

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 5: CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Elder-Led, Congregationally Accountable

Lesson 16

COMPARING MODELS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational Polity

The question of polity is not a question of organizational preference but of faithfulness to the apostolic deposit — and those who disagree on it charitably are often closer than they think.

“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.”

Acts 20:28, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 14:23; 15:1–35; 20:28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; Matthew 18:17; 1 Peter 5:1–5

“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.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

Unit 5 has built its argument from the ground up: the two biblical offices (Lesson 13), the consistent apostolic pattern of plural eldership (Lesson 14), and the congregation's genuine governance role alongside the elders' genuine leadership authority (Lesson 15). This final lesson of the unit steps back from the detailed exegetical work of the preceding three lessons and surveys the terrain from a wider altitude: how does the model this series endorses, elder-led, congregationally accountable, relate to the three major traditions of Protestant church governance? What are the genuine strengths and the characteristic failure modes of each tradition? And how does the charitable, text-grounded believer engage the polity question across confessional lines?

The three major models of Protestant church governance are episcopalism, Presbyterianism, and congregationalism. Each has deep roots in the history of the post-Reformation church, each claims scriptural warrant for its distinctive features, and each has produced faithful, theologically serious, pastorally fruitful congregations across centuries and cultures. None of the three is the exclusive property of a single denomination: episcopalism appears in Anglican, Catholic, Methodist, and some Lutheran traditions; Presbyterianism is the governance norm of Reformed and Presbyterian churches and has influenced many Baptist associations; congregationalism is the characteristic polity of Baptist, Congregationalist, and many independent evangelical churches. The diversity of polity traditions within orthodox Protestantism is not primarily a failure of the church's ecclesiological discernment; it is a reflection of the genuine complexity of the New Testament's governance data and the sincere disagreement of godly interpreters about how to weight and apply it.

The lesson proceeds through each model in sequence, describing it accurately, identifying its genuine contributions to ecclesiological thought, and assessing its principal vulnerabilities. It then describes the Reformed Baptist model of elder-led congregationalism as the synthesis that draws on the genuine strengths of both Presbyterianism and congregationalism while resisting the characteristic failure modes of each. The lesson closes with a sustained reflection on the posture of charitable disagreement: the conviction that polity matters enough to think carefully and advocate clearly, but not so much that differences on polity should fracture the fellowship of those who share the apostolic deposit at its most vital center, the gospel of Jesus Christ.

A note on tone and approach: this lesson engages each of the three models with the same charity and the same exegetical seriousness that this series has brought to every contested question. The goal is not polemical victory over the episcopal or Presbyterian traditions but honest, informed engagement with the genuine arguments on all sides, engagement that can strengthen the Baptist conviction by exposing it to the best arguments against it, and that can model for the congregation the kind of theological seriousness and charitable spirit that genuine ecumenical engagement requires. The Reformed Baptist position will be clearly defended; the other positions will be fairly represented. This is the only kind of comparative theology worth doing.

I. EPISCOPAL POLITY

The Bishop as the Source and Center of Ecclesial Authority

A. *The Episcopal Model Described*

Episcopal polity is the governance model in which authority is vested in a hierarchy of bishops who exercise oversight over multiple congregations and whose ordination constitutes the church's apostolic continuity. The term comes from the Greek *episkopos*, meaning overseer or bishop, and episcopalism in its various forms represents the oldest continuous tradition of church governance in the post-apostolic period. By the middle of the second century, a three-tier hierarchy of bishop, presbyter, and deacon had become the dominant governance structure across the Mediterranean world, and by the fourth century it had been so thoroughly institutionalized that it was effectively inseparable from the identity of the catholic church. The Roman Catholic tradition represents the fullest development of episcopal governance, with the bishop of Rome claiming universal jurisdiction over all other bishops through the doctrine of papal supremacy; but episcopalism in less hierarchical forms is also the governance norm of Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Methodism, and some Lutheran traditions.

The essential features of episcopal governance are the bishop's authority to ordain, to confirm the faith of members, and to exercise oversight over a defined geographical area (the diocese) that encompasses multiple congregations. The bishop is not merely a senior pastor among other pastors; he is an order of ministry categorically distinct from the presbyters who serve the local congregations under his oversight. The bishop's ordination, received in an unbroken chain of laying on of hands stretching back (in the Roman and some Anglican claims) to the apostles themselves, is what constitutes the church's apostolic continuity and what validates the sacraments administered within his jurisdiction. The local congregation exists within the bishop's diocese, is governed by a priest or presbyter appointed by or with the bishop's approval, and participates in a larger ecclesiastical structure that transcends the local assembly.

The genuine contributions of the episcopal tradition to ecclesiological thought are worth acknowledging. Episcopal governance has historically provided a mechanism for maintaining doctrinal unity across a geographically dispersed church, the bishop's oversight serves as a check on the local congregation's tendency toward idiosyncratic theological development. Episcopal governance has also historically provided a continuity of pastoral succession that protects congregations from the organizational disruption of leadership transitions: the bishop appoints and the bishop oversees, so the local congregation has institutional continuity even when individual clergy depart. And the episcopal tradition's emphasis on the church's visible unity, expressed through the communion of bishops who share the apostolic faith, captures a genuine biblical conviction about the church's catholicity that more radically decentralized governance models sometimes struggle to express.

B. *The Episcopal Model Assessed*

The Baptist tradition's assessment of episcopal polity is one of principled disagreement on exegetical grounds. Lesson 13 established the case in detail: the New Testament uses the terms *elder* (*presbyteros*) and *overseer* (*episkopos*) interchangeably for the same office within the local congregation. There is no New Testament evidence for a bishop as a distinct, superior order of ministry above the local elders, exercising jurisdictional authority over multiple congregations. The three-tier hierarchy of bishop, presbyter, and deacon that emerged in

the second century and that characterizes episcopal governance across its many forms was not a direct and explicit development of apostolic instruction; it was the church's early institutional development in the post-apostolic period, shaped by the practical needs of a geographically expanding community and the theological pressures of second-century heresy.

