

Northbrook Baptist Church

Constitution Review Committee Report Church Governance Theological Statement

December 2008

The Constitution Review Committee has reviewed and studied numerous passages of Scripture to try to understand and summarize what the Bible says about church governance. The points below set out the Committee's agreed-upon understanding of much of what the Bible says on the issue of how a Christian church should organize itself and how decisions should be made within the church. The Committee agrees that revisions to Northbrook Baptist Church's constitution and bylaws are necessary in light of the biblical principles, teachings, and examples summarized below. Therefore, the Committee intends to continue its work by discussing and recommending changes to the church's constitution and bylaws consistent with this understanding of the Bible. The Committee welcomes comments, including any recommended edits to this theological summary and thoughts on practically applying these principles. The Committee prefers to receive comments in writing, either by email or letter, so that the comments can be considered by the Committee as a whole. As the Committee continues its work, it asks for your prayers for wisdom in knowing how to implement these biblical principles at Northbrook Baptist Church.

Local Church

1. Definition. A local Christian church is the clearly defined community of God's people who have repented of their sins and believed in the Lord Jesus Christ, who have professed their repentance and belief through baptism and evidenced it in their lives, and who have agreed to assemble regularly to live out their common faith as they hear God's Word taught, baptize new believers, take the Lord's Supper, sing praises to God, pray, work to spread and share the Gospel, encourage one another in mutual accountability, practice and submit to church discipline, and exercise the gifts of the Holy Spirit for the strengthening of the body.

Membership

1. Definition. Church membership is (a) an individual believer's public statement that he affirms and commits to the faith and practice of a local church and promises to join actively with that body, and (b) the local church's public statement that, based upon evidences of repentance and faith, it holds out the person as a believer and that it accepts this person into Christian fellowship.

2. The Bible teaches that churches are to distinguish between those inside the church and those outside the church. For example, in 1 Corinthians 5:1-2, Paul says to the Corinthian church, *"It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans . . . Let him who has done this be removed from among you."* Likewise, in verses 11-13, Paul tells the Corinthian church *"not to associate with anyone who bears the name of brother if he is guilty of sexual immorality or greed, or is an idolater, reviler, drunkard, or swindler-not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge? God judges those outside. Purge the evil person from among you."* See also 2 Corinthians 2:6 (referring to *"the majority"* of the church) and 6:14 (commanding the church to *"not be unequally yoked with unbelievers"*).
3. The Bible teaches that church members should be committed to the entire church body. See, e.g., John 13:35, 1 Corinthians 3, James 2:1-9, 1 John 4:20. See also references throughout the New Testament to the church as a building, body, and household in which each part or member is vital to the health of the whole.
4. The Bible gives several examples of a church's need to keep track of its members. See, e.g., Matthew 18:17 (instructing that a member in unrepentant sin who refuses to repent after being confronted by the church as a whole is to be excluded from fellowship/membership), 1 Corinthians 5 (distinguishing between those inside and outside the church), 2 Corinthians 2:5-11 (urging the church to take back into fellowship/membership a man who has repented after being disciplined by the church), and 1 Timothy 5:9 (showing that the church kept a list of its widows and by implication its members).
5. The Bible teaches that there are requirements for becoming a member of a Christian church. Those requirements include being baptized as a believer, **after** a genuine and credible profession of repentance and belief. See, e.g., Acts 2:41-42, Matthew 28, Colossians 2. Consistent with the New Testament and our Statement of Faith, such baptism should be by immersion of a believer in the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit.
6. The Bible teaches that Christians are to be involved in specific ways as members of a local Christian church. Those expectations include, but are not limited to, regular attendance, Hebrews 10:25; regular and cheerful support/giving, 2 Corinthians 8 and 9, Psalm 24:1, and Acts 4:32-37; loving other Christian brothers and sisters in the church, John 13:35 and 1 John 4:20; participation in the Lord's Supper, Acts 2:41-42 and 1 Corinthians 11:23-26; exercising a member's gifts for the benefit of the local church, 1 Corinthians 12:4-11 and 14:12 and Ephesians 4:12-13; and devotion to learning the Bible, fellowship with other members, breaking of bread, and prayers, Acts 2:41-42.

