

Biblical Leadership at MABC

July 16, 2023

MABC family,

I want to explain the following document – what it is and what its general purpose is. Having finished our teaching on the pastoral epistle of 1 Timothy, I have heard from many of you, and I have asked myself the same basic question: “So what?” So, what should we conclude about what we have learned? When it comes to our present form of leadership and decision-making, are we in line with what we’ve learned, or should we reassess in some areas? In order to answer these questions, first and foremost to my own satisfaction, I felt that I needed to interact with the text of Scripture in order to see if my personal conclusions and convictions were correct. This paper is the summary and result of my investigation to this point.

I want to share this with you, my church family, because I want for you to be good “Bereans” and to consider my conclusions and to interact with them, both between you and the Lord and with me. I want to answer any questions that you may have, and if you can identify something in Scripture that you believe should modify these conclusions, then I want to hear those. Our goal as a church family is always to be together for His glory; therefore, I (and the church board) desire your feedback or questions. I have already presented this to the board, and to be honest, we have been discussing what the Bible says on the subject of church government for several years now. I praise God that we as a board are unified, which is thanks to the Holy Spirit, of course.

I pray for this same unity as a church as we consider these doctrinal and practical issues, and my prayer is that we will all seek God’s will according to His Word first and foremost (and that includes me). One of the things that I have loved about MABC since day #1 is that you have always been loving, gracious, and kind, even when we may have had to work through changes and even when we have had to come to agreement from differing initial perspectives. I do praise the Lord that we strive to be together for His glory!

Please know that my door is always open to you, the flock, of MABC, and I cherish your love for me, my family, and especially for the Word of God. I’m actually excited for our heart as a church to follow God’s Word because I believe that it will lead us to be a stronger and more effective church in standing for truth and in fulfilling the Great Commission (our mission).

This paper is at times technical and even somewhat polemical. Please don’t be intimidated, confused, or concerned by that. Again, if you have *any* questions, please come to me, and ask (I’m not that intimidating, I trust). I have been called by our Lord to shepherd you by teaching you from God’s Word, not by trying to confuse you or intimidate you in any way. I love you as a family, as does our board, and we all want to lead the church in the right direction for the glory and honor of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ, and that always means to teach lovingly and in accordance with all that He has commanded us.

As a board, we have not set any timeline or deadline for interaction for regarding these doctrinal issues, so please take your time to study, read, and interact with this paper and God’s Word. Also, you may come to come with questions multiple times. Again, the door is open.

In the love of Christ, and as always, together for His glory,

Pastor Robb

What is the church and what is its purpose?

We believe that the church (*ekklesia* = “assembly”) of Jesus Christ is completely under the headship Christ (Eph 5:23). The church is biblically known as the body of Christ (Rom 12:5; 1 Cor 12:12-13), the bride of Christ (Eph 5:25-27; 2 Cor 11:2; Rev 19:7), and the family/household of God (Rom 8:15-17; 1 Tim 3:15). We believe that the church began on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2) with the outpouring/baptism of the Holy Spirit as the initiation of the New Covenant ministry of the Holy Spirit upon the chosen saints in Jerusalem (Jer 31:31-34; Eze 36:27; John 14:17). We also believe that the church can be described as an “invisible” and a “visible” entity.

By the invisible church, we refer to all those who have come to saving faith in Jesus Christ by the will and grace of God (Eph 1:5; 2:8-9), having been chosen by God the Father from before the foundation of the world (Eph 1:1, 4). This universal group of believers is called invisible simply because man looks on the outward appearance of other men, and he cannot see the condition of men’s hearts as God does (1 Sam 16:7), and there is no external, identifying mark (sign) of a true believer in Jesus Christ other than his or her profession of faith in Christ (often given at public, water baptism), and his or her subsequent works which give evidence of the veracity of his or her professed faith (James 2:17). Thus, in that sense, the universal bride of Christ is “invisible” to the eyes of men, but certainly not to God (John 6:37, 40; 10:27).

The visible church, most commonly identified as the local church, is the local gathering of believers in Jesus Christ who identify with one another through the accountability of church membership (Acts 2:41), the service to and edification of one another by the gifts of the Holy Spirit (1 Cor 12), the submission to leadership as such imperfect authority submits to the Word of God (Heb 13:17), and through the reconciliation of internal relationships from the divisiveness of sin to maintain the purity and testimony of Christ’s church (Matt 18:15-17).

In the apostle Paul’s letter written directly to the local church in Ephesus, he further defines the international nature of the church as formerly a “mystery” to God’s chosen nation, Israel, in Old Testament times (Eph 3:4). Paul identifies the church as a unified (and chosen) body made up of Gentiles and Jews founded upon and based in the gospel of Jesus Christ (3:6). In the subsequent chapter of his letter, Paul then “implores” his readers to live with “all humility and gentleness, with patience, showing tolerance for one another in love” (4:1-2), preserving the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace” (4:3). From this and further study, Paul is clearly not considering local churches simply as social organizations of some sort. Rather, he is referring to a local church (the visible church) as a regional, organized, and functional gathering of believers in Jesus Christ whose primary mission is to carry out Jesus’ “Great Commission” as defined in Matthew 28:18-20.

