

Cornerstone Church

Principals of Governance

How we operate.

Members, Elders, & Deacons

*Philippians 1:1-2 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all **the saints** in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with **the overseers** and **deacons**.² Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.*

Three groups are mentioned – the saints, the overseers and the deacons. Paul assumes that collaboration between these groups made gospel partnership possible. God has given the church a great commission to embrace and obey, but he has also provided organizational structure through which the commission can be accomplished. There is an order to church life that is blessed by God for his multiplication mission. Paul instructs Titus, “Put what remained into *order*, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). This order includes: saints, elders, and deacons.

Paul in Romans 12 and 1Corinthians14 teaches us the interdependent nature of the church. Each part needs each other and has an important role to play. When these roles work in sync with one another it is a beautiful display of God’s wisdom. There will always be the danger of forcing pieces into the puzzle where they do not fit and neglecting other pieces altogether. Pastors/Elders oversee and lead the church. Deacons serve and to mobilize the church for service. Staff provides the direction. Members carry out the work of the ministry. Neglect or misunderstanding of any of these roles will affect the whole. But, when they are pieced together according to God’s design, the word of God increases and disciples are multiplied to the glory of God.

The Saints

Every local church is fundamentally made up of saints – those whom God has made holy by his grace through faith in Jesus. Saints are given a new identity in Christ, and they band together to carry out a new mission. In Ephesians 4:12, Paul explains that God has given spiritual leaders not to *do* the work of the ministry *for* the saints, but to *equip* the saints *for* the work of the ministry of building up one another.

Every individual saint, therefore, is responsible for building up other saints who will proclaim Christ according to their unique gifting and influence. Paul writes, “For as in one body we have many members and the members don’t all have the same function, so we, though many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another.” (Rom. 12:4-5). Saints are edified, the world is evangelized, and God is glorified through a diverse interconnected people united by one mission. Without the saints of Philippi giving, praying, and discipling, the Philippian church could not have maintained their own ministry to Philippi, much less a healthy gospel partnership with Paul in Rome. ***Church ministry should be an every-member-ministry.***

The Elders

All organizations of people need leadership. By God's grace, he designed this role for men who are particularly affirmed, gifted, and qualified to serve as pastors – also referred to as overseers, elders, or shepherds. (Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Pt. 5:1)

As overseers, the Elders watch over the spiritual needs and direction of the whole congregation. As shepherds, they protect the congregation from false teaching, disobedience, and corruption. They feed the sheep regularly with the God's Word and they lead them into green pastures of understanding, obedience, and rest. As elders, they provide God-given wisdom based not upon personal experience but on the Scriptures.

It was Paul's missional practice to not only evangelize the lost in a city and gather them into churches, but to then appoint elders over those churches.

*“And when they had **appointed elders for them in every church**, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Acts 14:23)*

Elders, therefore, are essential gifts to God's church. The normal pattern of the New Testament suggests that local churches have a plurality of elders, meaning that a team of qualified elders are accountable to one another and to the congregation. Together, with the affirmation of the congregation, they make major doctrinal, methodological, and directional decisions. While the congregation may have the final vote on matters of church discipline, budgeting, and other large decisions, the elders collaboratively lead the congregation through these issues. They bear a great deal of responsibility, authority, and influence while holding one another accountable and leaning on one another's wisdom.

The Deacons and Deaconesses

God's people are commanded to be salt and light in the world. (Matt. 5:13-16) We are called to care for the impoverished, the helpless, and the hurting. (Js. 1:26-27). We should:

- Consider ministries that care for the poor, provide counsel for the broken, evangelize the lost, and disciple children and youth.²
- Consider the need for church planting and church revitalization.
- Consider the logistical details that are involved with sending missionaries and maintaining gospel partnerships among people groups that have no access to the message of Jesus.

The work is overwhelming, and this mentions only a few areas of ministry.

In Acts 6, the widow care ministry was overwhelming the apostles. Under the influence of the Holy Spirit they appointed spiritually qualified individuals to lead the widow care ministry. This laid the groundwork for deacon ministry. As a result, the word of God increased, and the disciples multiplied. (Acts 6:7) Deacons are essential to the mission of multiplication. They are a gift for pastors who could potentially be overwhelmed and distracted. Likewise, they are a gift for members who desperately need both the faithful teaching of God's Word delivered every week and avenues of service coordinated and carried out.

Elders and Pastors alone are incapable of carrying out all these ministries without forsaking their primary role of leading and teaching the Word of God. The church needs people that are uniquely gifted and specially called to certain aspects of service. This is precisely why God gifted the church with both the offices of elder and deacon. Deacons and Deaconesses are the officially recognized assistants and supporters of the elders leading out in areas of service.

Congregationally Authorized, Elder, Deacon/Deaconess, Staff

***Titus 1:5** This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might **put what remained into order, and appoint elders** in every town as I directed you*

***Acts 14:23** And when they **had appointed elders** for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

Here are some principles for church organization that we have built our church policy around.

As followers of Jesus Christ, we affirm that He is the head of the church – his body (Col.1:18, Eph,5:23) and that, as members, we are obligated, individually and collectively, to submit ourselves to His leadership as God causes His church to grow and build itself up in love (Eph.4:15-16, Col.2:19). As members of Christ’s body, we are also commanded by God to use our gifts under His leadership to serve one another for the common good and for His glory (I Cor.12:7, I Peter 4:10-11). In doing so, God makes us even more fruitful as a body in reaching a lost world for Jesus Christ (Matt.28:19).

We hold that the visible church of Jesus Christ is the local congregation of baptized believers who are associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel, observing the two ordinances of Christ, committed to His teachings, exercising the gifts, rights and privileges invested in them by his Word.