Congregationalism

1. Definition. Congregationalism is the biblical principle that the final human authority under Christ over an individual church rests with the congregation -not the pastor, not the elders, not the deacons, not a trustee board, not a denomination or denominational leader, and not any other human authority.
2. Nature of congregational authority. The Bible specifically gives the congregation as a whole the final decision-making authority in several areas. Those areas include doctrine, discipline, membership, disputes, and selection of leaders/representatives.
 - a. Doctrine. In Galatians 1:2 and 1:6-9, Paul places upon the congregation as a whole the ultimate responsibility to judge whether the message being preached in the church is the true Gospel or is contrary to the true Gospel preached by Paul. In 1 Timothy 3:15, Paul explains that the *"household of God, which is the church of the living God, [is to be] a pillar and buttress of truth."* In 2 Timothy 4:3-4, Paul tells Timothy that the time will come when people (i.e., churches) *"will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own passions, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander off into myths."* In this way, Paul is holding the entire church accountable if they allow such false teachers. Finally, nearly all of the New Testament letters are written to churches as a whole -not just their leaders -instructing the whole church on fundamental matters of Christian doctrine, practice, and responsibilities.
 - b. Discipline. In Matthew 18:15-17, Jesus says that the last step in disciplining an unrepentant church member who has sinned against another church member is to take the matter to the church as a whole. Likewise, in 1 Corinthians 1:2 and 5:1-13, the entire church is ultimately held responsible for not confronting the immorality of another member in the church. In fact, we know from 2 Corinthians 2:6-8 that *"the majority"* of the Corinthian church did in fact administer discipline to (i.e., punished) one of its members.
 - c. Membership. In 2 Corinthians 2:6-8, after the majority of the Corinthian church had administered discipline against one of its members, Paul encourages the entire church to welcome the man back into its fellowship (i.e., membership) after he had repented. Paul does not make the decision for the church. Instead, in 2 Corinthians 2:10, he recommends a course of action but leaves to the church itself the final decision on allowing the person back into its fellowship.

- d. Disputes. In 1 Corinthians 1:1-4, Paul takes the Corinthian church to task for allowing those outside the church (unbelievers) to judge/resolve personal disputes among those inside the church (believers). Instead, he places responsibility on the church as a whole for settling disputes between those inside the church. Resting the final human authority and responsibility over disputes with the congregation as a whole is also seen in Acts 6:1-6, where in order to resolve a dispute between two factions within the church the whole church selects deacons to help serve the widows of the congregation, and Matthew 18:15-17, where Jesus gives final authority to the whole church to resolve a particular kind of dispute---dealing with the sin of one member against another member.
 - e. Selection of leaders/representatives. The congregation as a whole selects its leaders and representatives in the following passages: Acts 6:1-6 (church selected its deacons), Acts 11:22 (Jerusalem church sent Barnabas as missionary to Antioch), Acts 15:2-4 (Antioch church sent representatives to Jerusalem to discuss doctrinal error), 1 Corinthians 16:1-4 (Corinthian church appointed representatives to carry gifts to Jerusalem for Christians in need), and 2 Timothy 4:2-3 (Paul assumes the church selects its own preachers/teachers and should remove those who are not sound teachers).
3. Congregationalism does not mean that every decision in the church needs to or should be made by the church as a whole. Such a view is contradicted by Hebrews 13:17, which commands Christians to *"[o]bey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account."* The command to obey and submit to church leaders necessarily means that those leaders have a certain amount of authority to make particular decisions that are to be followed by the church and its members unless contrary to the Word of God. In many instances, there may be much wisdom in including the congregation as a whole in the decision-making process, even if church leaders are given the final authority over making particular decisions. For example, church leaders can include the congregation in decision-making by giving reports to the congregation about matters that are under consideration, asking for input or recommendations in making such decisions, and/or holding discussions with the congregation about certain matters.

