A BIBLICAL MODEL OF CHURCH DECISION MAKING

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BY

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A thesis to be submitted in partial fulfillment of degree requirements for the degree of Master of Religious Education

Indiana Wesleyan University

March 5, 2001
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My passion for this study is borne out of my experience as the senior pastor of Oak Chapel United Methodist Church (Upland, IN). My service at Oak Chapel was fulfilling and exciting. There were many who gave me a vision of what a body of believers dedicated to Christ would look like. Many of the dear saints at Oak Chapel asked the questions that I sought out to answer in this thesis. I am deeply thankful to the beloved believers who labored with me as we sought to understand a biblical model for church decision-making. I am also thankful for those who upheld that model, even when it was difficult or even painful to do so.
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CHAPTER I
INTRODUCTION

Most Protestant churches are governed by some form of democracy, whether they are connec
tional, congregational; led by lay committees or led by the church staff. The purpose of these democratic structures is to promote equality and fairness, but they may also cause frustration, controversy, confusion, and ineffectiveness. The purpose of this thesis is to give churches guidance in developing a decision-making process based on another more Biblical model.

Pastors of all denominations and from all regions of the country have stories to tell about church board meetings. Many of these are wonderfully outrageous and hilarious (at least in retrospect). These pastors identify well with the bus salesman who told a pastor that he had a bus specifically designed for church committees: it has “one gas pedal, four steering wheels, and ten brakes.”

My passion for this thesis is borne out of the realization that “across the continent today churches struggle over congregational control and authority.”

My passion was fueled by a difficult experience while serving as the pastor of a democratic, committee-driven United Methodist Church. While I pastored this rural congregation we faced many decisions which resulted in controversial board meetings. In time, a substantial portion of the congregation left, and finally, so did I.

The first controversy came within two months of my arrival at the church. We had no phone in the church building, so a few committee chairmen suggested at our board meetings...

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meeting that we get one. Someone even offered to pay the phone bill. But when it became evident that there was a great deal of resistance to the idea, the discussion was tabled for a month. Over the next thirty days two strong factions arose: one pro-phone, and the other anti-phone. At the next meeting the discussion of the phone topic went on for over an hour. We heard arguments such as: "We never needed a phone before." "But what if someone gets hurt, and we need to call an ambulance?" "But the youth will be calling China." "But a phone would make the pastor's job easier." Finally, when the ballots were counted, the phone was turned down by one vote. After this meeting I had to ask, "Isn't there a better way?"

John Moore and Ken Neff are convinced that there is a better way. In their book entitled A New Testament Blueprint for the Church they refer to a pastor who said, "I think our church is not working from a proper enough "biblical" blueprint currently in matters of leadership and decision-making. We have a deacon board, a trustee board, and ultimately congregational approval of major program changes and financial expenditures. That pattern has worked relatively well, and it certainly seems to fit the "democratic" model within America. But I am suspicious that we could do better! I would like to move more to a system of having an elder board, a deacon board, and some kind of congregational involvement in the decision-making without seeing them as the ultimate authority in the church. This has implications for how we see our church constitution, the future of my denomination, and even the relationship between our churches and our Bible..."

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I, too, am convinced that the New Testament can give guidelines which will aid churches in fostering a healthier decision-making environment. Such tensions and struggles at board meetings make me as a pastor question whether we are going about making decisions in a healthy or biblical manner. The democratic process has many appealing advantages: it appears to ensure equality and fairness, and it seems to limit autocratic leaders. For these reasons, within mainline denominations, especially in the twentieth century, there has been a desire to “make the shepherds part of the flock.” People seem to have a fear of pastors gaining so much power that they become dictators. Dr. Robert Ness says, “Our churches are based on the authority of the minister and change their direction with each new minister with the sheep expected not to question the shepherd.”

But there are also serious disadvantages in the democratic process, it may give a nonchalant “no” an equal standing with a passionate “yes.” And while this is not always the case, democracy can give an informed and well-thought-out “no” an equal standing with an uninformed or flippant “yes.” Lyle Schaller illustrates this problem within democratic structures. He says, “A more careful examination reveals that the decision-making and voting process in thousands of congregations has been “stacked” to reward negativism, perpetuate the status quo, block change, encourage apathy, stifle initiative, provoke discontent, and cause active leaders to drop into inactivity because of discouragement, frustration, and irritation.”

*Ness, p. xiii.*
In simpler and more specific terms, the voting process counts the votes rather than weighing them and places more emphasis on counting the “no” votes than on weighing the “yes” votes.

A democratic system may limit efficiency, increase opportunity for argument, and block movement. Proponents of democracy in the church ignore the fact that some people are better decision makers than others.

I am also concerned about the theological implications of democratic decision-making. I take for granted that churches desire to know and do God’s will. I also take for granted that God wants to communicate his will to us and help us accomplish his plan. So when a church makes a decision based on a seven-to-six vote, I wonder, “Is God schizophrenic?” If each member of a church committee has heard and done the will of God, then did God speak “yes” to seven people and “no” to six other? I think not.

