

NEW MEMBERS CLASS #3

THE GOVERNMENT AND DISCIPLINE OF THE CHURCH

recorded 9-27-11 31:19

Today we focus again on membership Vow #5 which says, *I submit myself to the government and discipline of the Evangelical Presbyterian Church and to the spiritual oversight of this church Session, and do promise to promote the purity and peace of the church.* Earlier we covered the last part of that vow, about the purity and peace of the church. Now let's get to understand what we can about the church's government and discipline to which our members promise their submission or subjection. And we'll begin with that concept of submission. Hebrews 13:17 *Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.* I get asked fairly often about what membership in a church really means. And a large part of that is found in this verse in Hebrews and in the concept of submitting to church leaders. We'll look at what submission means, but first consider with me what submission assumes. I am going to read some verses and you see if you can get my point about what submission assumes. James 5:14 says *if anyone is sick, let him call for the elders of the church and let them pray over him.* I Peter 5:5 says *be subject to your elders.* I Timothy ch.3 lists several qualifications for those who would serve the church as elders. I Timothy 5:17 *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor.* 19 *Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.* I Thessalonians 5:12-13 *But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work.* Now then – what is it that all of those verses assume? (pause) Really, it is so obvious that most of us miss it. What is assumed in all of these passages is that you, the Christian, will have spiritual leaders, church leaders, right? Absolutely. This is basic to Christian living. Assumed by the New Testament. But I find that individualistic Americans cannot relate to this idea of having spiritual leaders in your life. It is foreign to us, although central to New Testament living. I had an experience with a neighbor years ago that I think makes my point. My wife and I had as neighbor, a Christian woman who was a divorcee. And one day, she showed up at

my office asking if I would perform her wedding. This took me by surprise since she was a member at another church and very much liked her own pastor. So I asked, "why me? Why aren't you asking your own pastor?" And you know what she said? Well, her pastor had told her that since she had been divorced and her fiancée was divorced that they would have to go through three months of pre-marital counseling before the wedding. Now, think about this. Why would a church come up with a rule like that? Only one reason. They are genuinely concerned to see that their people don't hop from one bad marriage into another one without some preparation. The rule was developed for her good, but what does she do? Follow the wisdom of her spiritual leaders? Submit to church authority? No, she slips out from under them and shops elsewhere for a preacher. Well, she didn't get one in me. I sent her back to her own pastor and advised her to follow his counsel. So, what do you think she did? She went out and found a minister who didn't ask questions. Now, what I saw in her I see all over. The idea of having a spiritual authority, an overseer was foreign to her, as it is to many of you. But it is a basic element of discipleship in the New Testament. And the system is designed by God for the good of his people. So don't fight it. Don't run away from your shepherds, don't bite them, don't kick them. Let them do their job with joy, not with grief.

So, having seen what submission assumes, consider now what it means. And it means two things: obedience and respect. ® It means that you regard your leaders with esteem as I Thessalonians 5 indicates. And it means that you follow, without dissension, the rules they lay down. If some of the teachings and policies of the church don't suit you, that is precisely when the admonition to submit comes into play. My guess is that your disagreements with our leadership won't be over major issues of the gospel. They may have to do with our requirements for membership or our worship policies and so forth. On these things I recommend you quietly submit. When I was an assistant pastor many years ago, I held a theological view that differed from the elders of that church. So, what did I do? I avoided teaching on those areas where I disagreed. If someone asked me my position I would tell them honestly, but I would speak with respect for the positions of our leaders. That is what submission means. And note, that it is perfectly fine to express your disagreements to those in authority. It's funny, I've encountered folks who are upset with the elders of our church, but they won't talk to us because they are "too timid." But

they weren't too timid to criticize the elders before others. Well, listen, if you are too timid to talk to us, be too timid to talk **about** us.

When you consider what I am saying here about submission. When you read how the New Testament says we are to relate to our elders, you can see, I think, just how important the elders are in a church's life. These guys are critical. When I accepted the call to be pastor of this church the major factor in my consideration was the character and quality of the elders. Outside of my immediate family, the most important people in my life are the men who share with me in the leadership of our church. For not just you, but I too am called to be subject to them in the Lord.

Time to look together now at how our church government works. And we begin with the most important principle, which is that Jesus Christ is the King and Head of the church. And if He is the Head, guess who is not? Well, I certainly am not. And you aren't either. The pope of Rome is not our head. The church is not a democracy where majority rules. Christ is the King. What He says goes. Now, most everyone in every church would agree with that in principle, but in practice it often goes unheeded. You will notice the cartoon which says, "*Our bylaws specifically state that the will of God cannot be overturned without a two-thirds majority vote.*" In many churches a simple majority will do the job. AW Tozer is one of my favorite writers and the last thing Tozer wrote was an article entitled, "The Waning Authority of Christ in the Churches." In it Tozer argued that even in most Bible-believing churches, the place of Jesus is similar to that of the king or queen of England. It is a title of prestige, but not of real authority. In England, they bring out the queen for parades and ceremonies, but what real authority does she have? Little or none. And in the church we sing about Jesus. We put His name on the banners. We call Him the Lord, but we often ignore His commands. Our commitment as a church is to treat Jesus as King in every practical matter of the church. If Jesus has spoken to an issue in His word, it is not open for debate. He is the King.