The doctrinal of apostolic succession, the claim that the validity of ordination and sacraments depends on an unbroken chain of episcopal ordinations reaching back to the apostles, is the most theologically significant and most exegetically problematic element of the episcopal tradition. Lesson 13 addressed the Baptist alternative: apostolicity is a doctrinal category, not an institutional one; the church is apostolic insofar as it faithfully teaches what the apostles taught, not insofar as its leaders can trace an unbroken chain of ordination to the apostles' successors. The historical argument against apostolic succession as the criterion of ecclesial authenticity is as powerful as the exegetical one: the medieval papacy, which by Rome's own criteria stood in unbroken succession from Peter, presided over centuries of doctrinal corruption that the Reformers were compelled to address by returning to the apostolic deposit in Scripture, not by appealing to the institutional lineage of the hierarchy.

The Baptist critique of episcopal governance does not deny that episcopal churches can be genuine churches of Jesus Christ; many of them clearly are, by the three-mark standard of faithful preaching, right administration of the ordinances, and church discipline. The critique is that episcopal governance adds to the New Testament's two-office structure a third, hierarchically superior order that the New Testament does not authorize, vests that order with sacramental authority that the New Testament does not assign to any institutional office, and creates a governance structure that tends toward clericalism, the distinction between a governing clerical class and a passive laity, that the servant-leadership model of Matthew 20:25-28 and 1 Peter 5:1-5 is specifically designed to resist.

II. PRESBYTERIAN POLITY

A Plurality of Elders in Representative Assembly

A. The Presbyterian Model Described

Presbyterian polity is the governance model associated primarily with the Reformed tradition stemming from John Calvin's Geneva and developed in the ecclesiastical structures of the Church of Scotland, the various Presbyterian churches of the English-speaking world, and the continental Reformed churches. The term comes from the Greek *presbyteros*, meaning elder, and Presbyterianism is, at its core, an insistence on elder governance, both at the local level and at the regional and national levels where representative assemblies of elders exercise authority over larger ecclesial structures. The distinctive feature of Presbyterianism that distinguishes it from both episcopalianism and congregationalism is the representative assembly: the local church is governed by its session (the body of elders), but the session is accountable to a presbytery (a regional assembly of elders from multiple congregations), which is accountable to a synod, which is accountable to a general assembly. The authority flows both downward (from the general assembly through the synod and presbytery to the session) and upward (from the session through the presbytery and synod to the general assembly).

The theological ground of Presbyterianism's representative assembly structure is its reading of the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 as an authoritative apostolic precedent for the resolution of disputes between local

congregations through a representative assembly of the broader church. On the Presbyterian reading, the Jerusalem Council is the prototype of the presbytery: a gathering of apostles and elders from multiple churches that deliberated about a matter affecting the whole church and rendered a binding decision that all the churches were expected to observe. The Presbyterian tradition draws from Acts 15 the principle that no local congregation is entirely self-governing; every local congregation is accountable to the broader body of Christ, expressed through a representative assembly of qualified elders from multiple congregations.

The genuine contributions of the Presbyterian tradition to ecclesiological thought are substantial. Its insistence on a plurality of qualified elders at the local level, a conviction shared by this series, is one of the most important correctives to the single-pastor model that dominates Baptist practice. Its representative assembly structure provides a mechanism for the resolution of inter-congregational disputes, the maintenance of doctrinal standards across multiple congregations, and the coordination of mission efforts at a scale that individual congregations cannot achieve alone. And its confessional tradition, the Westminster Confession of Faith and Catechisms, the Heidelberg Catechism, the Belgic Confession, represents some of the most rigorous, comprehensive, and pastorally serious doctrinal formation in the history of Protestantism, products of a governance culture that values theological precision and doctrinal accountability.

B. The Presbyterian Model Assessed

The Baptist tradition's assessment of Presbyterian polity is one of genuine respect combined with a specific disagreement about the authority of the representative assemblies. The disagreement turns on the reading of Acts 15. Lesson 15 noted the Jerusalem Council's significance for the elder-led congregationally accountable model, but the Baptist reading of Acts 15 is different from the Presbyterian reading at a crucial point: the Baptist does not conclude from Acts 15 that subsequent representative assemblies of elders from multiple congregations have binding authority over local churches. The Jerusalem Council was an apostolic gathering, the apostles themselves were present and their authority gave the council's decisions a weight that no subsequent assembly of non-apostolic elders can replicate. The principle of multiple-congregation consultation and deliberation is genuinely illustrated in Acts 15, but the binding authority of the council's decision rested on the apostolic presence and authorization, not on the representative character of the assembly per se.

The Baptist critique of Presbyterian polity focuses on the authority of the regional and national assemblies over local congregations. The New Testament pattern, as Lessons 13-15 have established, is the governance of the local church by its own qualified elders, accountable to the gathered congregation and to Christ through His Word. The New Testament does not describe a regional assembly of elders with binding authority over multiple congregations' doctrinal, disciplinary, and governance decisions. The 1689 Confession's understanding of the relationship between local churches is one of voluntary fellowship and mutual assistance, churches supporting and consulting with one another, sending representatives to one another, cooperating in mission, but not of institutional subordination of one congregation to a regional governing body. The authority of the presbyteries, synods, and general assemblies over local sessions that Presbyterian polity establishes is, from the Baptist perspective, an institutional development that the New Testament does not authorize.

The practical failure mode of Presbyterian polity, the tendency of the higher assemblies to drift from the doctrinal standard to which they are supposed to hold the churches accountable, is one of the most well-documented patterns in the history of Reformed Christianity. The mainline Presbyterian and Reformed denominations of the twentieth and twenty-first centuries provide sobering case studies in how the representative assembly structure,

designed to maintain doctrinal faithfulness across multiple congregations, can become an instrument for imposing doctrinal deviation when the assembly itself departs from the confessional standard. The local congregation that is institutionally subordinate to a doctrinally compromised assembly has no structural means of maintaining its doctrinal integrity without the painful and costly process of leaving the assembly's jurisdiction, a process that the Baptist congregation, by virtue of its local autonomy, is spared. Local autonomy has its own risks, as the Baptist tradition's history amply demonstrates; but the specific risk of having the congregation's doctrinal faithfulness determined by a governing assembly that no longer holds the apostolic deposit is a risk that the congregationalist structure is specifically designed to prevent.