We see more of this organized structure in Paul’s first letter to Timothy (while Timothy was serving at that same Ephesian church just a couple of years later), as Paul explains the purpose of his writing in the following manner:

1 Tim 3:15 . . . *I write* so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

From this explanation of Paul’s God-breathed writing and his description of the local church, we can directly draw the following conclusions:

1. The church is made up of (a body of redeemed) individuals whose behavior and organization (“conduct”) is important to God.
2. God considers the church as His family or “household,” again emphasizing the importance of the local church as the functional, local gathering of Christ’s bride.
3. The church is the possession of the only God who is alive and the only God who can and does give life.
4. The primary responsibility of the church in order to honor and bring glory to God is to ensure that the truth of God stands so that it can have its intended, providential effect in the lives of God’s elect which is delineated in the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20):
 - a. Initiating the making of disciples through the preaching of the gospel of Jesus Christ.
 - b. Baptizing believers in the name of the Triune God (Father, Son, and Holy Spirit).
 - c. Teaching these disciples all that our King Jesus has taught us in His living Word (the Bible), knowing that Jesus is with us always.

The conclusion then for the organization and functioning of the local church then must be centered upon the accomplishment of this Great Commission (for the making of disciples) from our King (Jesus) and according to what He has commanded us in His Word.

This then brings us to our discussion about the organization and functioning of the local church.

I. What is the church?

- A. The church is the body and bride of Christ, the family and household of God whose purpose is to fulfill the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20).
- B. Just as the marriage relationship (which is to be a picture and portrayal of Christ and His church, Eph 5:22-33) is made up of ontologically equal members (husband and wife, Gal 3:28), these members have differing roles (they have economically distinct roles, Eph 5:22-27). So also, the church, the bride of Christ, is made up of the elect who are ontologically equal in value and redemption before the Triune God, yet there are different and distinct giftings and roles within the body (Rom 12:4-8). Two of those distinct giftings and roles are specifically identified as the offices of the local church – 1) overseers/pastors/elders, and 2) deacons (Eph 4:11-16; 1 Tim 3:1-13; Titus 1:5-9).
- C. The overseers/pastors/elders are chosen by Jesus Christ and given as a gift to His church for the purpose of leading the church according to God’s Word for the:
 1. “Equipping the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ” (Eph 4:12).
 2. “Unity of the faith and of the full knowledge of the Son of God” (Eph 4:13a).
 3. Maturing the church to the fullness of Christ (making us more like Christ, Eph 4:13b).
 4. “So that we are no longer . . . tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming” (Eph 4:14).

5. Teaching Christ's church to "[speak] the truth in love" by instruction and example as we all become more like our "head," Christ (Eph 4:15).
 6. Knowing that it is Christ Himself who holds us all together as each individual part joins and works together for His glory which results in "the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love" (Eph 4:16).
- D. The deacons are the helpers to the overseers/pastors/elders as the other biblically recognized office of the church (1 Tim 3:8-13)
- E. This means that the leaders of the church (the overseers/pastors/elders and their helpers, the deacons) are called and chosen by Jesus Christ to lead His church according to His Word. They do not serve as elected representatives of the members of the body of Christ, but they serve as under-shepherds who are responsible to the head of the church, the Great Shepherd, Jesus Christ Himself.
- F. **The remainder of this paper then is to address what the Bible says about the roles and qualifications of the men who fill these two offices of the church; how these men are to be chosen; the role of the church in submitting to this leadership, in helping to give accountability to these men (who are redeemed sinners just like everyone else), and in affirming, through the unity of the Holy Spirit, the direction and decisions of these leaders as they "humanly" guide Christ's church. In undertaking this extensive task, we must acknowledge that, as is the case with most doctrinal issues, there are times when God's Word gives very clear and explicit instructions, and there are other times when God gives us principles that we must use to make wise and practical decisions that honor and glorify God and best enable us as a church to obey and fulfill the Great Commission. The principle focus of this paper will be on the office of overseer/pastor/elder. We will attempt to accomplish this task through a series of questions that will be answered in outline form with biblical reference to support the answers given.**

II. What is biblical pastor/elder/overseer leadership?

A. The office – pastor/elder/overseer

1. The terms pastor, elder, and overseer do not represent three different offices, rather they are three descriptive terms for the same church office. We see this most clearly in the Bible's comparative use of the terms as they describe the office.
 - a) What most Christians believe are the qualifications for a pastor are listed out in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. However, these qualifications are noted to be for "overseers" and "elders" respectively.

1 Tim 3:1 It is a trustworthy saying: if any man aspires to the office of **overseer**, he desires a good work. ² An **overseer**, then, must be . . .

Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint **elders** in every city as I directed you.

- b) In fact, the only New Testament use of the term "pastor" as a noun is found in Ephesians 4 where it describes the pastors' responsibilities (as noted above), and

these responsibilities, which we might call “pastoring” (the verb form), are identical to the responsibilities given to overseers and elders when they are told to “pastor” or “shepherd” the flock (the church body). See Paul’s instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:6-16 in the context of “overseers” in chapter 3 and the mention of “the council of elders” in v. 14.