The next principle of church government is that Jesus the King rules by His written word. We believe the Bible to be the inerrant word of God. II Timothy 3:**16** *All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness.* So, we have a King, not just in theory, but in reality, because our King has spoken to us. The implications for church rule here are enormous. If the word of God

speaks to the role of women in the church we don't need to debate it, just obey it. If the word of God tells us how to worship, then we follow that word. And if you believe the leaders of your church need to change their direction, the best way to argue for that is with an open Bible in your hand.

Alright then. We want Jesus ruling us, through the Scriptures. But there are lots of churches who will want that, but end up going terribly different directions. Why? It is because even still, the rule of Christ must be mediated through men. You can't get away from that. In every organization and every church there is someone or someones calling the shots, making the decisions, determining the values. In our church those men are called "elders." They are the rulers, and the lordship of Christ is mediated through them. And if Christ is going to practically rule the church through men those men must have a knowledge of his word, and a personal walk with Christ, so that they develop the mind of Christ and have their decisions shaped by His word and will. In short, the elders must know Christ and be walking closely to Him. They have to be men of God or else the rule of Christ will never get past theory in our church.

So again we see the importance of our elders. But the elders in our system of government are themselves subject to the constitution of the church. For us that constitution consists of the Westminster Confession and the Book of Order. The Book of Order is an operations manual for us. The Book of Order is approved by the higher courts of the church and is mandatory for each church in the EPC.

Okay, it is time to get a look at the government and judiciary of the church. Before I tell you how things work in our system, let's look at the three basic approaches to church government. There are essentially three forms of church government out there. The first is the Episcopal form of government which you find in what church? The Episcopal church for sure, but it is maybe best known as the form of government for Roman Catholics. If we diagram it we end up with a triangle, and at the head of the triangle is one man. In the case of the Roman Catholics it is the pope. Tremendous power is vested in one guy. Now, you come down from that and you have the college of cardinals, and then down to the next lower court all the way down to the local church. But you see in this system the power essentially comes from the top down and invests more authority in smaller numbers. The second type of church government is congregationalism which you

will find in any kind of independent churches, and in Baptist churches. Congregational government means that the church is not bound by its connections. It is like an island. There is no one outside of the local church who can tell that church what to do. The government within a congregational church may differ, but the basic idea is that there is no authority higher than the local congregation. The third type of government is Presbyterian. And that of course, is ours. Presbyterian government is connectional like the Episcopal form, but power does not descend from on high so much as it rises from beneath. Presbyterian government is like an inverted triangle and is representative in form. In the EPC we have three courts. The lowest court is found in the local church and is called the Session, which is the term we use for the elders functioning as a whole. And each Session then sends up representatives to the next highest court which is the presbytery. And the presbytery sends its people to the General Assembly which is the highest court and the one with the largest number of decision-makers. Presbyterianism then is a representative form of government. I happen to believe it is the most biblical form of church government, and to make my case I invite you to look at Acts 15.

Acts 15 begins in Antioch and it says in Acts 15:1-2 *Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, "Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved."* 2 *And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.* Stop right there and take a look at what is going on. You have a local church experiencing conflict. There are some teachers there claiming that you have to become a Jew before you can be a Christian. Paul and Barnabas say, "No no." How were they going to settle this matter? They might have approached it like Congregationalists and called a meeting there in Antioch, letting both sides present their case and then voting. But they didn't. They might have approached it like Episcopalians or Catholics and just written for Peter's ruling on the matter, but they didn't. Instead they approached the problem like Presbyterians. They saw that this was an issue of significance for the broader church. They were not isolating themselves from the others. And they saw the importance of representation and debate. So, Acts 15: 4-6 *When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they*

*reported all that God had done with them. 5 But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses."6 The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter. So, they had a meeting. They had debate and thus reached a conclusion. You didn't have to become a Jew before becoming a Christian. Then notice what they did. **22-23** Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas--Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren 23 and they sent this letter by them, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. Tell me, did these churches see themselves as independent islands? Not at all. I would not die over this, but I do believe the system of government functioning in Acts and the early church is best represented in our day by Presbyterianism.*

Let's look specifically now at how our denomination works. There are three distinct courts of the church. The highest of those three is the General Assembly. The GA meets once a year at various locations for four days to carry out its business. All the teaching elders (what you think of as clergy) are eligible to come and vote. In addition, each church may send at least two ruling elders (laymen) to the General Assembly. Normally we get around 800 at these meetings. And the General Assembly addresses a number of things. It deals with changes to our Book of Order. It makes pronouncements at times concerning public civil policy. It oversees the work of denominational agencies such as our world missions committee. It handles cases brought up from the presbyteries. And more. The General Assembly.