III. CONGREGATIONAL POLITY

The Gathered Church as the Seat of Ecclesial Authority

A. The Congregational Model Described

Congregational polity is the governance model in which ultimate human authority under Christ resides in the gathered local congregation, self-governing, autonomous, and accountable to Christ alone through His Word. The congregational tradition emerged in England and the Low Countries in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth centuries as a protest against both Roman episcopal governance and the emerging Presbyterian structures of the English and Scottish Reformations. Its early advocates, Robert Browne, John Robinson, Henry Barrow, and the Separatist communities that eventually produced both the Pilgrim Fathers and the early Particular Baptists, argued from the New Testament that the local assembly of covenanted believers is the basic and sufficient unit of the church's governance, requiring no external authority above itself for its life and ministry. The gathered church, assembled in Christ's name, under Christ's Word, governed by Christ's Spirit, is the church; and no authority above the local congregation, no bishop, no presbytery, no synod, no general assembly, has governance jurisdiction over it.

The Baptist tradition is the most enduring and most widespread heir of the congregational principle, and the 1689 Confession's formulation of the congregational principle is among the most precise in the tradition: each particular church is 'a complete assembly of the whole, so that they may be governed by their own internal discipline and administration.' The local church is complete in itself, it is not a subdivision of a larger ecclesiastical structure, it is not accountable to any external governance body, and it is not dependent on any institutional hierarchy for the validity of its ministry or its sacraments. Its only ultimate authority is Christ Himself, exercised through His Word and through the Spirit who guides the gathered assembly in its discernment of that Word's application to the congregation's life.

The genuine contributions of the congregational tradition to ecclesiological thought are centered on its convictions about the nature of the new covenant community and the character of ecclesial authority. The congregationalist insistence that the local assembly of genuine believers is the basic unit of the church, not a subdivision of a hierarchical institution but a complete expression of the church's essential nature, is a genuine and important truth. The congregationalist insistence on the congregation's accountability to Christ alone, expressed through its corporate discernment of His Word rather than through institutional submission to external authorities, captures the New Testament's conviction about the priesthood of all believers and the Spirit's

guidance of the gathered community. And the congregationalist tradition's historic commitment to religious liberty, the conviction that the state has no authority over the church's governance and that each congregation has the right to order its life according to its own faithful reading of Scripture, is one of the most significant political-theological contributions in the history of Protestant Christianity.

B. The Congregational Model Assessed and the Baptist Synthesis

The characteristic failure mode of congregational polity is well known and honestly acknowledged within the tradition: the tendency of congregational governance to degenerate into pure democracy, factional politics, and the tyranny of the least-informed and most-opinionated members of the assembly. When the congregation's authority is not held in balance by the genuine leadership authority of qualified elders, when every pastoral decision is subject to congregational vote, and when the culture of the community is characterized by the kind of factional spirit that Paul condemns in 1 Corinthians 1-4, the governance dysfunction that results is not merely organizational inconvenience; it is a genuine threat to the congregation's mission, its doctrinal integrity, and its pastoral health. The Baptist tradition's history includes far too many congregations that have been reduced to institutional paralysis or factional warfare by an unbalanced emphasis on the congregation's authority at the expense of genuine elder leadership.

The Baptist synthesis, the elder-led congregationally accountable model that this unit has defended, represents the tradition's most mature and most biblically faithful response to the characteristic failure mode of pure congregationalism. By combining the Presbyterian emphasis on a qualified plurality of elders with the congregational emphasis on the gathered church's final authority in specific domains, the elder-led congregational model addresses both the weakness of pure congregationalism (insufficient elder leadership) and the weakness of pure episcopalism or Presbyterianism (insufficient congregational accountability). The elders lead, discern, preach, govern, and shepherd with genuine authority; the congregation exercises its binding and loosing authority in discipline, affirms and tests its leadership, and maintains its Berean vigilance over the apostolic deposit. Neither the elders nor the congregation governs alone; the Spirit governs through both, in the pattern that the apostolic record has established.

The elder-led congregational model is not a compromise between Presbyterianism and congregationalism that leaves both dissatisfied. It is the reading of the New Testament's governance data that takes with full seriousness both the consistent apostolic pattern of plural, qualified elder leadership and the consistent apostolic pattern of congregational participation in specific governance acts. The Presbyterian is right that qualified elder leadership is essential; the congregationalist is right that the gathered assembly has genuine governance authority; the elder-led congregationalist insists that both are right and that the New Testament's own pattern integrates them. The disagreement with Presbyterianism is not about the importance of elder plurality or the value of inter-congregational fellowship but about whether the New Testament authorizes binding inter-congregational governance authority. The disagreement with pure congregationalism is not about the congregation's genuine authority but about whether that authority is sufficient without genuine elder leadership.

IV. THE REFORMED BAPTIST POSITION

Elder-Led Congregationalism as the Biblical Synthesis

A. The Strengths of Elder-Led Congregationalism

The elder-led congregationally accountable model that this series has defended over the course of four lessons draws on the genuine strengths of both the Presbyterian and congregational traditions while guarding against the characteristic failure modes of each. From the Presbyterian tradition it draws: the insistence on a qualified plurality of elders as the apostolic pattern for local church governance; the conviction that the elder's office requires genuine theological formation, proven character, and the congregation's recognition; the emphasis on the elder's teaching and governing authority as real and substantial rather than merely advisory; and the vision of a community formed in the whole counsel of God through the faithful ministry of a body of qualified teachers. These are genuine and important contributions, and the Baptist tradition's characteristic neglect of plural eldership is a genuine failure that the Presbyterian tradition's consistent advocacy for qualified elder governance helpfully corrects.

From the congregational tradition it draws: the insistence that the local assembly of genuine believers is the basic and sufficient unit of the church's governance; the conviction that the congregation's binding and loosing authority in discipline, leadership selection, and doctrinal vigilance is genuine and non-delegable; the emphasis on the congregation's direct accountability to Christ through His Word rather than through institutional submission to external authorities; and the historic Baptist commitment to the local church's autonomy and to the voluntary character of all inter-congregational fellowship. These are genuine and important contributions, and the Presbyterian tradition's tendency to vest binding governance authority in representative assemblies is a genuine departure from the New Testament's pattern that the congregational tradition's insistence on local autonomy helpfully resists.

The synthesis of these two genuine contributions produces a model that is both elder-led and congregationally accountable in the specific senses that the New Testament's own governance pattern requires: elder-led in the sense that qualified, plural elders genuinely govern the congregation's pastoral, theological, and organizational life with the authority that Hebrews 13:17 assigns to those who keep watch over souls; congregationally accountable in the sense that the gathered assembly genuinely exercises the binding and loosing authority, leadership selection voice, and doctrinal vigilance responsibility that Matthew 18:17, Acts 6:3, and Acts 17:11 assign to the covenant community. The model's strength is precisely its refusal to sacrifice either of these genuine biblical convictions in the name of institutional simplicity.

