

HOW WE'RE ORGANIZED

EXPLORING MEMBERSHIP

CLASS 3

I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, 15 if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth. (1 Tim 3:14–15)

One thing important to know about a church is how its organized—its leadership structure or government.

We start with ***Jesus***: Jesus governs his church!

The ultimate governing Ruler of the church is Jesus Christ himself. He is “King of kings and Lord of lords” over all things, and head of the church, which is his body (Rev 19:16; Eph 1:22).

But Christ has also shown us how he wants his church governed at a human level.

There are **four broad types of church government**. These differ in where authority lies in the church, authority to make key decisions in the life of a local church.

1. Episcopal – The key place of authority in a church is in the hands of a bishop (Grk. *episkopos*) who likely has authority over several churches in a region (e.g., Episcopalians, Methodists).
2. Congregational – The key place of authority in a church is in the congregation as a whole. Such churches will typically have regular congregational votes to make decisions (e.g., Southern Baptists).

3. Apostolic – The key place of authority is in designated “*apostles*” who oversee various churches. These are “little-a apostles” and not the Scripture-writing apostles we find in the NT (e.g., New Frontiers International, a rarer form).
4. Presbyterian – The key place of authority is in the “elder” (Grk., *presbuteros*; e.g., Presbyterian denominations).

Cornerstone is “Presbyterian” (or modified-Presbyterian) in the sense that elders (Grk. *presbuteroi*) have the authority to govern the church (and the denomination). We sometimes refer to ourselves as an “elder-governed church.”

Why Elder-Governed?

We believe the NT establishes elders as the officers designated to lead local 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)

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. (1 Tim 5:17)

Now from Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him....He said to them,.... “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.” (Acts 20:17, 28)

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, (Eph 4:11–12)

Note how these passages use the words “elder,” “pastor/shepherd,” and, “overseer” interchangeably. That’s why at Cornerstone, “elders” and “pastors” refer to the same group of men. These titles are also one-word job descriptions. An “elder” is

an “older” man endowed with wisdom to make decisions and good judgments. The word “pastor” is the same Greek word as is translated “shepherd,” and so speaks to the “shepherd care” he provides to the sheep entrusted to him by the Lord. An “overseer” has responsibility to “oversee,” to lead in this context.

Elders Don’t Serve Alone

The biblical model is that such elders would serve in a *plurality*—a group acting as one to govern the church. When “elders” are mentioned in the NT, it’s *always in the plural* (Acts 14:23; 20:28; Eph 4:11; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 5:17; Tit 1:5).

But also, a plurality of elders in a church isn’t to serve alone. They serve in cooperation with deacons commissioned by the church (Acts 6:1–7; Phil 1:1) and all members of the church as they are “equipped for ministry” (Eph 4:12).

Deacons: Serving God, Serving God’s People

Deacons are a second office at Cornerstone.

Like with “elder” and “pastor,” the name itself is a job description. “Deacon” comes from the Greek word, *diakonos*, which means “servant.” The fundamental task of this role is to serve—serve God, serve the church, and serve the elders.

Acts 6:1–7 shows the kind of service they perform. It is complementary to the work of the elders, but also different:

Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. 2 And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. 3 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. 4 But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." 5 And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. 6 These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them.

7 And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith. (Acts 6:1-7)

Do you see the deacons involved with the "ministry of tables" while the elders here are involved with the "ministry of the word"? Neither is unimportant. Both are essential for a church to be healthy and to thrive. Practical needs and spiritual needs must be met. These two offices working together help make sure this happens.

1 Timothy 3:8-13 spells out the kind of character and home deacons are to have:

8 Deacons likewise must be dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain. 9 They must hold the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience. 10 And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves blameless. 11 Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things. 12 Let deacons each be the husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well. 13 For those who serve well as deacons gain a good standing for themselves and also great confidence in the faith that is in Christ Jesus. (1 Tim 3:8-13)

The Congregation

Elders and deacons are only two of the roles of leadership and service at Cornerstone. The congregation itself also has myriad ministries.

Ephesians 4:11–13 paints a picture of how elders and the saints within the congregation work together to build up the church:

11 And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, 12 to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ, 13 until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ. (Eph 4:11–13)

A few elders, many ministers: That’s important to us.

Sometimes we call this “**every-member ministry**.” Each person is gifted by God (Eph 4:7) and each person is to be equipped for ministry. That’s how the church will grow!

That’s why many of the **ministry teams** throughout the church are led by normal church members gifted for a certain area of service.

The congregation also performs an essential role when church discipline has reached the final step (more below):

If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matt 18:17)

But now I am writing to you 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. (1 Cor 5:11)

“Every-member ministry” doesn’t only happen on Sundays, however. The way a man serves his family or a woman cares for her parents or a person shares the gospel at work or a student cares for her classmates—all these are ways we minister throughout our lives. It’s often in these less visible contexts where our spiritual gifts really come out.

Our Denomination: Trinity Fellowship Churches

Just like a Christian isn't to walk alone but to be part of a church (whenever possible), so churches aren't to be alone but are to partner with other churches—for protection, accountability, fellowship, help, and mission.

We have partnered with Trinity Fellowship Churches because we believe the NT presents to us the model of churches joining together for a variety of reasons.

For instance, Acts 15 describes a scene where a theological matter needs to be decided. An assembly is held where “apostles and elders” come together to debate and make a decision (15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4).

Something important is that this decision, decided by the entire assembly, is delivered to other churches so that they might obey it (Acts 16:4).

Throughout the NT we see churches sending people, money, prayers, and encouragement to other churches as they're able.

Church discipline

A church well-ordered according to the Word of God is one that practices church discipline rightly. This is one thing that makes a church a church and not simply a random gathering of Christians.

“Church discipline” is the name given to the series of steps taken when someone is walking in unrepentant sin.

Like a father who disciplines the child he loves (Prov 13:24), so church discipline is a loving act by the church to bring a sinner from unrepentance and harm to repentance and blessing. The

goal is rescue the sinner from his sin for his sake and also for the glory of God and the protection of the church.

Matthew 18:15–17 details how this process starts out as brotherly rebuke but it can end up with removing a person from the fellowship of the church. These steps are increasingly serious and are taken only as the sinner persists in NOT repenting:

15 “If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. 16 But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every charge may be established by the evidence of two or three witnesses. 17 If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church. And if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Matt 18:15–17)

During this escalation there is a change from a more informal/brotherly process to a more formal process that will involve the elders of the church.

Our *Member Handbook* details more of how this might progress.

Interested in more on these topics?

Check out these resources:

1. Our *Member Handbook* (on our [website](#)).
2. *Deacons: Serving God, Serving God’s People*, our book on deacons. Available in our bookstore or on Amazon.
3. The *Trinity Fellowship Churches Book of Church Order*. See it on the website: www.trinityfellowshipchurches.com.

Our Next Class: How We Do Life Together