Next we come to the intermediate court, which is the Presbytery. A Presbytery consists of about 10-30 churches in a given geographical area. We are in the Presbytery of the Alleghenies which encompasses churches in several states. The geographical center is around Portersville to the north of us. It includes churches from New York, Ohio, West Virginia, and mostly Pennsylvania. The Presbytery meets 4 times a year for 1.5 day-long meetings. All the teaching elders in our region are members of presbytery and each church may send at least two ruling-elder commissioners. We spend most of our meeting time trying to develop and examine up-and-coming new teaching elders or pastors. The

presbytery is concerned to insure the quality of church leadership in our region. The presbytery spends most of its money on the task of starting new churches. The presbytery also serves as sort of the pastor to the pastors. If a pastor falls into sin, it is the presbytery that moves in to deal with him so the local church doesn't have to. The presbytery may also hear cases of conflict from our local churches, a situation that is thankfully rare among us.

Thirdly, we look at the lowest court of the church, which is the Session or the board of elders. The session is the governing body of the local church, elected by the members of the church. In the New Testament there are two terms used for this office. The first term is the Greek word *presbuteros* which is translated in most versions as “elder” and has particular reference to the function of rule and authority. The second term is the Greek word *episkopos* which is translated often as *overseer*. And this word has particular reference to the function of a shepherd or pastor. In Acts 20 we find the apostle Paul calling for the elders of the Ephesian church 20:17 *From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.* That is the term *presbuteroi*. And having called the “elders” he says to them in verse 28 *Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopoi), to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.* My point in reading that is to show that elders have not only two titles in the New Testament, but two roles, that of ruling and that of shepherding.

Now, in our church we have two types of elders. There are what we call Teaching elders. Teaching elders you normally will call “pastors.” Jonathan Shirk and I are currently the only ones of these in our church. We presently have seven of what we call “ruling elders.” Ruling elders are normally lay-leaders in the church. The difference is simply that teaching elders have been especially trained and examined for the work of teaching. I Timothy 5:17 *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.* These teaching elders have no more authority than ruling elders. Both get just one vote in the court and both are called to do the work of shepherding.

Now, to do that job of shepherding effectively and efficiently we have devised a two-pronged system designed to give us contact with the entire membership of our church.

The first prong is our small-group ministry. We encourage everyone who joins at North Park to be a member of a small group. And when someone is a part of a small group we regard that small group leader as being our link with the individual church member. Each small group is either led by an elder or is under the oversight of a particular elder who communicates with the small group leader about the spiritual welfare of those in the group. If a member of the small group drops out or seems to be having problems, it is the duty of the elder-overseer to contact the church member and intervene in whatever way may be appropriate. The second prong of our shepherding system involves the use of the family registers that you fill out on Sundays. Those registers alert us when someone has been missing from worship for a period of time, and when we discover that, the elders share in the responsibility of contacting those missing members to discern what is going on in their worlds that may need our attention. And if this should ever happen to you I urge you to appreciate the role God has assigned these elders to play in your life.

Now let's talk about the office of deacon in the church. In the New Testament church there were clearly two offices – that of elder and deacon. In I Timothy 3 you find the qualifications for the office of elder and for the office of deacon. We take both lists very seriously, and they are not identical. From the New Testament we learn more about the office of elder than we do about that of deacon. But it seems that the deacons served the church in more of an administrative role, giving oversight to the physical and material needs of the people. In our church the deacons are in charge of maintenance, mercy and hospitality. They care for the property and buildings of the church. They oversee our welcome to those who come on our campus. And they lead us in our expressions of mercy, caring for the poor and hurting. So, we have two officers in our church. Elders and deacons. But please note, the elders have oversight of the deacons and have the final say in all matters concerning the church.

Finally, let's look at the powers of congregational members. And there are five. In our system of government, the Session has lots of authority, but the congregation does have to meet to vote on the following items. #1 is to elect officers. #2 is to call pastors or teaching elders. They also have to vote to fire them, but you don't have to worry about that. #3 the congregation must vote to buy or sell property. #4 The congregation would have to vote for us to withdraw from the denomination. And #5 the congregation would

need to vote to approve a pulpit committee for the calling of a Sr. Pastor. There are times when the elders may see fit to put a matter before the congregation that is not on this list. But apart from these five the elders may make all other decisions affecting the church. And again you see that the men who are put in that office are very important. In our church those guys go through serious scrutiny. Before a man ever appears on a ballot he has been carefully examined by the Session.