B. The Weaknesses to Guard Against

The elder-led congregationally accountable model has its own characteristic failure modes that honest self-assessment requires acknowledging. The first failure mode is the degeneration of congregationalism into mob rule or factional politics when the balance tips too far toward congregational authority at the expense of genuine elder leadership. Lesson 15 addressed this failure mode in detail; the congregation that votes on every pastoral decision, that treats its elders as employees subject to popular review, and that allows the most vocal and most organized factions to determine governance outcomes has not maintained the elder-led dimension of the model.

The guard against this failure mode is the congregation's genuine formation in the apostolic deposit, its genuine submission to the elders' leadership in the domains assigned to the elder body, and the elders' genuine exercise of the pastoral authority that Hebrews 13:17 assigns to them.

The second failure mode is the degeneration of elder leadership into authoritarianism when the balance tips too far toward elder authority at the expense of genuine congregational accountability. Lesson 14 addressed this failure mode in the context of the single-pastor reality; Lesson 15 addressed it in the context of the elder body's accountability to the congregation. The congregation that allows its elders to govern without transparency, that has no mechanism for raising concerns about elder conduct or doctrine, and that has created a culture in which the congregation's governance authority is never genuinely exercised has not maintained the congregationally accountable dimension of the model. The guard against this failure mode is the congregation's genuine exercise of its governance authority in the three specific domains, the elders' genuine openness to the congregation's accountability role, and the culture of mutual trust and transparency that makes the balance sustainable.

The key to maintaining the balance, as Lesson 15 argued, is not primarily structural but cultural: a culture of genuine trust, genuine transparency, and genuine mutual submission to the Word that makes both the elders' genuine leadership and the congregation's genuine accountability possible and natural. The congregation that has this culture will find the governance structure supports it; the congregation that lacks this culture will find that no governance structure can supply what the culture is missing. The ongoing cultivation of this culture, through faithful preaching that forms the congregation in the apostolic deposit, through pastoral relationships that create the trust on which accountability depends, and through the elders' consistent demonstration of the servant-leadership character that 1 Peter 5:1-5 requires, is the most important governance work any congregation can do.

V. COMPARING THE THREE MODELS

Strengths, Weaknesses, and the Apostolic Standard

A. *A Comparative Assessment*

A fair comparative assessment of the three models requires the same standard to be applied to each: the apostolic standard of the New Testament's own governance pattern, as this series has argued it should be understood. Applied consistently, this standard yields the following assessment. Episcopalianism's genuine strength, providing a mechanism for maintaining doctrinal unity and pastoral continuity across multiple congregations, is purchased at the cost of adding an office (the bishop as a superior tier above the local elders) that the New Testament does not authorize and of vesting in that office sacramental and ordination authority that the New Testament distributes across the two authorized offices. Episcopalianism's characteristic failure mode, the clericalism that treats the congregation as a passive recipient of the clergy's ministry rather than as an active participant in the church's governance, is the predictable consequence of concentrating governance authority in a hierarchical tier that the congregation cannot meaningfully hold accountable.

Presbyterianism's genuine strength, the qualified plurality of local elders, is the element of Presbyterian governance that the elder-led congregational model most directly inherits and most earnestly commends to Baptist practice. The Presbyterian tradition's characteristic failure mode, the representative assemblies' exercise of binding authority over local congregations in a way the New Testament does not authorize, is a departure from

the apostolic pattern that creates the specific vulnerability of having the local congregation's doctrinal faithfulness determined by a governing body it cannot adequately hold accountable to the Word. The Baptist's disagreement with Presbyterianism is a narrower and more specific disagreement than his disagreement with episcopalianism; the two traditions share the conviction about qualified plural elder leadership that is the most important single element of the apostolic governance pattern.

Congregationalism's genuine strength, the local assembly's governance authority and its direct accountability to Christ through His Word, is the element of congregational governance that the elder-led model most directly inherits and most earnestly defends. The congregational tradition's characteristic failure mode, pure democracy, is the degeneration of the congregation's genuine governance authority into governance by majority preference rather than by apostolic standard, producing the factional politics and mob rule that the critics of congregationalism have always warned against. The guard against this failure mode is the genuine elder leadership that the elder-led congregational model insists on, and that the pure congregational model too often lacks. The Baptist's disagreement with pure congregationalism is a narrower and more specific disagreement than his disagreement with episcopalianism; the two traditions share the conviction about the congregation's governance authority that is the second most important element of the apostolic governance pattern.

B. The Apostolic Data and Its Complexity

The honest engagement with all three models requires acknowledging that the New Testament's governance data is genuinely complex in ways that make the disagreements among faithful interpreters intelligible and, in some cases, irreducible. The New Testament does not provide a systematic governance manual; it provides a collection of apostolic practices, instructions, and precedents that require careful interpretation and responsible application. The episcopalist is not simply misreading the New Testament when he notes that the apostles exercised a form of oversight over multiple congregations that resembles episcopal jurisdiction; he is over-extending that apostolic precedent into a permanent institutional structure that the New Testament does not explicitly authorize. The Presbyterian is not simply misreading the New Testament when he reads Acts 15 as precedent for representative assemblies with binding authority; he is applying that precedent to post-apostolic assemblies in a way that does not adequately account for the unique apostolic authority that gave the Jerusalem Council its binding character. The congregationalist is not simply misreading the New Testament when she insists on the gathered assembly's governance authority; she is right about the assembly's authority but sometimes wrong about its sufficiency without genuine elder leadership.

The recognition that all three traditions are engaged in genuine, good-faith interpretation of the same apostolic data, and that none of them is simply ignoring or misreading the New Testament, is the theological basis for the charitable posture that the conclusion of this lesson will advocate. The difference between the Baptist and the Presbyterian on the question of binding inter-congregational authority is a difference about how to interpret Acts 15 and about the weight to give the New Testament's pattern of local elder governance; it is not a difference about the authority of Scripture or the necessity of qualified elder oversight. The difference between the Baptist and the Episcopalian on the question of the bishop's order and apostolic succession is a more fundamental governance disagreement, but even here both traditions are wrestling with genuine New Testament data about the apostles' oversight of multiple congregations and the continuity of the church's apostolic identity. The Baptist is confident in his reading of that data, and this series has argued for that reading with exegetical seriousness; but

the confidence is combined with genuine acknowledgment of the data's complexity and genuine respect for those who read it differently.