Eph 4:11 And He Himself **gave** some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* **pastors and teachers**.

- c) In addition, we these terms (elders, overseers, and those who pastor) used synonymously in several instances in Scripture by both Paul and Peter.

Acts 20:17, 28 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him **the elders of the church**. . . . **Be on guard** for yourselves and **for all the flock**, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **shepherd the church** of God which He purchased with His own blood.

1 Peter 5:1-4 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your fellow elder* and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² **shepherd the flock** of God among you, **overseeing** not under compulsion, but willingly, according to God; and not for dishonest gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to you, but being examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

- d) Therefore, it is right to conclude that the office of pastor *is* the office of overseer which *is* the office of elder.
2. There are not two classes of pastors/elders/overseers (“paid staff” and “lay elders”) – there is one office, and those who serve in this office are equally pastors and elders and overseers.
- a) Those who serve in this office are positionally equals with an equal voice. There is always a leader among leaders, and this is often the preaching pastor (what some will call the “pastor-teacher”), but this man does not have an “additional vote” or veto power per se over the decisions of the council of elders.
- b) As such, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is not just a substitute for a “deacon board” by a different name (perhaps the “elder board”). Rather, these men who lead the church are pastors/elders/overseers who have been called and given to the church by Jesus Christ Himself (Eph 4:11) through the power of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), and they stand before Jesus as responsible for their humble leadership (watching over the flock), their character, their teaching, and their faithfulness to Jesus and His Word (Heb 13:17; James 3:1; 1 Pet 5:1-4). God’s people (the flock) are called to “fall in line – submit” to them (Titus 3:1; Heb 13:17) as they faithfully lead (“rule”) the church according to God’s Word (Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 3:4-5; 5:17; 1 Thess 5:12).

3. Just as with any human leadership, pastors/elders/overseers are an example of **imperfect leadership**, but that doesn't eliminate the responsibility of the church to submit to their leadership unless the decisions made are directly contrary to God's Word (Heb 13:17; 1 Pet 2:13-3:7). Accountability is given to the leaders of the church via the plurality of the offices and through the diligent study of God's Word by the flock with respectful and appropriate questioning with an appeal to Scripture to which the leaders must humbly and gently answer (Matt 18:15-17; Acts 17:11; 1 Tim 5:19-20).
4. The Bible describes **male leadership** in both the offices of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon. This is not because God in any way considers men to be more important, valuable, or better than women. There's no "ontologic" distinction (Gal 3:28). Rather, it simply represents the role ("economic" or functional) distinctions that God has given to men and women (1 Tim 2:9-15; 3:1-13; 1 Cor 11:7; 14:34-35). Note that Jesus Himself was a male. His twelve disciples were all men. The pronoun for those who would aspire to be an overseer (1 Tim 3:1) or elder (Titus 1:6) is masculine. In fact, when speaking of the individuals themselves, the terms "overseer" and "elder" are both masculine (1 Tim 3:2 and Titus 1:5, respectively). There are many other examples of male leadership in God's Word.
5. The Bible also describes a **plurality of leadership** in both the offices of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon.
 - a) Biblical evidence for a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers (shared leadership):
 - (1) These verses we see a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers within a church/flock/city (singular) – Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4; 20:17, 28-30; 21:18; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1-4
 - (2) In all of the other uses of the terms pastors/elders/overseers, the usage does not counter the idea of a plurality of elders:
 - (a) 1 Tim 3:1 singular (speaking of the office)
 - (b) 1 Tim 3:2 singular (speaking of the individual's character requirements)
 - (c) 1 Tim 5:17 plural (general term)
 - (d) 1 Tim 5:19 singular (general term)
 - (e) Titus 1:7 singular (speaking of the individual's character requirements)
 - (f) 2 John 1 singular (speaking of John himself)
 - (g) 3 John 1 singular (speaking of John himself)
 - b) Biblical reasons for a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers (shared leadership):
 - (1) In the Old Testament, we see Jethro's wisdom to have a plurality of leaders to help Moses with the oversight of the people of Israel (Exodus 18:21-23; 24:1, 9, 14, 15).
 - (2) In the New Testament, Jesus chose and prepared twelve disciples to lead His church after His departure (ascension) to heaven.