Congregational

The New Testament portrays the congregation of local church members as having authority in circumstances concerning church discipline (Matthew 18:15-17; 1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:6-8) and in the election of church officers (Acts 6:3-5). Many of the letters of the New Testament were written to churches for the confrontation of certain issues, thus, by implication, the weight of responsibility falls on the collection of members at large. This is what is meant by congregational. Church members are committed to and responsible for the health, growth, and ministry of the local church. At the same time, churches are clearly commanded in Hebrews 13:17, “*obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you.*” This Scripture points to an organizational structure in which church members follow the leading of certain leadership.

Elders

All authority in the church comes from the resurrected Jesus Christ and is exercised on his behalf. According to the Scriptures, Jesus is the “Chief Shepherd” of God’s church (1 Peter 5:1-5), but he has invested the authority and responsibility of church leadership to “under-shepherds”. These under-shepherds are referred to in the scriptures with three interchangeable words: elder, pastor, and overseer. In Paul’s farewell to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, all three words occur simultaneously referring to the same group of men. You can also find all three words used interchangeably in Peter’s instruction to elders in 1 Peter 5.

Elder is not a term that signifies a particular physical age (1 Timothy 4:11-16), rather it conveys a certain spiritual maturity. Elders/Pastors/Overseers must be men who meet the Biblical qualifications as outlined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. While no man is perfect, the descriptions found in these two passages of Scripture should consistently characterize any potential elder. In addition, each elder must have the ability to verbally communicate sound Christian doctrine to the church. He must be able to both recognize and refute false doctrine that endangers the church. These qualifications require deep Biblical understanding and the ability to convey that understanding to the congregation with clarity and fruitfulness.

What Do Elders Do?

The responsibility of an elder is first and foremost to devote himself to the ministries of prayer and teaching the Word of God as portrayed in the pattern of the apostles in Acts 6:1-7. The major qualification that differentiates the office of elder from the office of deacon is the requirement that an elder must be able to teach (1 Timothy 3:2; 4:11-16; 2 Timothy 4:1-5; Titus 1:9; 2:1). This qualification is in place because elders are primarily responsible for the doctrinal integrity of the church. They lead the church in Biblical teaching on various platforms and through various means including corporate preaching, small group teaching, and discipleship of individuals. They hold one another accountable in matters of doctrinal integrity and they protect the church’s membership from false teaching. Elders make decisions together regarding the future of the church based upon the teaching of the Bible and the leading of the Spirit.

Elders are also responsible for the ministry of shepherding. They pay close attention to themselves and to all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers. They care for God’s church (Acts 20:7-32). This shepherding involves the exercise of oversight that is willing, eager, and clothed with humility (1 Peter 5:1-5). Pastors lead by example in their disciple-making of the congregation through modeling Christ-like character, engaging in pastoral care, counseling, and carrying out Biblical church discipline. They are ultimately responsible for equipping the saints for the work of the ministry and for building up the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Plurality

Though there may be circumstances in which a church is led by only one elder, the goal for that elder and the congregation should be a movement toward a plurality of elders – multiple men qualified and called to pastor a local church together. Although singular pastors have been common for many churches in the last century, a plurality of elders appears to be the norm for congregations addressed in the New Testament. (Acts 14:23; 15:22-23; 20:17; 1 Peter 5:1; James 5:14) Both Timothy and Titus were instructed to appoint multiple elders in each local church. (2 Timothy 2:2; Titus 1:5-9) Multiple

elders leading a congregation together is both Biblical and practical. A plurality of elders/pastors, both paid and volunteer, share the load of shepherding, teaching, and overseeing. With their joint leadership there is strength in a plurality of perspective, wisdom, and accountability.

What about pastoral leadership?

The role of “Lead Pastor” or “Senior Pastor” cannot be explicitly sighted in Biblical texts, but it is perhaps inferred that particular Elders did function in a leadership position that was unique to the others in their labor of preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17-18). Paul’s pastoral writings (1, 2 Timothy and Titus) imply that both Titus and Timothy served unique leadership roles in their churches. In the exercise of elder/pastoral plurality within the church, there may be a certain pastor or pastors that are paid by the church so that they can give their lives fully to the work of pastoring. One man may be labeled as Pastor, but he functions as a chief among equals. He may have more responsibility, but he does not wield more authority than his fellow elders. It is possible that a lead pastor might have more influence among church members because he teaches more often than the other pastors and is more immersed in the workday in and day out, but a pastor in this position nonetheless submits to his fellow elders and affirms their leadership in the local church as equally valuable and authoritative.

Staff

While not explicitly called for in the Word, we believe that we are free to equip our church with pastoral and non-pastoral staff members to more effectively direct and carry out the everyday work of the church’s ministries. These individuals are defined as paid employees of the church. Each staff member fulfills specific roles in the church established and assigned by the Elders. Staff members given leadership roles provide vital daily direction and guidance to other ministry leaders and members of the congregation.

Deacon/Deaconess

The Scripture teaches that deacons “lead by serving” (Acts 6:1-6). The qualifications for elders and deacons are similar regarding character (1 Timothy 3:8, 11), but differ in aptitude. The elders are “able to teach” while the deacons are to be capable and proved as servants. In our church we elect the Deacons, and the Elders appoint Deaconesses. The Deacons/Deaconesses are not a second executive or legislative body but are a group of servants, are responsible to help the elders by facilitating practical ministry in the church body. In their supportive roles, they may coordinate various ministries that relate to the practical needs of the congregation. Under the direction of the elders, the deacons/deaconess may also help in the shepherding of the saints, assist the Pastors at Communion and baptismal services, and perform other functions as assigned by the elders.