Elders

1. The Bible uses the terms elders, overseers, and pastors interchangeably to refer to the same local church office. See, e.g., Acts 20:17-28.
2. The Bible gives several responsibilities to elders in a local church. The Bible passages that speak most directly to this point and the responsibilities they set out include the following:
 - Acts 16:4 (elder responsibilities include "decision-making");
 - Acts 20:28 (elder responsibilities include caring for the entire congregation, caring for the church of God, protecting the church/members from spiritual attack, protecting the church/members from twisted [untruthful, contrary to Gospel or Scripture] speech, admonishing the congregation when and where necessary by staying alert, helping the spiritually weak, remembering the words of Jesus that it is better to give than to receive as other elder responsibilities are carried out);
 - 1 Timothy 3:1 (elder responsibilities include being hospitable, teaching, and managing the household of God);
 - 1 Timothy 5:17 (elder responsibilities include ruling/leading/directing the affairs of the church; preaching and teaching are also part of their duties);
 - Titus 1:7-9 (elder responsibilities include being God's steward / trustee / manager [includes financial and supervisory], being hospitable, giving instruction in sound doctrine, and rebuking those who contradict God's Word);
 - Hebrews 13:7 (elder responsibilities include keeping watch over the soul of each church member);
 - James 5:14 (elder responsibilities include, when called upon, praying for the sick and anointing the sick with oil); and
 - 1 Peter 5:4 (elder responsibilities include shepherding the congregation, exercising oversight of the church/congregation, and being an example to the church/church members).
3. Elders should be approved/voted upon by the congregation as a whole. In Acts 6:1-6, the entire church (*"the full number of the disciples"*) selected deacons. If the congregation is given the responsibility of selecting its deacons, then by implication it seems that the congregation should also select its elders by a similar procedure. The use of the word "appoint" in Titus 1:5 (Paul directing Titus to *"put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town"*) and Acts 14:23 (*"And when [Paul and Barnabas] had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord"*), if understood to mean "select," would conflict with the principle of congregational selection of its church leaders. However, when read in conjunction with Acts 6:3, which states *"Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty"* and Acts 6:5-6, it appears that the word

"appoint" means something more like what we would understand to mean "ordain." In other words, the use of the term "appoint" in these passages is better understood to mean a public commissioning of people for specific church ministry. Finally, the selection of elders by those outside a local congregation also would seem to conflict with the biblical principle resting the final authority over a local church with the members of the local church itself, rather than in some outside individual or group.

4. The Bible clearly spells out specific qualifications for elders in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-9, though the lists of qualifications in these passages are not necessarily exhaustive.
 - a. The Committee believes "*husband of one wife*" is best translated and understood to mean "a one-woman man" and "a godly, faithful husband." With this understanding and in conjunction with other biblical teaching, a man would not be automatically prohibited from serving as an elder if he is remarried, unmarried, or -depending on the circumstances -divorced. Indetermining whether a particular elder candidate who has been divorced meets this qualification, a number of factors should be considered including the circumstances of the divorce, whether the man was an unbeliever at the time of the divorce, how long ago the divorce occurred, and whether with the passage of time the candidate has demonstrated evident faithfulness to both those inside and outside the church.
 - b. The Committee believes the two phrases referring to children of elders are best translated and understood to mean an elder's minor children should be "faithful" -meaning generally obedient or not wild and profoundly disobedient -instead of "believing" in the sense of needing to be Christians.
5. Churches should not automatically recognize as an elder persons who may have served as an elder in another church. Persons should not be permanently recognized by the church as an elder because such recognition ("once an elder always an elder") conflicts with the potential need for exercising church discipline of individual elders and also ignores the fact that a person might meet the elder qualifications at a certain point in their life but later may not. There is biblical support for some type of elder "ordination" consisting of public acknowledgement, prayer, and laying on of hands (e.g., Acts. 6:6).
6. Although the New Testament does not expressly state that a church must have a plurality of elders, the New Testament regularly refers to elders in the plural. See, e.g., Titus 1:5 (assumes one church per town); Acts 14:23 and 20:17; and James 5:14. This common and consistent pattern in the New Testament strongly suggests that the expected practice in New Testament churches was to have a plurality of elders in each local congregation. That being said, a precise number of elders for a local church is nowhere mandated in Scripture.