- (3) When discussing the care (shepherding, pastoring) of the local church in the New Testament, the repeated pattern is a plurality of elders and overseers as noted above.
- c) Practical reasons for a plurality of pastors/elders/overseers (shared leadership):
 - (1) Balancing weaknesses – None of us are God. Shared leadership can help a church leader to recognize his own faults and deficiencies – his blind spots.
 - (2) Lightening the workload – Shared leadership also helps to lighten a very heavy workload that only grows with diligence and effectiveness in ministry or “successful ministry” (Eccl 4:9-12).
 - (3) Providing accountability – “The collective leadership of a biblical eldership provides a formal structure for genuine accountability.” Such accountability between coequals in leadership diminishes the risk for an abuse of power, and it provides a means to deal with sin with the least damage to the flock and the testimony of Christ and His church.
 - d) Two additional points regarding shared leadership:
 - (1) Are there pitfalls with shared leadership? Yes, of course there are, but problems exist without biblically shared leadership as well. The existence of problems (because of sin) is not to be the litmus test of doctrine. God’s Word is, and His Word calls for shared leadership in the office of pastor/elder/overseer.
 - (2) Will there be a leader among leaders? Yes, of course there will be, but with a plurality of leadership, there are others within the office to help to hold this man accountable, especially in his areas of weakness or his blind spots.
6. Assisted by the deacons (the other church office/calling – 1 Tim 3:8-13)
- a) In the same manner and for the same reasons that the office of pastor/elder/overseer is an office of male, plural, imperfect leadership, the office of deacons is as well with equal character requirements (1 Tim 3:8-13) except for being “apt to teach.”
 - b) Deacons are not competitors to the pastors/elders/overseers in their church office. Rather, they are helpers of the pastors/elders/overseers in all areas and means of ministry – from the most menial, yet necessary tasks, to the highest of spiritual responsibilities in order to ensure the biblical obedience, the order, and the functionality of Christ’s church. That doesn’t mean that either the pastors/elders/overseers or the deacons do all the work. (Remember, it is the saints who are to be equipped for the work of the ministry.) However, the deacons are the agents who help the overseers to accomplish this equipping and to ensure that it is carried out in obedience to God’s Word and in a good and proper order.
 - c) That all being said, the deacons are leaders along with the pastors/elders/overseers. As the helpers to the overseers, they do have authority within the

church as leaders to carry out their assigned tasks, but the office is one of service and ministry (as indicated by the name) and one that comes alongside the overseers. Similar to the situation of the twelve disciples of Acts 6, this allows the elders to be devoted to prayer and to the ministry of the Word.

- B. The details of the pastor/elder/overseer job description are most clearly seen in Paul's instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 4:6-16; however, there are a few other helpful passages as well (noted below). In this way, the pastors/elders/overseers shepherd the flock (1 Pet 5:1-4) and equip and mature the saints for the work of ministry (Eph 4:11-16). Pastors/elders/overseers are to:
1. Preach and teach the Word (Matt 28:19-20; John 21:15-17; Acts 20:19-21, 27; Eph 4:11-12; 1 Tim 3:2; 1 Tim 4:2)
 2. Train and designate other leaders (2 Tim 2:2)
 3. Be an example as a shepherd and overseer – exemplify Christ (1 Pet 5:1-3)
 4. Defend and protect Jesus' flock from false teachers ("wolves") (Acts 20:28-30)
 5. Be a Good and godly minister (1 Tim 4:6-16)
 - a) The good and godly minister should reject the godless myths of false teaching (v. 7a)
 - b) The good and godly minister should train himself in godliness (vv. 7b-10)
 - c) The good and godly minister should teach all that he is learning (v. 11)
 - d) The good and godly minister should not be intimidated by his weaknesses (v. 12a)
 - e) The good and godly minister should live an exemplary life (vv. 12b)
 - f) The good and godly minister should give attention to preaching the Word (v. 13)
 - g) The good and godly minister should not neglect God's gift to him (v. 14)
 - h) The good and godly minister should cultivate God's gift to him (v. 15)
 - i) The good and godly minister should pay close attention to his conduct and his teaching (v. 16a)
 - j) The good and godly minister should persevere in his calling for the sake of himself and his flock (v. 16b)
- C. The character description of a man called to serve as a pastor/elder/overseer (1 Timothy 3:1-7 "office of overseer," Titus 1:6-9 "elders")
1. The man aspires to the office of overseer.
 2. He must be above reproach.
 3. He must be the husband of one wife.
 4. He must temperate
 5. He must be sensible.
 6. He must be respectable.
 7. He must be hospitable.
 8. He must be able to teach/holding fast the faithful word so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to reprove those who contradict.
 9. He must not be addicted to wine.
 10. He must not be pugnacious/not quick-tempered.

11. He must be considerate.
12. He must be peaceable.
13. He must be free from the love of money/not fond of dishonest gain.
14. He must be leading his own household well/having faithful children, *who are not* accused of dissipation, or rebellious.
15. He must have his children in submission with all dignity.
16. He must not be a new convert.
17. He must have a good reputation with those outside *the church*.
18. He must not be self-willed.
19. He must love what is good.

III. What is the biblical pattern for implementing (choosing and installing) pastors/elders/overseers?

- A. God/Jesus calls men to serve as pastors and teachers and He gives them to the church (Eph 4:11). To put it another way, pastors/elders/overseers are selected by God and recognized by the church through their leaders. So how should this work?
- B. A “license to ministry,” as it is commonly called, is the recognition by a local church through its leaders (with input from the congregation – *see below*) that a man is called and qualified according to God’s Word (*although not necessarily ready*) to enter into Gospel Ministry. The most evident biblical example of such a licensing to ministry involves Timothy in Acts 16:1-3. Such a determination communicates to the church that this man is “in the queue,” and the formal evaluation and training process has begun. Note in the Scriptural example that Timothy was well spoken of by the brothers (input from the congregation), but it is Paul himself (perhaps with wisdom from Silas) who decided that Timothy should begin training for ministry under the tutelage of Paul and Silas.

