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ELC: JX's Discipleship Programme

Faced with the twin struggles of secularism from outside the church, and liberalism from inside the church, evangelicals are often tempted to downplay ecclesiological differences. "If we want to reach the world for Christ," the argument goes, "we need to set aside denominational differences and focus squarely on the gospel which unites us." Perhaps you've heard that argument before. Somehow, giving attention to ecclesiology is *opposed* to the church's task of making disciples.

In this article, I want to argue the opposite. Rather that hindering the church's mission, biblical polity serves churches as they seek to fulfil the Great Commission. Specifically, when a local church is led by elders and governed by its membership it is best placed to evangelise the lost and disciple the converted. Instead of being irrelevant to a church's disciple-making work, this polity offers a God-ordained framework within which our work takes place.

The polity I'm referring to is called elder-led congregationalism, and it is Jesus's discipleship programme.

The goal of this piece is not to provide a full-orbed defence of elder-led congregationalism. Rather, in this article, I'd like to do just three things: define elder-led congregationalism; explain why it is best-placed for disciple-making; and address a common objection.

What is ELC?

So, what is elder-led congregationalism? In short, it is a biblical partnership between a church's eldership and its membership. Under Christ, a local church's eldership and membership possess complementary domains of authority that equip them to make disciples. That may sound abstract, but the reality is surprisingly practical. Let's break it down into its two parts.

First, Christ has granted church members the authority to perform the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper.[1] When, for example, someone is baptized, the action is not merely performed by the pastor standing in the pool, but by the whole church. Through baptism, a congregation affirms the validity of someone's profession of faith and initiates a covenant relationship of mutual support and accountability. In effect, the membership says, "yes, you're a Christian too, let's help each other to live as faithful disciples!" Through baptism, a church speaks.

Although baptism is a one-off event, churches continually affirm each other's faith and covenant promises through the Lord's Supper. When Christians eat the bread and drink the wine, they not only look backward to Christ's death, and forward to his return, but also outward to the other members they partner with in their discipleship (see esp. 1 Cor 10:17). Baptism and the Lord's Supper are collective acts through which a church renders judgements on what the gospel is

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[1] In this section, I use the terms "membership," "congregation," and "church" interchangeably. By these terms, I mean the individuals a church affirms to be a genuine Christian through the ordinances of baptism and the Lord's Supper. In a sense, the membership *is* the church, everyone else, whether it's their first time visiting, or they've attended for years, is a guest.

and who represents that gospel. Through the ordinances, churches draw boundaries between the true gospel and false gospels, between true gospel people and pseudo-gospel people. The freedom for a church to draw these lines encapsulates its domain of authority.

The idea that the whole membership makes gospel judgements is supported by the New Testament. In Matthew 18:15-20, Jesus states that if someone claims to be a Christian, yet refuses to repent of known sin, finally the church should treat him as an unbeliever. Similarly, in 1 Corinthians 5, Paul instructs the assembled church to remove a man who claims to be a Christian yet lives in unrepentant sexual sin.

These passages may seem like a strange defense for the church's authority to act through the ordinances, but these two examples describe the photo-negative of the ordinances. When a church decides to treat someone like an unbeliever, that verdict is the mirror image of the ordinances' affirmation. In both passages, the authority to draw boundaries is given not to the elders, but to the whole church.[2]

In addition to the authority given to members, Christ has also granted elders a distinct authority to equip the membership through public Word ministry. Drawing boundaries between true and false gospel people and professions is not always straightforward. Some are well-equipped to make these decisions while others require more guidance. Elders teach their membership how to think biblically about the gospel so that they can perform their role well.

The elders' role isn't limited to equipping members to answer gospel questions, however. Elders also equip them for the work of ministry so that the church grows in maturity (Eph 4:11-13). That's a powerful idea. It's not merely the pastors or church staff who do ministry, it's the whole church. Elders equip the members by teaching the Bible so that members can better minister to others. Spirit-empowered word ministry is the life-giving sustenance that springs all members into action. When elders teach, members act.

Finally, elders should lead the church in how they use the keys. Typically, the elders should lead in bringing new members into the church as well as in removing members. Paul's own work in 1 Corinthians 5 is illustrative. In verse 3, he declares his judgement. Then in verse 12, he calls the church to make this same judgement. In other words, the gathered church possesses the authority to guard the gospel. Yet it's the elders who lead them in that work.

Together, these domains of authority mean that churches are both led by the elders and governed by the congregation, hence, elder-led congregationalism. But why is this polity structure so helpful for the church's task of making disciples? Here are two reasons.

