

“The Majority”

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Every week, people seem to be freaking out over something political, or some event that has political ramifications. This week, people were freaking out over the news that Anthony Kennedy is retiring from the Supreme Court. That means that our president, Donald Trump, will be able to nominate a new judge to fill Kennedy’s open slot, which means that Trump will be able to place two judges on the Supreme Court in two years. Anthony Kennedy was known as the swing vote on the Court. Though he was nominated by a Republican president, Ronald Reagan, he often voted in favor of so-called liberal decisions. If he’s replaced by a conservative judge, that means there will be five conservative judges on the Supreme Court bench. If Ruth Bader Ginsburg, who is 85, retires or dies in the next two years, Trump could place three judges on the Supreme Court.

Now, all of this means that some people are happy, and other people are upset, depending on their politics. Isn’t it strange how so much can hinge on one person? Really, it’s a sign that our government isn’t working the way it ought to be. In fact, that so much can hinge on the presidency shows that our government isn’t working well. Congress should make the laws, the president and his administration should make sure the laws are carried out, and the Supreme Court should determine if laws (and their execution) are constitutional. But the reality is things aren’t work well, and big decisionx are often made by one individual. And that’s strange in a country of over 300 million people.

What about the church? Are all decisions made by one person, or a small group of people? What role does the congregation play in making decisions? I have spent considerable time in this series talking about the role of pastors, or elders, or overseers. (Again, these three terms are used of the same people.) I stressed that they are the shepherds of the church, the leaders. But does this mean that all decisions are made by them? Can the congregation make decisions?

Today, I’m going to talk about the role the congregation plays in making decisions. And since it’s hot and we’re also going to take the Lord’s Supper, I’ll try to make this sermon as short as possible. So, I’ll tell you up front what the Bible seems to say about the congregation’s role in making decisions. In short, the congregation helps decide who is in, and who is out. The

congregation has some role to play in determining who can join a church or who must leave a church. The congregation may also play a role in affirming who can serve as ministers.

To see this, we're going to look at some passages in the Bible. The two most important ones we'll look at are 1 Corinthians 5 and 2 Corinthians 2. We'll also take a peak at some other passages along the way.

So, let's first read 1 Corinthians 5. This is part of a letter that the apostle Paul wrote to the church in the city of Corinth, part of what we now call Greece.

¹ It is actually reported that there is sexual immorality among you, and of a kind that is not tolerated even among pagans, for a man has his father's wife.

² And you are arrogant! Ought you not rather to mourn? Let him who has done this be removed from among you.

³ For though absent in body, I am present in spirit; and as if present, I have already pronounced judgment on the one who did such a thing. ⁴ When you are assembled in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus, ⁵ you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

⁶ Your boasting is not good. Do you not know that a little leaven leavens the whole lump? ⁷ Cleanse out the old leaven that you may be a new lump, as you really are unleavened. For Christ, our Passover lamb, has been sacrificed. ⁸ Let us therefore celebrate the festival, not with the old leaven, the leaven of malice and evil, but with the unleavened bread of sincerity and truth.

⁹ I wrote to you in my letter not to associate with sexually immoral people—¹⁰ not at all meaning the sexually immoral of this world, or the greedy and swindlers, or idolaters, since then you would need to go out of the world. ¹¹ 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. ¹² For what have I to do with judging outsiders? Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?

¹³ God judges those outside. "Purge the evil person from among you."¹

Let's quickly review what we see in this passage. Paul calls out some sinful behavior in the Corinthian church. He says that "a man has his father's wife." He means that a man is having a sexual relationship with his father's wife. This is probably his stepmother, because Paul doesn't say "his mother," which would be even more shocking. Still, this is very bad, the kind of behavior that not even the pagans tolerated. And that's saying something, because sexual practices in the Roman Empire would make us blush.

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version (ESV).

What I want us to pay attention to today is the fact that Paul addresses the whole church. He's not just writing to the pastors, the elders, or overseers. He's not saying, "Hey, pastors, why have you allowed this? Kick this man out of the church!" No, he says the whole church is failing. Instead of mourning, the people are boasting and are arrogant. Maybe they're boasting about how tolerant they are, or how diverse they are. But Paul knows that what this man is doing is evil, and even a little evil has a way of producing a big effect, just as a little yeast can leaven a large amount of dough.