Acts 16:1-3 Now Paul also arrived at Derbe and at Lystra. And behold, a disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a Jewish woman who was a believer, but his father was a Greek, ² and **he was well spoken of by the brothers** who were in Lystra and Iconium. ³ **Paul wanted this man to go with him, and he took him . . .**

- C. “Training for ministry” involves formal and informal education and mentoring for the office of pastor/elder/overseer. Paul briefly explains such training quite simply in 2 Timothy 2:2, and the entrusting of these “things” that have been passed from generation to generation from faithful men to faithful men can take different forms – formal or informal.

2 Tim 2:2 And **the things** which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these **to faithful men who will be able to teach** others also.

1. Formal training opportunity – usually involves some form of seminary training
 - a) Positives – a solid theological education with degree recognition
 - b) Negatives – not local, cost, limited discipleship/hands-on pastoral training
2. Informal training – in-house training within the local church

- a) Positives – can be a solid and even formal theological education (ACTS class, biblical counseling training and certification, online seminary training), one-on-one discipleship, hands on pastoral training (apprenticeship), lower cost, don't have to move and give up your “day job”
 - b) Negatives – potentially limited by biblical languages training, and the abilities and biblical knowledge within the local church or online availability, potentially no degree recognition (although more local options are becoming available)
3. Men from both inside and outside the church (trained men brought in from outside the church) will need an undefined time period to go through certain aspects of this training. When completed, the man ought to undergo a final ordination to declare his recognition and appointment to the office of pastor/elder/overseer.
- D. “Ordination” is the official recognition and appointment to ministry (καθίστημι *kathistemi* – “to put in place,” *the central concept being recognition and appointment by one in authority*) by the leadership of a church (*an ordination council* or biblically, *a council of elders*, “presbytery” 1 Tim 4:14) following a thorough investigation of a man’s character, spiritual preparedness, ministry proficiency, and Bible knowledge.
1. We see biblical examples of direct appointments to ministry by God with Moses, Aaron, and priests in the book of Exodus in the O.T., and the disciples appointed by Jesus (John 15:16) in the N.T., including the apostle Paul himself (Acts 9; 1 Tim 2:7).
 2. In addition, elders were appointed in multiple cities by Paul and Barnabas, or their designates (Acts 14:23; 1 Tim 3:1; Titus 1:5), under the unity and authority of the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28).
 3. So, what we see in each biblical example is that God, or His authoritative representative (“*apostolic succession*” in a 2 Timothy 2:2 manner, a non-Roman Catholic manner), appointed or ordained (put in place) a man to spiritual ministry. The authority for such an appointment/ordination today (in the post apostolic period of the church) lies within the authoritative, previously ordained, overseeing leadership (council of elders, “presbytery”) of the local church (1 Tim 4:14; 5:22).
 - 1 Tim 4:14** Do not neglect the gift within you (*Timothy*), which was given to you through prophetic utterance with the **laying on of hands by the council of elders**. (*the presbytery*)
 - 1 Tim 5:22** Do not lay hands upon anyone hastily and thereby share *responsibility* for the sins of others; keep yourself pure.
 4. So, what is the biblical model? When a man has been approved in character and readiness through the preliminary acknowledgment or identification of licensing and has been adequately trained, then the testing of ordination by the “presbytery” or the council of elders, he is thus to be “appointed” (καθίστημι) to ministry, or “put in place” as a pastor/elder/overseer by the authoritative leadership of the church. We do not see evidence in the Bible that this is a “board” position in the sense of a board of directors in business (*although for lack of a better word, we tend to use the word*

“board” – perhaps the “council of elders” is the better phrase, but note it’s not a “council of deacons” or a “deacon board” in God’s Word). We also do not see evidence that such a man serves “terms” with designated term limits. (And “a lack of terms and term limits” has always been the pattern of MABC when it comes to the office of pastor/elder/overseer – none of the pastors of MABC have served “terms.”)

5. While, in Scripture, we **do** see input from the congregation as to the character of the man – he must be above reproach with all the character qualities identified in 1 Timothy 3 – and the congregation should have an opportunity to voice support or any concerns of the man’s character; **we do not see in Scripture a popular vote of the congregation as a means of appointment.** Rather, we see the responsibility of appointment given to the presbytery, the council of elders, the leadership of the church – who stand accountable before Jesus Christ Himself, the Head of the church.

Titus 1:5, 9 For this reason I left you (*Titus*) in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint (καθίστημι) elders in every city as I directed you, (*character qualities in vv. 6-8*) . . . ⁹ holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to reprove those who contradict (*the ministry responsibilities of pastors/elders/overseers*).