VI. CHARITABLE DISAGREEMENT

Polity Matters, but Polity Does Not Divide the Church

A. Why Polity Matters

The comparative analysis of this lesson is not motivated by a conviction that polity is an adiaphoron, an indifferent matter about which Christians may hold any view without theological consequence. Polity matters because governance structures have real consequences for the health of congregations, the accountability of leaders, the protection of members, and the faithfulness of the community's witness. The congregation governed by an unaccountable episcopal hierarchy is a congregation that is structurally exposed to pastoral abuse and doctrinal drift. The congregation governed by binding representative assemblies is a congregation that is structurally vulnerable to having its doctrinal faithfulness determined by the theological trajectory of institutions it cannot fully control. The congregation that has no genuine elder leadership is a congregation that is structurally deprived of the pastoral quality and governance wisdom that qualified plural eldership provides. These are real consequences that affect real people in real communities, and the theological analysis of polity is not an exercise in abstract institutional theory but a genuinely pastoral concern for the welfare of the congregations that the analysis describes.

Polity also matters because it is an expression of how the church relates to Christ's authority over it. The congregation that governs itself according to the apostolic pattern, however imperfectly, is a congregation that is demonstrating its submission to the apostolic deposit in one of the most concrete and institutional forms available. The congregation that dismisses polity as a secondary matter of organizational preference has implicitly claimed that the governance structures of the church are not subject to the apostolic deposit's normative authority, a claim that is inconsistent with the doctrine of Scripture's sufficiency for every matter of faith and practice. The Baptist tradition's insistence on ordering the church's governance according to the New Testament's own pattern is not a form of legalistic biblicism; it is the logical consequence of taking the doctrine of Scripture seriously in the domain of ecclesial governance.

The specific polity convictions that this series has defended, the two-office structure, the plural eldership, the congregation's governance authority in specific domains, the local church's accountability to Christ alone, are convictions that this ministry holds with genuine theological conviction and advocates with exegetical seriousness. They are not held as mere preferences or cultural inheritances; they are held as the most faithful available reading of the apostolic governance pattern. The congregation that is formed in these convictions and that practices them with integrity is, in the judgment of this ministry, a congregation that is most fully aligned with the apostolic standard for the governance of the local church.

B. Why Polity Should Not Divide Christians from One Another

At the same time, the polity convictions of this series are held with the humility that genuine theological engagement with the complexity of the New Testament data requires. The faithful Presbyterian elder who has

spent his ministry in the service of his session, his presbytery, and his general assembly, whose theological formation has been shaped by the Westminster Standards and whose pastoral care has been enriched by the inter-congregational fellowship that the Presbyterian system provides, is a man whose governance convictions deserve respect and charitable engagement, not dismissal. The Anglican vicar who shepherds his congregation within the historic episcopal structures of his tradition, whose preaching is faithful to the apostolic deposit, and whose pastoral ministry reflects the servant-leadership model that the New Testament requires, is a man whose ecclesiological home is different from the Baptist's but whose commitment to the gospel is not. These are genuine brothers in Christ, and the differences in governance structure between their communities and the Baptist congregation do not negate the unity of the Spirit that the apostolic faith creates.

The charitable acknowledgment of polity differences requires a clear-headed assessment of which differences rise to the level of gospel-level concerns and which remain within the range of good-faith disagreement among those who share the apostolic deposit at its center. The Baptist's conviction that the bishop's office as a superior tier above the local elders is not authorized by the New Testament is a genuine conviction that should be maintained and advocated; but the Episcopalian whose preaching faithfully proclaims the gospel of Jesus Christ and whose pastoral ministry demonstrates the servant-leadership that Christ modeled is a brother whose governance structure the Baptist can disagree with without questioning his standing before God. The distinction is not between important and unimportant theological convictions; it is between those convictions that are constitutive of saving faith and those that, however significant, do not determine whether a person is in Christ.

The posture that this lesson commends is the posture that the best of the Baptist tradition has always maintained in its most mature expressions: clear conviction about the apostolic governance pattern as the Baptist reads it, willingness to advocate for that reading with theological seriousness and exegetical care, genuine respect for those who read the same data differently and come to different conclusions in good faith, and the sustained commitment to the gospel as the center around which all those who confess it gather, whatever their governance structures, in the unity of the one Spirit, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all. The polity debate is a family argument about how best to organize the household; it is not a debate about whether Christ is Lord, Scripture is authoritative, and the gospel is the power of God for salvation.

VII. THE UNIT IN RETROSPECT

What Unit 5 Has Established and Why It Matters

A. The Four-Lesson Argument

Unit 5 has moved through four closely related lessons that together constitute the series' account of the elder-led congregationally accountable model of church governance. Lesson 13 established the two offices of elder and deacon as the New Testament's complete and sufficient structure for local church governance, argued for the terminological equivalence of elder, overseer, and bishop, and examined the qualifications and responsibilities of both offices. Lesson 14 established the apostolic pattern of plural eldership, argued for its wisdom on both theological and pastoral grounds, addressed the single-pastor reality with pastoral honesty, and made the case for the intentional development of future elders through the 2 Timothy 2:2 pattern. Lesson 15 established the congregation's genuine governance authority in the three specific domains of discipline, leadership selection, and

doctrinal vigilance, and argued for the balance between genuine elder leadership and genuine congregational accountability that the apostolic pattern requires. This lesson has surveyed the comparative polity landscape, placed the elder-led congregational model in relation to the three major Protestant governance traditions, and made the case for charitable engagement with those traditions across the polity divide.

The four lessons together constitute a positive vision for the governance of the local church that is, in the judgment of this series, the most faithful available reading of the New Testament's own governance pattern. The vision is not utopian: it acknowledges the single-pastor reality, the difficulty of achieving genuine plural eldership in smaller congregations, the characteristic failure modes of both the elder authority and congregational authority dimensions of the model, and the genuine complexity of the New Testament governance data that produces sincere disagreement among faithful interpreters. But it is a vision grounded in exegetical seriousness about what the apostolic record consistently describes, pastoral wisdom about why the apostolic pattern serves the church's health, and theological conviction that the church's governance should correspond to the authority that Christ has exercised through His Word and His Spirit in the apostolic deposit.

