

## ARTICLE 4.1

# How Congregations with Authority Submit to Elders

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If the congregation as a whole is the final court of appeal in the church, what does it mean for them to submit to their leaders? The Bible says that elders are to teach the word, set a godly example for the flock, and oversee the affairs of the church (1 Tim. 3:2; 1 Pet. 5:3; 1 Tim. 5:17). Scripture therefore calls all Christians to “submit” to the leaders of their churches (Heb. 13:17). At the same time, Scripture teaches that the congregation as a whole has final authority in matters of discipline (Matt. 18:17; 1 Cor. 5:4–5) and doctrine (Gal. 1).

Do you see the dilemma? If the Bible located church authority exclusively in the elders, the idea of submission would be simple: the elders would make the decisions, and the congregation would submit to those decisions. But what does it mean for a congregation to submit to its elders when the congregation itself holds final authority?

Instead of considering this question in the abstract, let’s look at a case of church discipline. I would argue that, even in a congregational church, the process of discipline should be led by the elders. Working to restore

someone who is in sin requires spiritual maturity (Gal. 6:1, Jude 23). Therefore, it makes sense for the elders to be the primary group who work behind-the-scenes to address sin issues in the congregation.

Still, the congregation maintains final authority. The decision to excommunicate must ultimately be theirs. The elders cannot simply announce that they have excommunicated a member. They must bring all irresolvable cases of unrepentant sin to the congregation for a final decision.

Now, the tricky question is this: How much does the congregation need to know in order to legitimately exercise their authority in a matter of public discipline? This is a sensitive issue. On the one hand, it would not edify the congregation to air out all the details, and doing so may unnecessarily aggravate the erring member. On the other hand, the congregation needs to know enough to make an informed decision and exercise their responsibility with integrity.

Imagine you're at a congregational meeting and the elders recommend that the congregation discipline a man for "habitual, unrepentant drunkenness." The elders use those exact words and explain that they've been working with this individual for some time but that he has stubbornly persisted in his sin. They further explain that the apostle Paul clearly teaches that people who live in this way will not inherit the kingdom of God (1 Cor. 6:10). So they recommend that the church exclude this individual from membership and pray for his repentance and restoration.

Now it's over to you and the other church members. How do you respond? What does it mean to submit to your elders when you, along with the other members of your church, are called on to make a decision in this matter?

A full answer might differ from case to case, but here's a crucial part of it: trust. An unsubmitive member won't be satisfied with the seemingly sparse details the elders have provided. Instead, he will demand a full account—details of specific incidents, transcripts of the elders' conversations with the individual—or else he won't go along with it. He'll insist on having all the facts so that he can make an independent judgment. He'll want to hear opposing arguments in the interest of fairness. He

won't take the elders' word for anything. He doesn't trust the elders, and he will cloak that mistrust in the language of "responsibility," "transparency," or "rights."

But that kind of attitude makes church discipline—and many of the church's other responsibilities—virtually impossible. It leads to the kind of committee-of-the-whole congregationalism that understandably gives congregationalism a bad name. It paralyzes the church's elders by giving them a title and responsibility but then hanging them out to dry when they most need a church's trust.

A submissive church member, on the other hand, won't set himself up as an independent review committee regarding every decision the elders make. Instead, he'll recognize that elders have been voted into office in order to lead, and that in order to lead, they need to be trusted.

So a godly church member will be inclined to take the elders at their word. He'll be inclined to trust their assessment of someone's sin. He'll trust that they have faithfully followed the biblical steps that precede public discipline. He'll trust that the elders have good reasons for not telling the congregation all the gory details. That doesn't mean he'll never under any circumstances dissent or voice disagreement. For example, there may be times when a church member knows something crucial that the elders do not and so the member privately shares such information with the elders. Trusting one's elders also doesn't mean a member will never ask the elders questions. Yet it does mean that he is willing to follow them despite not knowing all the details. He will submit to them by trusting them.

In order for a congregation to exercise its responsibility in discipline, the elders must give them enough information to act wisely. But in order for them to exercise that responsibility in a submissive manner, a congregation needs to trust its leaders.

What if you don't trust the elders to act responsibly? Perhaps you should be at a different church. Not all elders are trustworthy!

But if you're the type of person who would have trouble trusting the elders at any real (not hypothetical) church, the problem just might be

with you. There might be more pride in your heart than you realize. We who are called to submit to our elders should be willing to follow them without having all the answers—just like we follow the Lord who appointed them.