IV. What is the biblical pattern for decision-making in the church?

- A. The biblical term in the New Testament for “presiding over,” “to rule,” “to lead,” to stand before,” or “to be set over” in a manner of authority is προϊστημι, *proístemi*.
 1. We see it as a spiritual gift from the Lord in Romans 12:8 to be done with diligence, and we see it as a function of elder leadership in 1 Timothy 5:17. The church body is to appreciate “those who labor among you, and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, and that you regard them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Th 5:12-13), and it is described as one of the character qualities of the overseers of the church (1 Tim 3:4-5), as well as for the deacons as the helpers of the overseers (1 Tim 3:12). A key aspect of leading with authority is decision-making on behalf of Christ church and in accordance with the will of God as noted in His Word. Such biblical leadership is in contrast to congregational voting for the purpose of making decisions within the church.
 2. A wise leadership team (plurality of elders) will seek the counsel and wisdom and perspective of the body, especially in major decisions such as the choosing of other pastors/elders/overseers or in any financial decisions; however, the decision is that of the ones who preside over or lead the church (the pastors/elders/overseers) under the guidance of the Holy Spirit in submission to the Head, Jesus Christ.
 3. As has been noted in our church, there is always a sense in church all churches are congregational as people will “vote” with their feet and their wallets. That simply means that good and godly people will not follow foolish leadership. Therefore, it is the responsibility of the pastors/elders/overseers to lead well and to lead diligently first for the honor of Christ and second for the spiritual benefit of the body according to God’s Word.

B. Where do we see “voting” in Scripture?

1. One pastor has suggested that we should “do church votes as often as Jesus and the apostles taught us to.”¹
2. The principal word that etymologically could be translated “vote” (χειροτονέω *keirotoneō* – *to make a joint decision by the raising of the hand*) in the N.T. only appears twice. Once by an early form, perhaps, of a “council of elders” (two apostles – Paul and Barnabas) appointing elders for the churches; and then by a church in choosing a man to lend accountability to the management of the money (offering) for the churches.
 - a) In Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas “appoint” or “choose” or “vote” or “decide upon” elders “for them in every church.” This decision was not a vote of the church membership/body, but rather a decision made by two men, one an apostle of Jesus Christ (2 Cor 12:12) and the other an apostle of the church (Acts 14:14) acting on behalf of a new church at this point without pastors/elders/overseers and thus without a “council of elders.”
 - b) In 2 Cor 8:19, “To protect Paul and Titus from false accusations regarding the mishandling of the money, the churches picked the unbiased brother (v. 18) as their representative to lend accountability to the enterprise. . . . Paul wanted careful scrutiny as protection against bringing dishonor to Christ for any misappropriation of the money. He wanted to avoid any offenses worthy of justifiable criticisms or accusations.”² (Even in this instance, it is not clear whether it was a vote of the church body in its entirety or the church leaders as the decision makers for the church. Thus an argument for congregationalism is an argument from silence, and it is overwhelmed by the other evidence of Scripture pastor/elder/overseer leadership and decision making.)
3. Another potential “vote” in Scripture is in Acts 26:10, but this was clearly a decision or “vote” made by Jewish leadership outside the church (some believe that this is evidence that Paul was at one point a part of the Sanhedrin). Cf. Rev 2:17 “an allusion to the ancient custom among the Greeks of acquitting with a white stone or pebble and condemning with a black one.”³

Acts 26:10 And this is just what I did in Jerusalem; not only did I lock up many of the saints in prisons, having received authority from the chief priests, but also when they were being put to death, I **cast my vote** (ψῆφος, *psēfos*, *literally a small stone or pebble*) against them.
4. Lastly, some will point to Acts 6:3 and the choosing of the seven men to assure equality in the distribution of “the daily serving of food.” However, the word translated “select” is the word ἐπισκέπτομαι, *episképtomai* which means “to look at something, examine closely, inspect, observe.”⁴ So, what we see in this text is that the people at most made

¹ Ted Bigelow, <https://sharperiron.org/article/congregational-voting-biblical>, published 4/6/11, cited July 14, 2023.

² John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1776.

³ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

⁴ Spiros Zodhiates, *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* (Chattanooga, TN: AMG Publishers, 2000).

recommendations by close examination, but you'll note who made the appointment (the final choice or decision), "we" which clearly refers to "the twelve" (v. 2).

Acts 6:3 Therefore, brothers, **select** from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom **we may put in charge** (καθίστημι) of this need.