The practical challenge that follows from this four-lesson argument is the challenge that every congregation faces in its specific, particular, historically located form: the challenge of governing the community of the redeemed with the qualifications, the plurality, the accountability structures, and the relational culture that the apostolic standard describes, not perfectly, not immediately, but faithfully and with deliberate, patient movement in the direction that the New Testament points. This is the challenge that Unit 5 has been preparing every congregation and every member to take up with theological seriousness, pastoral courage, and the confident expectation that the Builder who has promised to build His church is also the one who has provided, in His Word, the governance pattern by which that building most faithfully proceeds.

B. Looking Forward to Unit 6

Unit 5's four lessons on church government close with a sense of both completion and anticipation. The governance unit has addressed the most structurally complex dimension of the doctrine of the church, the question of who has authority over what, and how that authority is exercised, checked, and transmitted in the covenant community of the redeemed. Having established the framework of elder-led congregational governance, the series now turns from the structural to the sacramental: Unit 6 addresses the ordinance of baptism, one of the two visible words that Christ has given His church as the enacted proclamation of the gospel and the covenant sign of new covenant membership.

The transition from governance to ordinances is theologically significant, not merely a shift in subject matter. The ordinances are administered within the governance structure that Unit 5 has established: the elders oversee the administration of baptism and the Lord's Supper; the congregation participates in both ordinances as members of the covenant community that the elders shepherd; and the ordinances themselves are among the most direct expressions of the ecclesiological convictions that the governance unit has defended, above all, the Baptist conviction that the new covenant community is defined by personal regeneration and faith, and that baptism is the sign administered to those who personally bear the new covenant reality. Unit 6 will make the theological and exegetical case for this conviction with the same rigor and the same pastoral concern that Unit 5 has brought to the governance question. The governance and the ordinances together constitute the visible, institutional, week-by-week expression of what the church is, the covenant community of the redeemed, gathered under the Word,

administered by qualified servants, sealed by the ordinances, and governed by Christ through His Spirit and His apostolic deposit.

“And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.”

Acts 14:23, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Episcopal Polity	The governance model in which authority is vested in a hierarchy of bishops who exercise oversight over multiple congregations and whose ordination constitutes the church's apostolic continuity. The dominant governance tradition from the second century onward. Characteristic of Roman Catholicism, Eastern Orthodoxy, Anglicanism, Methodism, and some Lutheran traditions. The Baptist critique: the bishop as a superior tier above the local elders is not authorized by the New Testament's own use of elder and overseer as synonymous terms.
Presbyterian Polity	The governance model in which a plurality of local elders governs the congregation through a session, with broader authority exercised through representative assemblies (presbytery, synod, general assembly). Dominant in Reformed and Presbyterian traditions. The Baptist critique: while sharing the conviction about qualified plural elder leadership, the Presbyterian's representative assemblies exceed the New Testament's authorization by exercising binding authority over local congregations.
Congregational Polity	The governance model in which ultimate human authority under Christ resides in the gathered local congregation. The local church is self-governing, autonomous, and accountable to Christ alone through His Word. The characteristic Baptist polity. The characteristic failure mode: degeneration into pure democracy, factional politics, and mob rule when not held in balance by genuine elder leadership authority.
Diocese	In episcopal polity, the defined geographical area over which a bishop exercises jurisdictional authority, encompassing multiple congregations. The bishop's governance of the diocese is the basic unit of episcopal ecclesial structure, corresponding to the role the local congregation plays in congregational polity. The concept has no direct New Testament counterpart.
Session	In Presbyterian polity, the body of ruling and teaching elders that governs the local congregation. Corresponds roughly to the elder body in the elder-led congregational model. The session is accountable to the presbytery above it and exercises authority over the congregation below it. The Baptist analog has elder authority flowing horizontally to the congregation rather than vertically to a higher assembly.
Presbytery	In Presbyterian polity, the regional assembly of elders from multiple congregations within a defined geographical area, exercising governance authority over the sessions within its boundaries. The Baptist objects to the presbytery's binding authority over local congregations but affirms the value of voluntary inter-congregational fellowship and mutual assistance that the presbytery structure also provides.
Apostolic Succession	The doctrine, central to episcopal polity, that the church's apostolic continuity and sacramental validity depend on an unbroken chain of episcopal ordinations stretching back to the apostles. The Baptist alternative: apostolicity is a doctrinal category (fidelity to the apostolic teaching in Scripture), not an institutional one. Rejected on both exegetical and historical grounds: the medieval papacy stood in unbroken succession from Peter but presided over centuries of doctrinal corruption.
Local Autonomy	The congregational principle that each local church is self-governing and accountable to Christ alone through His Word, without institutional submission to any external governing body. The Baptist tradition's formal expression of this principle is in the 1689 Confession's description of each particular church as 'a complete assembly.' The positive expression: each congregation directly under Christ's authority through His Word; the negative expression: no bishop, presbytery, synod, or assembly has governance jurisdiction over the local church.

Reformed Baptist	The theological tradition that combines the Reformed (Calvinist) soteriology of grace alone, faith alone, Christ alone with the Baptist convictions about believers' baptism, regenerate church membership, and congregational polity. Formally expressed in the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith. The governance model of Reformed Baptists is typically elder-led congregationalism: combining the Presbyterian emphasis on qualified plural elder leadership with the congregational emphasis on the gathered church's final authority in specific domains.
Inter-Congregational Fellowship	The voluntary cooperation and mutual support of local congregations in mission, theological formation, and pastoral assistance, without the binding governance authority that Presbyterian polity vests in its representative assemblies. The Baptist alternative to Presbyterian connectional polity: churches relating to one another as peers in voluntary association, not as subordinate units in a governing hierarchy. Expressed institutionally through Baptist associations and conventions, which have advisory but not binding authority over member churches.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the question of church government is a genuine theological question that deserves careful, text-grounded attention, not a secondary matter of organizational preference that can be set aside as practically irrelevant. Polity has real consequences for the health of congregations, the accountability of leaders, the protection of members, and the faithfulness of the community's witness. The governance structures of the church are subject to the normative authority of the apostolic deposit, and the congregation that orders its governance according to the New Testament's own pattern is expressing its submission to that authority in one of the most concrete and institutional forms available.