Deacons

1. The word for deacon in the Bible, "diakonos," means servant or minister.
2. The Bible clearly spells out specific qualifications for deacons in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 and also provides qualifications for deacons in Acts 6:1-6, though the lists of qualifications in these passages are not necessarily exhaustive.
 - a. Deacon qualifications in 1 Timothy include dignified/worthy of respect; not double-tongued/hypocritical (e.g., saying one thing but living a different way); not addicted to much wine; not greedy; holding the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience; tested first/blameless (e.g., questioned and watched); husband of one wife; and managing children and household well. Deaconesses or the wives of deacons (the Greek can be translated either way, see also #5 below) likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, sober-minded, and faithful in all things.
 - b. Deacon qualifications in Acts 6 include being full of the spirit and of wisdom and being men of good repute.
 - c. Deacons are not required to be able to teach nor are they required to teach, but there is no prohibition on deacons teaching. The meaning of *"husband of one wife"* has the same meaning for deacons as it does for elders as discussed above in the section on elders, point 4.b.
3. The Bible does not discuss deacon responsibilities in great depth. Based on Acts 6:1-6, deacons were given the responsibility of serving tables for widows. As is shown in Acts 6:1-6, deacon service had several purposes: (1) to fulfill particular physical needs of the church by ensuring wise use of available ministry resources (though not deciding overall allocation of resources); (2) to promote unity within the church ("shock absorbers") by serving impartially; and (3) to support the ministry of the Word by freeing up others for preaching, teaching, and prayer. Scripture does not say that deacons shared the same responsibilities as elders or that they function as a separate deliberative body within the church (e.g., like a second house of the legislature) competing with the elders over decisions.
4. Based on Acts 6:1-6, the final selection of deacons should be made by the congregation as a whole. Deacons should be tested first before being selected, but the Bible does not explain who should do the testing. In a general sense, the entire congregation tests a potential deacon by watching them in their service, but ultimately someone or several people may need to examine and evaluate potential deacons in a more specific and deliberate manner.
5. Inconsidering whether 1 Timothy 3:11 is best-translated as referring to the wives of deacons or to deaconesses, the Committee agreed that the Bible does

not prohibit women from serving *as* deacons in churches that (a) formally and functionally limit the role of deacons to the roles and responsibilities seen in the Bible for deacons; (b) do not give deacons any responsibilities reserved in the Bible for elders, such as exercising spiritual oversight; and (c) do not give deacons any responsibilities reserved in the Bible for men alone (such as teaching other men or having authority over men).

Recommended Resources

1. Pastor Eric's sermons on the local church, available on the church's website (www.northbrookbc.org):
 - The Local Church: Congregationalism -Defending and Displaying the Glory of God in the Gospel of Jesus Christ (Feb. 11, 2007)
 - The Local Church: Led by Elders, Served by Deacons (Part 1) (Mar. 4, 2007)
 - The Local Church: Led by Elders, Served by Deacons (Part 2) (Apr. 22, 2007)
 - The Local Church: May Women Serve *as* Deacons? (Apr. 22, 2007 p.m., audio only)
2. *A Display of God's Glory and By Whose Authority? Elders in Baptist Life*, small booklets by Mark Dever available on the bookstall
3. Handout and manuscript of the Sunday School class entitled *Church Governance: Godly Authority Fostering Unity*, the sixth class in the *Living As A Church* series taught at Northbrook Baptist Church, available on the church's website (www.northbrookbc.org).
4. The current constitution and bylaws for Northbrook Baptist Church, available on the church's website (www.northbrookbc.org).