C. Other arguments made for congregational decision making by vote in Scripture:

1. One such argument revolves around the autonomy of the local church. Some correctly suggest that the Bible never speaks of a hierarchy or any church organization or office above the local church itself (the offices of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon), and thereby the authority of each local church lies within its own autonomy, with no person organization above it except Christ as the Head. **To this we can agree!** The local church is autonomous. However, in the congregational model "emphasis is also upon the democratic structure of the church whereby the ultimate authority is vested in the members themselves." **To this we must disagree!** The congregational argument suggests that "in the ultimate sense, officers have no more ecclesiastical authority than any other member. Each one has but one vote on any issue." "More generally there are the pastor and deacons, in which case the deacons are also concerned with the oversight of the congregation."⁵
 - a) This argument ignores meaning of the term "overseer" (ἐπίσκοπος, epískopos) and the requirement of the pastors/elders/overseers to "manage," "preside over," "rule," "lead" (προΐστημι) his home and the church according to 1 Timothy 3:5.
 - b) It is not necessary to have a congregational, voting style of decision-making within a church in order for the church to be autonomous. Autonomy can just as clearly occur through the leadership of pastors/elders/overseers, which is the biblical model defended in this paper.
2. Another argument made in favor of congregationalism (church votes for decision making) involves "church discipline." The suggestion is that when a member of the church is unrepentant and unwilling to confess and repent of their sin, the Jesus instructs His disciples to "tell it to the church" (Matt 18:17). The presumption is that the church then (at some point) makes a membership decision (by vote) to remove that individual from membership, giving authority for such a matter to the congregation of the church.⁶ But is that what it says?
 - a) The ultimate authority for discipline does rest with the local church itself (autonomy of the local church), **but not necessarily with the congregation (membership) per se by vote.** I believe that Saucy is reading into the text if he is declaring the *congregation* as the "final court" (p. 115). In 1 Cor 5:5 it is the apostle Paul who is giving the directive to the church to "deliver such a one to Satan." The church is to submit and

⁵ Robert Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1972), 114-5.

⁶ *Ibid.*, 115.

agree to this directive, but it is not a vote of the congregation that makes the directive. (We see the same in 2 Th 3:6, 14-15).

- b) Note that Jesus' instruction in Matthew 18:17 is to "tell it to the church" in order that the church body might also exhort this individual to repentance. Then, "if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as the Gentile and the tax collector." In order for the church body to exhort such an individual to repentance, they will need to submit to and accept (Heb 13:17) the testimony of their leaders (pastors/elders/overseers) regarding the sin of the individual. Then if he or she won't listen to the pleas to repentance made by the congregation, then the individual must be removed from the congregation. "The idea is not merely to punish the offender, or to shun him completely, but to remove him as a detrimental influence from the fellowship of the church, and henceforth to regard him as an evangelistic prospect rather than as a brother. Ultimately, the sin for which he is excommunicated is a hard-hearted impenitence."⁷ The subsequent question then is this, whose responsibility is it protect the flock from "a detrimental influence" on the church? It's the decision of the pastors/elders/ overseers, not a vote of the congregation.
3. "The qualifications for office given to the church at large imply its responsibility in selecting officers."⁸
 - a) Presumed implications are in the eyes of the beholder; and therefore, they are prone to subjectivity. Given the lack of other biblical evidence for a congregational vote in church decision-making, especially in the appointment of pastors/elders/overseers, and given the clear biblical evidence of appointment of pastors/elders/overseers by the council of elders, I don't see that "the qualifications for office given to the church at large imply its responsibility in selecting officers."
 - b) As noted preciously, the church body should have input into qualifications of a man for eldership (to be a pastor/elder/overseer) to help assess the fact that the man is "above reproach," and any good and wise leadership group (council of elders) should listen to any concerns about the man on the part of the congregation. However, that doesn't mean that the decision is up to vote of the congregation, as there is no biblical evidence for such a manner of decision-making.
 4. Some suggest that since the church sent out and received messengers (Acts 11:22; 14:27; 15:3-4; 2 Cor 8:19; 1 Cor 16:3), it implies congregational votes; however, once again, the fact that the church sent out messengers doesn't mean that such a decision to send out a messenger in the name of the church came from a vote of the congregation. More likely it would have come from the decision of the council of elders as they would determine the qualifications of the man for the task. For example:
 - a) In Acts 13:1-3 it's the "prophets and teachers" (*leaders*) who by the order of the Holy Spirit "set apart (*ἀφορίζω, separated out*) . . . Barnabas and Saul for the work." Paul and Barnabas then simply reported back to the church at Antioch.

⁷ John MacArthur Jr., ed., *The MacArthur Study Bible*, electronic ed. (Nashville, TN: Word Pub., 1997), 1426.

⁸ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program*, 115.