So, Paul tells the church, "you are to deliver this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord."² That sounds intense, doesn't it? What does it mean to hand someone over to Satan? Well, at the least it means removing that person from the protection of the church. Paul wanted this man to be excommunicated, at least for a time. Whenever the man would be removed from the church, he would no longer experience the blessings of the church. His sin would be exposed. He was to be treated like a nonbeliever. Perhaps Paul thought that God would punish this man in some physical way, by using Satan to afflict the man with an illness. But Paul is clear that he wants the man to be saved from condemnation.

This episode shows what is at stake in the church. The great problem of humanity is our separation from God. Our problem is that we start out life with a broken relationship. Something is wrong with us, a power that corrupts us and keeps us from God. That something is sin, the power of evil and rebellion that leads us to reject the one true God and replace him with something else as our ultimate authority. Sin leads to condemnation. Why? Because God doesn't want evil spreading throughout the world. He is patient. He is merciful. He puts up with our sin. But he won't put up with it forever. There will be a time when he calls us all to account, when all our sins are judged. And we will pay for them.

We will pay—or someone else will. But the only person who can pay for our sins, besides us, is Jesus. He is the Son of God, who has always existed, through whom God the Father created the universe, and who also became a human being over two thousand years ago.

² It's interesting that Paul's life sometimes echoes the life of Jesus. In verses 3 and 4, when Paul says that he is absent in the flesh but present in the spirit (because he had spent time in Corinth and was now writing from elsewhere), he is likening himself to Jesus, who is in heaven but is present with his people through the indwelling Holy Spirit. Of course, the Spirit of God is greater than the spirit of Paul, and perhaps this was Paul's way of making the church realize that. In other words, if Paul is absent and his spirit compels the church to act in a certain way, how much more should they act in accordance with the Holy Spirit, who is with them though Jesus is in heaven.

He is the only human being who lived a perfect life. He always obeyed God perfectly because he has always loved God perfectly. Yet he was treated like a criminal, like an enemy of the state and of the Jewish religion. And he was killed, put to death on a cross. This was because people hated him and didn't believe him. But it was also God's plan, to have his Son bear the punishment of sinners. All who turn to Jesus in faith, who trust that he is who he claimed to be and that he has accomplished what the Bible says he has, have their sins paid for. They are reunited to God. They are forgiven of all wrongdoings. And though they die, they will rise from the grave when Jesus returns, just as Jesus rose from the grave on the third day.

But since Christians are united to Jesus, and since the church is where Jesus dwells on earth, by means of the Holy Spirit, we shouldn't keep sinning. Of course, we will sin. We still wrestle with our old nature. But we shouldn't want to sin and as a church we cannot allow flagrant, egregious sins to occur. Sin has a way of corrupting the whole church. And more than that, it makes Jesus look bad. So, the church should monitor such behavior. Paul says, "Is it not those inside the church whom you are to judge?" He doesn't mean judge in an ultimate way. Neither you nor I can determine if someone truly knows Jesus. God knows the heart; we don't. But Paul means judge in the sense of evaluate. We certainly can look at someone's behavior and say, "This isn't right. This isn't what Christians should do." Notice that Paul says we should make a distinction between what happens in the church and the world. Christians in America have this a bit backward. We spend all our time judging those outside the church and very little time judging those inside the church. Paul says we can't separate ourselves from non-Christians, or else we would have to leave the whole world. But we can separate unrepentant sinners from the church, and that's what we should do. "Purge the evil from your midst"—that's a command that is repeated throughout the Old Testament book of Deuteronomy (Deut. 13:5; 17:7, 12; 21:21; 22:21, 22, 24).

What Paul is commanding here is no different than what Jesus taught his disciples. In Matthew's Gospel, Jesus told the disciples how the church should deal with sin. This is what he says in Matthew 18:15–20:

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. ¹⁸ Truly, I say to you, whatever you bind

on earth shall be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth shall be loosed in heaven.¹⁹ Again I say to you, if two of you agree on earth about anything they ask, it will be done for them by my Father in heaven.²⁰ For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them.”

Jesus says that if a person has sinned against you, it is your responsibility to approach that person directly. Don't gossip. Go to that person and point out his or her wrong. If they see the error of their ways, “you have gained your brother”—or your sister. But if that person will not listen, then things escalate. The next step is to take another person or two. These people will bear witness to whether the sinning brother or sister is repentant or not. But if that person still won't listen, then he or she should be brought before the church. And if they refuse to listen to the judgment of the whole church, then they should be removed and treated like a non-Christian.