We must believe that the three major Protestant governance traditions are each engaged in genuine, good-faith interpretation of the same apostolic data, and that the differences among them are intelligible and, in some cases, genuine matters for continued charitable debate. The Baptist's confidence in the elder-led congregational reading of the apostolic data is combined with genuine acknowledgment of the data's complexity and genuine respect for those who read it differently. Charitable engagement with the polity question across confessional lines is not a form of theological indifferentism; it is the mature recognition that those who disagree about polity while sharing the apostolic deposit at its center are family members having an argument about household governance rather than strangers at odds over fundamental questions of identity.

We must believe that the elder-led congregationally accountable model, as this unit has argued for it, is the most faithful available reading of the New Testament's governance pattern, and that this conviction, honestly held and openly advocated, is entirely compatible with genuine respect for faithful Christians in episcopal and Presbyterian traditions. The conviction does not require the dismissal of the other traditions' genuine contributions to ecclesiological thought, the caricature of their positions, or the refusal of Christian fellowship with those who hold them. It requires the clear articulation of the Baptist reading, the honest engagement with the best arguments against it, and the consistent pastoral application of the model's principles to the life of the specific congregation in which the teaching is given.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a renewed appreciation for the specific governance tradition that has shaped the community we are part of, not as an inherited preference to be defended against criticism, but as a theologically grounded conviction to be held with intellectual humility and pastoral seriousness. The Baptist tradition's elder-led congregationalism is not simply what Baptists have always done; it is, as this unit has argued, the most faithful available reading of the apostolic governance pattern. That conviction should produce not pride in the tradition but gratitude for the careful theological work that has articulated and defended it across centuries.

We should feel a genuine desire to engage the polity question across confessional lines with the charity, theological seriousness, and mutual respect that the best of the Baptist tradition has always modeled. The Presbyterian elder who governs his congregation with the wisdom of plural eldership and the Episcopalian bishop who shepherds his diocese with the servant-leadership of 1 Peter 5 are fellow servants of the Chief Shepherd, however differently their governance structures are organized. The Baptist's disagreement with them is the family

disagreement of those who share the household of faith, not the absolute division of those with incompatible ultimate commitments.

We should desire for this congregation to embody the elder-led congregationally accountable model with the theological seriousness that four lessons of careful argument have prepared it to bring. Not as a governance ideal that is always in the future, but as a present, practical, weekly commitment: elders who genuinely lead; a congregation that genuinely holds accountable; a culture of mutual trust and transparency that makes the balance sustainable; and the shared conviction that the governance of this community is not a matter of institutional preference but of faithfulness to the apostolic deposit that Christ has entrusted to every generation of His church.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- Read the 1689 Second London Baptist Confession of Faith, Chapter 26, sections 5-15, as the confessional articulation of the governance convictions that this unit has argued for. Compare the Confession's formulations with the New Testament texts that this unit has examined. Where the Confession is clear and precise, note it with gratitude. Where the Confession leaves questions open or where the unit's argument has gone further than the Confession, note the development.
- Identify one thoughtful representative of a different polity tradition, a Presbyterian or Anglican author whose theological work you have not read before, and read one of their arguments for their governance model this month. Engage it with the theological seriousness it deserves: identify its strongest argument, assess its exegetical foundation, and articulate the Baptist response. Bring your assessment to the next study session as a contribution to the group's engagement with the polity question across confessional lines.
- Evaluate this congregation's governance against the four-lesson argument of Unit 5: Does it have the two offices functioning according to their biblical definitions and distinctions? Is it currently pursuing genuine plural eldership or has it accommodated to the single-pastor norm as a permanent arrangement? Does the congregation genuinely exercise its governance authority in the three specific domains of discipline, leadership selection, and doctrinal vigilance? Is the governance culture characterized by mutual trust and transparency or by some form of imbalance? For each question, identify one specific, concrete improvement.
- Pray for the broader Protestant church across its polity divisions: for the Presbyterian elder who is laboring to maintain his congregation's doctrinal faithfulness within a denomination that has drifted from its confessional standard; for the Anglican bishop who is shepherding his diocese through the theological turmoil of institutional disagreement; and for the Baptist pastor who is building a genuine plural eldership in a congregation formed by a single-pastor culture. Pray that all of them would be found faithful to the apostolic deposit they have been entrusted with, whatever governance structure they serve within.
- As a final exercise for Unit 5, write a one-paragraph summary of the elder-led congregationally accountable model in your own words, as if you were explaining it to a friend from a Presbyterian or Anglican background who wanted to understand why you govern your church the way you do. The summary should: (a) describe the model accurately; (b) acknowledge what it shares with the Presbyterian and congregational traditions; (c) explain the specific exegetical argument for its distinctive elements; and (d) do so with the charitable tone that this lesson has commended. Bring the paragraph to the next session.

Key Texts: Acts 14:23; 15:1–35; 20:28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; Matthew 18:17; 1 Peter 5:1–5

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- Before this lesson, had you given much thought to the question of church polity beyond your own tradition's practice? What did you think about the differences between Baptist, Presbyterian, and Episcopalian governance? Has this lesson changed the way you think about those differences, and if so, how?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Acts 20:17-32. This passage is a key text for both the elder-led governance model and the warning against false teaching. Who are the men Paul addresses in verse 17? What does he call them in verse 28? What does 'overseers' (episkopous) mean in the context of verse 28? What does Paul warn them about in verses 29-31, and how does the form of that warning reflect the governance structure he is addressing?
- Read Acts 15:1-35 with the specific question of governance in mind. Who initiated the deliberation (verses 1-5)? Who participated in the deliberation (verses 6-18)? Who rendered the decision and proposed the letter (verse 19, James)? How is the letter described in verse 23, and what does 'the brethren in Antioch' add to the governance character of the decision? What did the outcome require of the churches that received it (verse 28)?
- Read 1 Peter 5:1-5. What does Peter identify as the right motivation for elder oversight (verses 2-3)? What does he identify as the wrong motivation? What does verse 4 add about the ultimate accountability of the elders? What does verse 5 require of the congregation? How does the instruction to 'clothe yourselves with humility toward one another' in verse 5b relate to the governance relationship between elders and congregation?
- Read Acts 14:21-23. What did Paul and Barnabas do on their return journey through the cities where they had planted churches? What does the plural 'elders' in verse 23 indicate about the intended governance structure of each congregation? What was the form of the appointment process described?
- Read Matthew 18:17-20 alongside Acts 6:3 and Acts 17:11. How do these three texts together establish three distinct dimensions of the congregation's governance authority: discipline (Matthew 18:17-18), leadership selection (Acts 6:3), and doctrinal vigilance (Acts 17:11)? What does each text specify about the congregation's role, and how do the three together define the scope of congregational governance authority?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the differences among the three polity traditions are intelligible and, in some cases, reflect genuine good-faith interpretation of the same apostolic data. Do you find this argument persuasive, or does it seem to undermine the Baptist's confidence in his own governance convictions? Is it possible to be genuinely confident in a theological position while genuinely acknowledging that faithful Christians hold the opposite position? How do you maintain both convictions simultaneously?
- The lesson identifies the Jerusalem Council of Acts 15 as a key text that both the Presbyterian and Baptist traditions read differently: the Presbyterian uses it to ground binding representative assembly authority; the Baptist uses it to model voluntary inter-congregational consultation without binding authority. Whose reading do you find more exegetically persuasive, and on what specific grounds? What would the

