

Who Has Authority In The Congregation?

Who should rule the congregation? Why do you ask?

Red flags pop up when that question is raised. First, it arouses suspicion that the spirit of willing and unselfish cooperation with mutual respect is being strained or has died. Second, it indicates a misconception that God's congregation is an organized system with its chain of authority invested in certain persons.

Disciples can and should associate with others for mutual edification, so they can organize any cooperative activity to expedite their intention. They can do this without creating an authoritative organizational structure that in any manner binds demands on others. Cooperative agreement cannot become a rule of law. Any in the group may cooperate if they choose or leave that community of believers in favor of another group if they desire. There are no congregational jurisdictions. Each disciple is free.

Who has authority in a congregation? Some readily declare that no one has any authority because Christ is the head and only ruler of the church. Of course, we all know that Christ is king and head of the church but even he does not rule by law -- except the law (principle) of love. I have sat in countless meetings with brethren reaching decisions about activities in their local group, and I have never seen Jesus in any of those meetings. He is not present bodily in our congregations to direct their corporate activities, so he leaves that to the disciples. Their aim is to do the will of Christ as he revealed it in the Scriptures, but he does not decide for them whether to meet at a certain location, involve a quartet in the praise service, or appoint John Doe to be an elder. While praying for wisdom, disciples must make those decisions. But who among the disciples has authority in that area? Who should rule the congregation?

In our voluntary associations with other believers, no system of organization is prescribed in the Scriptures, hence none is essential. Did Lydia and her household have to appoint elders and deacons before God would recognize them as a community of his saved ones? We are not told whether such associations should be independent, autonomous, structured, or unstructured, but we are urged to be involved with others for the common good.

You may believe that elders have the authority to rule the congregation. None of the terms used relating to rule carry the concept of authoritative rule. *"Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching..."* (1 Tim. 5:17; also used in 3:4-5). In Verse 14, Paul had used the same word in instructing, *"So I would have younger widows to marry, bear children, rule their households..."* Vine defines this word translated "rule" as, "literally, 'to stand before,' hence, to lead, attend to." In no instance is it used to denote authoritative power.

Disciples were urged to, “*Obey your leaders and submit to them . . .*” (Heb. 13:17). The word “obey” used here is defined by Vine: “to be persuaded, to listen to, to obey.” Then he explains, “The obedience suggested is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion.” These leaders are not specified in the text, but some are identified beautifully by Paul: “*Now, brethren, you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints; I urge you to be subject to such men and to every fellow worker and laborer*” (1 Cor. 16:15-16). If disciples have this respectful attitude toward each other, they need no authoritative rulers. If they do not have this humble attitude toward each other, no authoritative rulers can be effective. Unity, peace, and cooperation cannot be coerced. Demanded conformity may produce slavery but cannot lead people to be of one heart, soul, and mind.

Granting for argument's sake that elders may rightly bind and loose, who gives specific persons in the church that authority? Is each man an elder? No, the congregation selects and authorizes persons to serve them but not to make laws. Otherwise, any authority claimed would be usurped. So any authority rests in the people -- the disciples themselves.

Such understanding leads us to conclude that congregations should be autonomous -- self-ruled. For some reason our people in the Church of Christ have rebelled at the thought that each group should be directed democratically, but that is the implication of autonomy. The group selects and empowers those who serve in functionary capacities, and the group retains the right to recall any one they have appointed. That is true autonomy.

In our civil democracy, no one has inherent authority, but that does not mean policemen, judges, senators, or other officials have no authority. By vote the people choose and authorize others to serve the common good. If the authority of an official -- even that of the President -- has not been given by the people, autonomy is lost. By our traditional methods in the church of selecting and dealing with representatives, we have followed only a modified, abridged democratic procedure. That has left the door open for some problematic abuses.

First, it has commonly led to a self-perpetuating body of elders who consider themselves rulers, or administrators, rather than shepherds. If the congregation thinks it best to unseat one or all of them, they generally find it difficult, painful, upsetting, and sometimes impossible. The autonomous solution is for the congregation to decide by secret ballot periodically their approval or recall.

Second, our misdirection in this area has permitted one of our frustrating roadblocks to progress -- minority rule, or objector rule. For some reason our people have always protested majority rule. The alternative to majority rule is minority rule! True autonomy is lost to minority rule! Just a small percent of those in a church can control its policies and practices by their vocal objections. Progress and constructive change are blocked by the minority dedicated to maintaining the status quo -- tradition, orthodoxy, "old paths," inherited patterns, mindless ruts, conditioned responses, sectarian attitudes. Even a

majority convicted of the urgent need for redirection is expected to sit on their convictions to please the objecting minority.

We do not want to brand all objectors as mean and selfish, though some are. Those want to enforce their convictions at the cost of overriding those of the majority in the group. Without appointment to authoritative function, they usurp the authority of the assembly. Some persons have a personality flaw that makes the "control freaks." Some control from the pulpit while others may use political maneuvering to control others.

We are not suggesting that we run roughshod over the weak. If the objector is a weak brother who would be caused to sin by violating his conviction, then that one should be taught and strengthened before change is implemented. If a person becomes stubborn and refuses enlightenment in the area of his conviction, then he needs to be instructed in the grace of "becoming all things to all men" for the good of all (See 1 Cor. 9:19-23).

Where irreconcilable convictions exist, persons may resort to separate assemblies. That would not be divisive unless disciples reject and condemn each other. In eagerness to assign blame, too often the majority will arrogantly accuse the minority of dividing the congregation.

What percentage of the vote would be counted as a majority? That would have to be decided by each group. We would not want this to be implemented without love and respect. Even an overwhelming majority would still consider the depth of conviction of the objectors and their longtime dedication to God and to the group. Where love and respect do not rule, majority rule will not solve all problems.

Our technical orientation has developed the "scruple mentality." We would do well to begin emphasizing the unity of believers rather than the unity of scruples (Rom. 14).

Implementation of majority rule by ballot will not prevent or solve all problems, but it will preserve congregational autonomy wherein the church has the right of selection and recall of its servants.

For other related thoughts, see *Free In Christ*, Chapters 22, 23, and 24.

(Cecil Hook; August 2003) []