Time now to talk about the discipline of the church. And to do this we need to look at I Corinthians chapter 5:1-2 *It is actually reported that there is immorality among you, and immorality of such a kind as does not exist even among the Gentiles, that someone has his father's wife. 2 You have become arrogant and have not mourned instead, so that the one who had done this deed would be removed from your midst.* So here is the situation in Corinth. You have a guy in the church who apparently is shacking up with his step-mother. He is in serious open, blatant immorality. And what had the church done about it? Apparently nothing. The man was still a member of the church. So Paul tells them this in verse 3 *For I, on my part, though absent in body but present in spirit, have already judged him who has so committed this, as though I were present.* Then in verse 9 *I wrote you in my letter not to associate with immoral people.* Uh-oh. Some of you won't be able to go to work tomorrow will you? Well, maybe you can. 10 *I did not at all mean with the immoral people of this world, or with the covetous and swindlers, or with idolaters, for then you would have to go out of the world.* That's good. We can still have a life. But read on. 11-12 *But actually, I wrote to you not to associate with any so-called brother if he is an immoral person, or covetous, or an idolater, or a reviler, or a drunkard, or a swindler--not even to eat with such a one. For what have I to do with judging outsiders?* The implied answer is "nothing." *Do you not judge those who are within {the church?}* And the implied answer is, "yes." You see Paul is making a distinction between those who are members of the church, those wearing the name of Jesus and those who do not. The church is concerned with the behavior of its own, those so-called brothers. They may be phonies, but if they are in the church they get disciplined when they are out of line and this fella in Corinth was surely out of line. So, what was the church to do? Lovingly, graciously, but firmly kick the man out of the church and deprive him of their fellowship. This is church discipline and there is a shameful lack of it going on.

Look with me quickly at the purposes of church discipline. And there are four. The first is the glory of God. When we call ourselves by His name, His reputation is now on the line. And we communicate something untrue about God when we tolerate lawlessness in the church. In order to glorify God we must deal seriously with serious sin. The second purpose of discipline is the reclaiming of the sinner. Remember how Matthew 18 says that if you reprove a brother for sin and he listens to you, you have won your brother? That is what we are hoping for. It doesn't always happen, but sometimes it does. God uses discipline to bring someone to his senses. The third purpose of discipline is the protection of the whole from the one. I Corinthians 5 says that a little leaven leavens the whole lump of dough. Rebellious persons tend to spread a spirit of rebellion, and it is not wise to let that go on. The fourth purpose of discipline is to maintain purity in the church. Discipline of one member serves as warning to others. In Acts 5, after the Lord dealt with Ananias and Saphira, it said that everyone was in fear. I Timothy 5:20 *Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful {of sinning.}* Now we can't put a person in stocks or anything, but we can let you know that if you decide to run away from the Lord we will be coming after you doing whatever we can to make you stop and think.

Now to the means of discipline. How does the process actually work? Well, it starts with the order covered in Matthew 18. There is a private confrontation, a private rebuke. If that is not effective, then it may be told to the Session of the church. The Session will do what fact-finding they can and if there is a strong presumption of guilt we hold a trial. Any person found guilty and unrepentant comes under censure. And there are basically three types of censure. One is admonition, which is a formal slap on the hand. Another is excommunication which is the excision of a person from the membership of the church. The third censure is suspension which is a temporary removal from the privileges of membership, including the Lord's table. Suspension is designed to give extra time for repentance before moving on to excommunication. The third step in discipline, that is often necessary, is the announcing of it to the congregation. In the case of excommunication, part of the discipline is the loving ostracism of the guilty party. And we need the whole church to understand the issues and take part in that element of the discipline. Furthermore, we generally find it best that everyone be informed about what is

going on just to know how to love on the injured parties, and how to pray for all involved.

You may be wondering how often this goes on. Thankfully, it does not happen that often. But listen, when you join our church you are inviting us to have this kind of biblical role in your life. And we feel obligated to you and to our King to follow His word in this matter, no matter how uncomfortable it may be.

I close with this quote from James Blankinship:

James Blankinship wrote this little ditty, "I think that I shall never see a church that's all it ought to be; a church whose members never stray, beyond that straight and narrow way. A church that has no empty pews, whose preacher never has the blues; where elders "eld" and deacons "deek" and none is proud, and all are meek. Where gossip never peddles lies; or makes complaints or criticize. Whose members all are sweet and kind, and to each other's faults are blind. Such congregations there may be, but none of them is known to me; So let us work and pray and plan, to make this church the best we can."