—not elders or bishops—at Corinth that they are responsible for making judgments on disputes over interpersonal wrongdoing inside the church (1 Cor. 5:12).
- Paul tells the Galatian churches, not their elders, that they are responsible for identifying and rebuking distortions of the Gospel, even if they come from himself or an angel (Gal. 1:6-9).
- Paul affirms that the decision made by “the majority”—not the elders—was sufficient to remove a man from membership in Corinth.

3

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- Churches can exist as key-wielding and exercising entities without elders (Acts 14:23; Tit. 1:5)
- Much of the New Testament is written to entire churches, not only the elders, with the expectation that the letters will be understood, identified as faithful, obeyed and that they will disfellowship those among them who do not heed the content of the letters (e.g., 2 Thess. 3:14-15)
- The Greek word “*ekklesia*” both in Jewish and first century Greek contexts understood an *ekklesia* to refer to a gathered body, with the Greek concept including the ability to shape decision-making through voting rights as citizens as opposed to merely enacting the rulings of a sovereign as subjects.

4

But... Who Cares?

- If a church doesn't have a theology of where authority lies at all, then they will **functionally** veer into either authoritarianism or individualism.
- If a church has a theology of final authority that places it in Tradition or Succession, then authority in the church will **functionally** stand over the word of God as its authoritative interpreter.
- If a church has an understanding of final authority that places authority beyond the congregation—either at the top or outside the local church altogether—then church members are **functionally** fired from their God-given responsibility to wield the Keys.
- If a church has an understanding of final authority that places authority in the entire congregation, then **functionally**, membership is understood an office—a vetted position with requirements and responsibilities. Such members are called to take ownership of their local church membership in the weightiest manner possible, while submitting to elders who lead them in a better understanding of the truths of the Gospel (“what”) and how to be people “who” live in light of it.

5

Clearing Up Misconceptions

- Congregationalism is Representative/Reflective Government
 - “In congregationalism, elders don't lead, they just walk in front. We need real authority and leadership.”
- Congregationalism Breeds Isolationist Autonomy
 - “In congregationalism, insular churches are disconnected from the larger body of Christ, have no accountability and can grow stagnant and sick in their own echo chamber.”
- Congregationalism Allows Unqualified Voices Undue Influence
 - “In Congregationalism, the authority and responsibility for protecting the bride of Christ and carrying out the mission of the church is largely placed in the hands of new believers, weak believers, immature believers and untrained believers.”

6