- b) In Acts 15:2-3 autonomy of the local church is seen in the decision, but that doesn't mean a church vote was made or required to make the decision. It's not there in the text. In fact, in v. 6 it says, "Both the apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter." In fact, in vv. 12, 22-23, 25 we see an affirmation of the body, but we also see that the letter that was sent was from the "apostles and the brothers who are elders" (v. 23). Then in v. 25 we see that they ("we") "knew the same mind" (ἡμῶν γενομένοις ὁμοθυμαδὸν) – they were unanimous, of one accord, all together, of unanimous consent. The question then is, who is "we"? I believe that it is the apostles and elders (v. 23) with the submissive agreement of the church body (Heb 13:17). Certainly, the entire church in Antioch heard the report from the letter (v. 30) since the information was important to everyone, but again, there's no evidence of a church vote.
5. Another suggestion is that the "final obligation" for maintaining true doctrine and practice is "directed toward" or "rests" with the church (as a body). His basis is that all believers are called to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God" (1 John 4:1) as we are all anointed with the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:20, 27), thus we are all able to discern truth. Paul wrote to the church in Thessalonica and told them to "examine (δοκιμάζω) all things; [holding] fast to that which is good" and "abstaining from every form of evil" (1 Th 5:21-22).
- a) There's a sense in which I agree with this perspective, but does that mean a vote of the church is required for decision-making? Is there not another way to affirm leadership, doctrine, and practice than a general church vote? And ultimately, isn't it the responsibility of the pastors/elders/overseers to ensure that saints are "no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming" (Eph 4:14)? Certainly, the flock has an obligation to submit to and obey their leaders in these areas (Heb 13:17), but the precision of the theological accuracy rests with the leaders of the church, the pastors/elders/overseers.
- b) From a practical standpoint, in a congregation system of voting, babes in Christ can be swayed by a strong and flamboyant personality (perhaps a false teacher), and it falls to the elders to deal with that. If it all depends on a majority vote, then it creates a harder environment in which to deal with the false teacher and to avoid unnecessary conflict.
- c) The body of the local church needs to be "noble-minded," just like the Bereans were (Acts 17:11); and with all humility they need to challenge presumed and perceived error in doctrine and practice (1 Tim 5:17-21), but none of that infers congregational voting for decision-making within the church.
- V. What about these more vital decisions – the choosing of additional pastors/elders/overseers and any financial decision?**
- A. Perspectives on the church body giving input and affirmation on the choosing of leaders and financial issues:

1. Affirmation does not need to involve a vote. The best way to affirm a decision (with the least amount of potential division and debate) is to have a limited period of time for feedback before a proposed decision is to be made (e.g., new church members; potential new elders; potential new deacons; annual church budgets, etc.).
 2. Salary issues must be done in an honest, open, and above-board manner (as with all financial transactions of the church). In principle and functionally, all financial transactions of the church (except for details of the deacons' fund and giving statements) must be made readily available at all times to the membership of the church. Any changes of salary or honoraria given to anyone who fills the office of pastor/elder/overseer (or deacon) ought to be communicated to the church for a defined period of assessment and comment. MABC's current system with a church treasurer (and book-keeper) who oversees the day-to-day management of the finances as well as financial secretary who privately keeps track of the giving of individuals is a good and functional system with good division of duties and adequate oversight to ensure that all financial transactions are above board. Regular financial reports in informational meetings or made available online should also be continued and made available to the body on an ongoing basis.
- B. It's not an issue of power (the leadership vs. the congregation). It's an issue of wisdom, fidelity to God's Word, and unity. This is not my church. This is not your church. This is Christ's church, so we must do things according to **His** Word, and the pastors/elders/overseers are to lead in this. Leaders should lead biblically, faithfully, and transparently and the body should trust and follow their leaders while faithfully searching (Acts 17:11) and obediently following God's Word (Heb 13:17).
- C. The primary role of the pastors/elders/overseers of the church is to "determine God's will and then make sure that it's carried out."
- VI. **How should MABC consider implementing pastor/elder/overseer leadership moving forward?**
- A. This is likely a 1-2-year project at a minimum.
 - B. Preaching through 1 Timothy was the first step, and this biblical explanation and exhortation is the second step. The third step will involve a conversation of the church in order to answer questions and to determine how we move forward. ***We need to have this discussion.***
 - C. Clearly, we will need to reassess our doctrinal statement and bylaws in this area in a slow, deliberate, and intentional manner.
 - D. The church board should begin a review of the church bylaws (which includes the doctrinal statement) immediately at board level (Pastor Robb with 1-2 other board members). As with any other church decision, any recommended changes would be presented to the board to assess and to make any adjustments, etc. Once the board has made its determination of recommended updates to the bylaws, the church will need to

have time to review them, all questions should be answered, and based on current bylaws, they will have to be voted on by the congregation.

- E. In the meantime, we continue to function faithfully under the current bylaws.
- F. In addition, Pastor Robb will begin to take initial men who aspire to eldership and who he and the current board determine are qualified to lead them through a path of doctrinal training/preparation (depending on previous training and current doctrinal knowledge), character assessment and growth, and leadership assessment and growth.
- G. Council of elders – since we don't have this to start (we have one elder), we ought to use respected elders from sister churches to give us counsel, and we should allow our current deacons to help/assist the elder we do have in guiding the church through this process and in the development and preparation of potential future elders (as we are currently doing). Should the church agree to a change in the bylaws in the future to follow elder leadership as outlined above, then a transitional period of leadership will have to be determined so that the deacons can help to fill in the gap until an adequate number of elders (perhaps 3-4) are ordained.
- H. As far as fielding questions from the church, I believe that that is best done on a fairly individual basis so as to be able to have frank conversations and not to stir up discord. The board will continue to lead the regular quarterly business meetings of the church and any additional meetings will be held in accordance with the current church bylaws.

Thank you for reading this document and for considering my theological conclusions. Please feel free to set up a time to come and talk to me for any questions.

Together for His glory!