In both cases, the goal is to bring the sinning person to repentance. But there is another goal, which is to purify the church. And when the whole church says to a sinning person, “This kind of behavior won't be allowed here,” it sends a strong message.

It's not just flagrantly immoral behavior that deserves excommunication. That is, it's not just things like sexual immorality, or violence or stealing or things we think are “really bad.” Paul also says that people who are divisive should be avoided. In Romans 16:17–19, part of another letter that Paul wrote to a different church, Paul writes,

¹⁷ I appeal to you, brothers, to watch out for those who cause divisions and create obstacles contrary to the doctrine that you have been taught; avoid them.
¹⁸ For such persons do not serve our Lord Christ, but their own appetites, and by smooth talk and flattery they deceive the hearts of the naive.¹⁹ For your obedience is known to all, so that I rejoice over you, but I want you to be wise as to what is good and innocent as to what is evil.

Divisive people can be obviously divisive, the kind of people who complain and argue and fight. But they can also be quietly divisive. Either way, divisions in the church threaten the health of the church, and divisive people must be avoided and, if necessary, removed from the church. The same is true of people who teach false doctrine. Paul tells the church in Galatia that anyone who comes teaching a different message is accursed (Gal. 1:8–9). And in 1 Timothy, Paul said that he removed a couple of men who were blaspheming (1 Tim. 1:18–20).

In each case, Paul says that the church should be involved. In another passage, 2 Corinthians 2:5–11, Paul says that a majority of the church had brought a punishment upon a person. This may or may not be the same person that Paul mentions in 1 Corinthians 5. In this

case, the person has attacked Paul personally, but he has also caused pain to the whole church. If that were the man of 1 Corinthians 5, it's likely that the man resisted any correction, attacked Paul's authority, and then later the church excommunicated him. But it could be someone else. But, for our purposes, it doesn't matter. What matters is that the punishment was voted on. Let's read what Paul writes:

⁵ Now if anyone has caused pain, he has caused it not to me, but in some measure—not to put it too severely—to all of you. ⁶ For such a one, this punishment by the majority is enough, ⁷ so you should rather turn to forgive and comfort him, or he may be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. ⁸ So I beg you to reaffirm your love for him. ⁹ For this is why I wrote, that I might test you and know whether you are obedient in everything. ¹⁰ Anyone whom you forgive, I also forgive. Indeed, what I have forgiven, if I have forgiven anything, has been for your sake in the presence of Christ, ¹¹ so that we would not be outwitted by Satan; for we are not ignorant of his designs.

Here, it seems as though the rebuke of the whole church has brought this person to a godly sorrow. Paul worries that if the punishment continues, it might produce “excessive sorrow.” So, he asks the church to forgive and comfort him. If not, they are playing into Satan's schemes. Satan wants a divided church; he also wants an unforgiving church.

Now, I have to make this point: the fact that Paul says a majority of the church brought the punishment upon the sinner means that there is a definite number of people who voted. And, I would argue, it means that there should be definite church membership, or a roll of members.

Some people don't like the idea of church membership. They think it is unbiblical because there is no one verse in the Bible that says, “You must officially join a local church.” It's true that there is no one verse that says so much. But the concept of an official membership of a local church is presupposed in several passages. This is one of them. Who could vote against the unrepentant sinner? Did they take a vote on a Sunday, and everyone who showed up, including people who came for the first time, vote? That doesn't make sense. But what about someone who had come for a month? Or someone who came to the church for a few years but refused to join and officially submit to the authority of the church?

Joining a local church is important because it's a sign of commitment. Joining a church says, “This is my church. I belong here. I submit to the leaders of the church. I commit to these people. I will serve and love them. I am also committed to the spiritual health and purity of the church. And if someone starts messing with the church, I am prepared to take action.” That's a

big deal. I think churches suffer greatly because people don't make that kind of commitment. And I think a lack of commitment to a local church speaks volumes about the level of commitment people have to Jesus.

What we have seen so far is that the congregation has a role to play in bringing discipline to unrepentant members. And what Paul writes suggests that there was an official vote. I think, by implication, that the reverse is true: when people officially join a church, the church should vote on that. The reason is that members of a church may know more than the pastors know about a person, their reputation, and their behaviors. When a potential member is brought before a church, it is like when a pastor asks at a wedding if there is any reason why the couple shouldn't be married. The Book of Common Prayer says, "Therefore if any man can shew any just cause, why they may not lawfully be joined together, let him now speak or else hereafter for ever hold his peace." In the case of church membership, perhaps someone in the congregation knows why a person shouldn't join the church.