1. <u>ELC Trains All Members to Take Responsibility for the Spiritual Wellbeing of Other Members</u>

During my time at Third Avenue Baptist church, I noticed an interesting pattern. New members often joined from a church that didn't practice elder-led congregationalism. At first, these members found it strange that Third Avenue voted on people joining, transferring, and, on occasion, receiving discipline. For some, the votes felt perfunctory. Month after month, the

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[2] For more on this see Jonathan Leeman's *Understanding the Congregation's Authority*.

membership would rattle through dozens of transfers and additions—virtually always voting with unanimity.

So how did this help the membership? Wasn't it just "rubber-stamping"? No. Every vote was like a runner taking another stride. Rarely does an experienced runner trip, yet each stride strengthens them for future races. Every time members voted, they trained their congregational muscles.

Sometimes members who were initially bewildered by the voting process later demonstrated that their congregational muscles had strengthened. Perhaps someone was transferring to another church and the person would ask, "do we know whether the church they're joining preaches the true gospel?" Previously the inquirer had attended a church where they took no responsibility for outgoing members, but now, having strengthened their congregational muscles, they're looking out for the outgoing member. The questioner recognises that to transfer the outgoing member to a church which preaches a false gospel would be to lie to them. It would be saying that the church which preaches a false gospel is, in fact, a true church. The person risks embarrassment to protect the outgoing member from spiritual harm. That's what elder-led congregationalism does. Over time, it teaches members that the spiritual wellbeing of others is not merely the responsibility of the pastors, but is also their responsibility.

Just as a workout programme consists of a series of exercises to build strength, so elder-led congregationalism transforms the warp and woof of church life into a spiritual workout that trains every member to take responsibility for the spiritual good of others.

2. ELC Equips Members to Minister to Other Members

The second reason why elder-led congregationalism fuels discipleship is because it gives "on the job" training. Ephesians 4:11-13 states that shepherds and teachers exist not only to do ministry themselves, but to equip *all the saints* for the work of ministry. Imagine being in a congregational church that lacks elders. It would be organized chaos. Without leadership, the congregation is forced to make every decision collectively. Members' time and attention is taken up with the colour of the carpets and whether to purchase a new photocopier while the person living in unrepentant sin goes unaddressed. The preparation which elders ordinarily do before members' meetings is now done in the spur of the moment. Conversations are dominated by the most forceful personality as members are swamped by minor decisions while important issues are crowded out. A church without elders is like a ship without a rudder.

Elder-led congregationalism supports disciple-making because it both empowers *and* equips members for ministry. Without congregational authority, members lack responsibility, without elders, they lack direction. Our churches need both.

What about Other churches?

You might object, "If elder-led congregationalism is so important, why are there so many churches with different polity structures that are effective at making disciples?" Let me sketch three brief responses.

First, it's important to see that not only does biblical polity support discipleship, but is itself *part* of discipleship. Consider, for example, Jesus's instructions in Matthew 18:15-20. Jesus states that if someone commits a known sin yet refuses to repent, the church should eventually treat him like an unbeliever (i.e. excommunicate). As such, since obedience to Jesus's commands is essential to discipleship, then for a church to disregard these instructions and instead hand the process over to the elders (or another body) would disregard Jesus's command. In other words, biblical polity is not just about finding a structure that works, but one that obeys Jesus. Polity not only supports discipleship, it *is* discipleship.

Second, many churches without elder-led congregationalism are effective at making disciples because polity is not the only load-bearing factor. A culture of meaningful relationships, gifted Bible teachers, and regular evangelism all feed into how well churches make disciples. Any church with John Piper in the pulpit would benefit from his ministry, yet a church with elder-led congregationalism will extend his impact further. When members develop their sense of responsibility for others, "from the front" ministry reverberates through the church body as members speak the same truths to one another in everyday life. Elder-led congregationalism amplifies the good effects of other factors.

Third, consider the difference elder-led congregationalism makes when things go wrong. Many churches are good at discipling when there's unity, but when there's sin and scandal, polity makes a difference. Polity affects how swiftly a church recovers after sin bombs detonate. Elder-led congregationalism keeps the elders accountable to the congregation while allowing them to shepherd the membership through hard decisions. Other polity structures either reduce accountability or remove the guidance and shielding needed during those seasons.

Conclusion

Elder-led congregationalism is not a silver bullet to church success, but it is Christ's design for his church. When we rightly implement this governing structure, we walk in obedience to Christ and aid our efforts to make disciples. If you're a church member your church has a polity too. Does your polity honor Christ by seeking to walk in obedience to his instructions? Does it aid every member by equipping the saints for ministry? These are the instincts that elder-led congregationalism helps to cultivate in a church. After all, it is Jesus's discipleship programme.