

Position Paper on Elder Led Congregationalism

Our supreme pattern for living is our Lord Jesus Christ “who came not to be served, but to serve and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Matt 20v28) The pattern of service that we see in Jesus, is to be the pattern for his people. True Christian leadership is not about status or position, but about service. This is a pattern that yields joy, and this is - in part - because our identity is not ultimately found in what *we do* (which can change), but in who *we are* in Christ (which is constant).

This paper was prompted by a change in our charitable status that required us to define a number of core convictions including our model of governance. In our SCIO (Scottish Charitable Incorporated Organisation) application we described Central’s governance as Elder Led Congregationalism. The main purpose of this paper is to explain what is meant by this. In explaining this, we need to keep before us the model taught and exemplified by Jesus who spoke with authority, but at the same time gave himself in humble, sacrificial service. Under-shepherds of Christ must do the same (1 Peter 5v3) with the whole church “submitting to one another out of reverence to Christ.” (Eph 5v21)

The model of church life given to us in the New Testament is truly radical and when applied with grace brings a healthy, prayerful engagement among the people of God. This model of church life is not hierarchical but functional with elders set apart by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20v28) and formally recognised by the church to lead and equip. In this model we find a balance between elders who lead and whole church discernment. Acts 6v1-7 sets an apostolic pattern in this.

The Congregation. One of the striking things about the New Testament is the way in which Christ and the Apostles address churches as a whole. In Matthew 18v17 Jesus applies a ‘Tell it to the church’ principle in a case of an unresolved personal issue. Paul in his epistles addresses – not just the elders of local churches – but whole congregations. In the narrow sense congregationalism is about how we operate in our church meetings, but the congregational principle is wider and involves a whole life approach: our attendance, preserving the Gospel, affirming members and discipline, discipleship, giving, evangelism and submission to biblical leadership etc.

In a Baptist church the highest court under Christ is not the Eldership – but the Church Meeting. It is in the Church Meeting that key decisions are made (membership, finance, doctrinal positions, etc). This may be by vote or consensus, providing the clear understanding that this process is not about democracy but discernment. What we seek is Christ’s rule in his church. Scripture has a high view of the competency of God’s people to take responsibility and operate in this way (Rom 15v14).

The Elders. The role of the elder is mainly one of teaching and oversight (1 Tim 3v1-7). Those set apart by the Holy Spirit and appointed to this office by the church are given an authority in trust by the local church (Heb. 13v17). The NT pattern is of a plurality of elders. Although authority is given to elders, God given authority is always in the model of our Lord, not for leading with compulsion but with compassion (1 Peter 5v1-5). The church meeting that appoints an elder, may also - seeking the mind of Christ - remove an elder. (1 Tim 5v19)

The Deacons. This short paper is primarily about elders and the congregation, but where do deacons fit in? The Diaconate is a vital component of the congregation. The role of a deacon is wide and covers all that is outside the remit of the elders in the administration of the church. The qualifications are high (1 Tim 3v8-13). It is not a *second chamber* like the House of Lords; but is a valued shaping part of what we do in presenting proposals to the church meeting using diaconal gifts of administration and problem-solving. Our pattern is not top-down but collaborative. The Diaconate lifts the administrative load and allows elders to get on with the equipping of the saints and prayer. (Acts 6v2)

In Ephesians 4 Paul writes of pastors and teachers (elders) as a gift to the church. But both offices (elder and deacon) are gifts to the church, as is every member of the church. This is evident in what Paul then goes on to describe: “speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” The purpose of pastors/teachers is not self-serving but Christ-serving in the building up of the church. As God’s people are equipped and released into service the whole of the body benefits.

Elder Led Congregationalism (and not Elder Rule where decisions are made by the Elders and communicated to the church) describes what we find in Scripture. Elders who recognise and honour the place of the Church Meeting and members who recognise and honour the role of elders is the biblical pattern we pursue. The role of such elders is not hierarchical but functional. The same functional principle holding for deacons and indeed every member of the Body of Christ.

The New Testament presents a beautiful balance of responsibilities between those who lead and godly communal discernment. When it works well, we see a reflection of the unity of Holy Trinity, Father, Son and Spirit, in the meeting of the church. The benefits of this are evident. We have seen a change in the manner of our church meetings. This is because of the better balance we now have so that “each part working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.” (Eph 4)