There are also other things that churches may vote on, at least according to Scripture. In the book of Acts, we see the church active in determining who served the church and who were sent as missionaries. Now, we have to be careful, because what is descriptive in the Bible isn't always prescriptive. To put it another way, what is narrated isn't always normative. There were some unique things that happened in the early church. But in Acts, we see that the apostles asked the church to find seven men who could serve widows in the church (Acts 6:1–7). We looked at this passage two weeks ago when talking about deacons. So, it might be that the congregation has a role to play in deciding who serves in the church. Elders in churches were appointed, but perhaps that was something that apostles had authority to do. Now that we don't have apostles, perhaps the church should determine who leads. Or, perhaps at the least, the church should affirm the decisions of those who are serving as elders. If a team of elders, or pastors, or overseers, recommend that another person join their ranks, they should ask the church to affirm their decision. That way, the church is making a statement: "We will submit to this man's leadership."

In the book of Acts, the church in Antioch laid their hands on Paul and Barnabas and sent them off as missionaries (Acts 13:1–3; 15:3). The whole church in Jerusalem, with the apostles and the elders of the church, chose a couple of men (Judas and Silas) to go with Paul and

Barnabas to Antioch to deliver a letter (Acts 15:22). So, it would seem that the church has the authority to send people for certain purposes, and the church should vote on that, too.

The Bible does not speak of the congregation voting on all manner of other things, like a church budget or special purchases. But there is wisdom in having a church vote on such things. God uses the congregation to affirm the decisions of leaders. And the congregation, by voting, says, “We will financially support the church’s budget.”

The Bible does not teach anything about committees that consist of lay people. I suppose the leaders of the church can delegate authority and ask committees to serve for certain purposes. But it’s worth considering what Mark Dever, a pastor and author, says: “The congregation’s authority is more like an emergency brake than a steering wheel. The congregation more normally recognizes than creates, responds rather than initiates, confirms rather than proposes.”³ The elders of the church should be the ones that have their hands on the steering wheel, directing the church as God has directed in the Bible and as the Holy Spirit leads. The congregation can act as an emergency brake if they see that something wrong is clearly happening. The congregation can also recognize what God is doing through its leaders and the congregation can affirm what the leaders have decided.

So, what does this mean for us? I think the main thing we should consider today is that all Christians should care about the health of a local church. And that requires commitment. It requires knowing the people of the church, knowing them well enough to know if there is some egregious sin in their lives. Also, when we read the pages of the New Testament, we get the sense that all Christians should take ownership of the local church. They should care about the welfare of the church. They should serve in the church, which is something I’ll talk about next week.

If you’re here today and have not yet officially committed to this church, I would urge you to make that commitment. We will be inviting some of you personally to do that, and we will announce when a membership class is meeting. If you aren’t a member of this church, I invite you to be more than a consumer. A consumer comes and takes. And, yes, a consumer gives money. But a member of a church is more than that. A member cares about the whole body. A member cares about the health of the whole body. Do you care about this church enough to want to make it better?

³ Mark Dever, *The Church: The Gospel Made Visible* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2012), 143.

If everyone who comes to this church joined the church and was truly committed to the church, we would be much better off. More people serving would mean we could accomplish more things. When few people serve, a great burden is put on a relatively small number of people. The 80/20 rule says that 80 percent of the work is done by 20 percent of the people. That's probably true of this church. That means those 20 percent are taxed and burdened. It also means that we struggle to keep up with the basics. Instead of working on new things, like doing more outreach, we struggle to keep up with the basics of meeting together in worship and taking care of the building. We need more help. We need commitment. And beyond serving, the health of the church requires commitment. We should be committed not only to our own spiritual health, but the spiritual health of other people in the church.

I also need to say this: If you're here today and you're not yet a Christian, I would urge you to make a commitment to Christ now. There is no other Savior, no other one who can make you right with God and grant you eternal life. To reject Jesus is to reject God. And to reject God is to reject your Maker and the very purpose of your life.

Right now, I'm asking that all of us—even myself!—become more committed. Let us love one another. Let us care about each other's souls. Let us care about the purity of the church, the reputation of the church, and the direction of the church. The church is where Jesus dwells on earth. Let us make sure his house is in good order.