Presbyterian say in response to the Baptist's emphasis on the apostolic authority that uniquely characterized the Jerusalem Council?

- The lesson acknowledges that the Baptist tradition's history includes numerous examples of congregational governance degenerating into factional politics and mob rule. Is this a serious objection to the congregational model, or merely an argument for implementing it better? What does the existence of these failure modes tell us about the conditions under which the congregational model can function well and the conditions under which it cannot?
- The lesson argues that the elder-led congregational model is the most faithful available reading of the New Testament's governance pattern. Is this a claim that can be proven from Scripture, or is it a judgment call based on how one weighs competing evidence? What would you say to a thoughtful Presbyterian who argues that the New Testament's governance data is genuinely ambiguous and that the Baptist's confidence in his reading is overconfident?
- The lesson commends charitable disagreement on polity as compatible with clear conviction and open advocacy of the Baptist position. Is this balance sustainable in practice? Does the emphasis on charitable engagement risk producing a theological indifferentism that treats all polity positions as equally defensible? How do you distinguish between charitable engagement with polity differences and the kind of indifferentism that treats governance as genuinely unimportant?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- Looking back across all four lessons of Unit 5, what is the single most important governance conviction that this unit has established in your thinking, either a conviction you already held but now hold more deeply, or a conviction that this unit has given you that you did not have before? And what is the single most important practical implication of that conviction for this specific congregation's life?
- The lesson argues that polity has real consequences for the health of congregations and the accountability of leaders. Can you identify a specific example from your own observation or reading in which a congregation's governance structure had a direct, visible consequence, positive or negative, for its health? What governance principle does that example illustrate?
- The lesson closes by looking forward to Unit 6 on the ordinance of baptism, noting that the ordinances are administered within the governance structure that Unit 5 has established. How does the governance structure of the elder-led congregational model specifically affect the administration of baptism? Who authorizes the administration? Who participates? What does the congregation's role in receiving baptized members say about the relationship between the governance and the ordinances?
- The lesson commends reading a thoughtful representative of a different polity tradition. If you were to choose one book or article to represent the Presbyterian or Anglican governance tradition at its most careful and persuasive, what would you choose (or what would you ask your pastor to recommend), and what specific aspect of the Baptist governance conviction would you want to test against its argument?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Acts 20:28 aloud one final time as the charge that has stood at the beginning of each prayer focus in Unit 5: '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.' This verse has grounded four lessons of governance theology in the most fundamental reality of all: the church that is being governed is the blood-purchased possession of the living God. Whatever the governance structure, however faithful or imperfect, however mature or developing, however precisely calibrated or in need of further formation, it is in service of the community that the Son of God bled and died to establish. The elders who lead are stewards of the Chief Shepherd's possession. The congregation that participates and holds accountable is exercising the authority that the Chief Shepherd has given to it. Let that reality shape the prayers that close Unit 5.

Pray in gratitude for the governance gift that Christ has given His church in the apostolic pattern: the two offices that provide the complete structure for the congregation's ministry; the plurality of elders that provides the accountability, the wisdom, and the sustainability that single-pastor leadership cannot achieve; the congregation's genuine governance authority in the three specific domains that protect both the community's integrity and the leaders' accountability. These are not organizational inventions; they are the Spirit's own wisdom embedded in the apostolic record, given to every generation of the church for the same reasons they were given to the first, because the community of the redeemed, in every age and cultural context, needs qualified leadership, mutual accountability, and the gathered assembly's participation in the governance acts that most directly affect the covenant community's life.

Pray for the broader church across its polity divisions. Pray for the godly pastor in an episcopal church who shepherds his congregation with the servant-leadership of 1 Peter 5, whose governance structure differs from the Baptist's but whose commitment to the apostolic deposit does not. Pray for the faithful elder in a Presbyterian congregation who maintains his doctrinal integrity within an institutional structure whose higher assemblies are drifting from the confessional standard he holds. Pray for the Baptist pastor who is laboring to build a genuine plural eldership in a congregation formed by decades of single-pastor culture, who knows what the New Testament requires and who is patiently, faithfully working toward it. Pray that the Spirit would sustain all of these men in their governance calling, whatever the institutional form it takes, and that He would work through their faithful ministry to build the one church that is the blood-purchased possession of the one Lord.

Pray for this congregation as it enters Unit 6. The governance unit has established the framework within which the ordinances are administered: the elders who oversee the congregation's baptism and Lord's Supper practice; the congregation that participates in both as members of the covenant community; the new covenant convictions that ground both the governance model and the ordinance practice in the same theological foundation. Pray that the theological formation of Unit 5 would deepen the congregation's engagement with the ordinances of Unit 6: that the members would receive baptism and the Lord's Supper with the understanding of covenanted, accountable members of the new covenant community, who know why the ordinances take the form they do, what they signify, and what they demand of those who participate in them.

Close with the benediction of Ephesians 3:20-21, which has been the closing doxology of every lesson in this unit: 'Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.'

The glory belongs to Him in the church, not in any particular governance structure, not in any particular polity tradition, not in any particular institutional arrangement, but in the church: the gathered covenant community of the redeemed, whatever its governance form, however imperfect its institutional expression, however long the journey toward the apostolic standard still remains. To God alone be the glory.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 14:23; 15:1–35; 20:28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; Matthew 18:17; 1 Peter 5:1–5

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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