The decisions a church makes may have deep theological implications, whether the church realizes it or not. Instead of considering the theological implications of a decision, many people vote based on their tastes or opinions. For instance, when a church is faced with the decision whether to employ contemporary or traditional music, many members may think the decision is one of taste. They may not at first realize this decision involves theological implications, so they feel a decision may be made without a great deal of thought. But one may make a case that traditional music has a greater ability to communicate the reverence of God, and that it was designed to teach theology. One could argue that contemporary music is often taken from Scripture and that it will attract lost people. These theological implications must be taken into account.

Lyle Schaller provides an example of a flippant decision rooted in sentiment, rather than theology or purpose. A growing church, faced with the decision whether to go to two services or remain with only one, has a sanctuary which is at near-full capacity. The pastor suggests that the church begin a new, contemporary service to reach young people. F6 Schaller, Lyle E. & Charles A. Tidwell, Creative Church Administration. (Nashville: Abingdon, 1975). p. 38.
people and alleviate the seating problem. The church board decides to remain with only one service, because the sanctuary was designed to seat five hundred, and they are not yet at that point. Schaller asks, “Who should control this decision on schedule? The plans of the building committee of 1923 who designed this building? Or a desire to reach a more varied constituency?”

Church decision-making does not need to be as difficult or frustrating as it often is. The democratic paradigm of decision making appears to be based on a relatively recent phenomenon which has crept in from the secular world, and may not be closest to biblical models. This fact that churches have moved from a more biblical to a more secular model is evident with the advent of Robert’s Rules of Order in the church. As one church board member states, “Most church boards employ Robert’s Rules of Order to make decisions, which often creates animosity among board members. RRO is an adversarial system that creates winners and losers.”

How did Robert’s Rules end up ruling the church in the first place? And how did these rules gain a preeminent position over Scriptural principles? Robert’s Rules cannot, “help explore the deeper issues of church life, such as determining a church’s vision. Such issues are the ones over which emotion in God’s people run hot and deep. These essential issue share this question at their core: What is God’s will for our church?”

In this thesis I examine the New Testament model of decision making and discuss how that model can radically transform our churches.

A. PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This study seeks to answer the question, “What are the primary guidelines and model of church decision-making presented in the New Testament, and how can that..."
By answering this question, churches may reduce conflict and more easily make God-honoring decisions. This paper shows the limitations and downfalls of a democratic structure, and presents a healthier option. Following a more biblical pattern could make the process of church decision making less stressful, less controversial, and more efficient. This paper assumes that churches maintain a conviction that the Bible is authoritative, and that churches desire to be modeled after Scripture. Without this conviction, the New Testament does not serve as an authority, but only as an historical example. And if the New Testament is not seen as an authority, then churches do not necessarily strive to follow its model. Instead, they choose the model which most suits their interest.

This study also seeks to distinguish decision-making practices in the early church which are descriptive from those which are prescriptive. By descriptive I mean those practices which relate an event in history, but do not intend to convey a command or timeless model. By prescriptive (also called normative) I mean those practices which are common to all congregations, and intend to convey a command or timeless model. For instance, Acts 13:4 reads, "The two of them (Paul and Barnabas), sent on their way by the Holy Spirit, went down to Selucia and sailed from there to Cyprus." This verse contains both descriptive and normative elements. That Paul and Barnabas went to Selucia and Cyprus does not indicate that all believers should go to these two cities. The fact that they traveled by boat does not imply that all believers should sail: it merely described an event in history. Yet the fact that Paul and Barnabas went on their way by the Holy Spirit does seem to have a prescriptive nuance. Throughout the book of Acts, Luke speaks of the guidance of the Holy Spirit. He regularly speaks of various Christians who are led by the Holy Spirit to do a variety of things. It seems like a normal part of Christian experience to be led by the Holy Spirit. For this reason, this element of the verse can be
said to be prescriptive. We can infer from this verse that one component of New Testament decision making is guidance by the Holy Spirit. 

Jesus said that “every city or household divided against itself will not stand.” By providing a New Testament model of decision-making which churches can emulate, it is my hope that the church will be able to stand and that the “gates of hell will not prevail against it.”

B. THESIS STATEMENT

The New Testament provides a model of decision-making involving a group of carefully selected elders, empowered by the congregation. This model contrasts with a fundamentally democratic model, where decisions are made by the vote of the congregation or a body elected by the congregation. In the New Testament model, the elders are judged (appointed and evaluated) by character, not by tenure or mere desire to serve. Finally, in this model, the church empowers the elders with authority, not just responsibility.

C. DEFINITIONS

Authority: “The ability to make a final decision without asking anyone else.”

Deacon: This is a transliteration of the Greek word διάκονος which characterizes church servants or ministers. People holding this office are responsible for waiting on tables, administering offerings, and ministering to the needy.

Democracy: This word represents a church government where most decisions are made by the vote of the congregation, or a body elected by the congregation.

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10 Matthew 12:25
11 Matthew 16:18
Elder: This word comes from the Greek έρετρος and is used in a near synonymous way throughout the New Testament with "pastor" (πρόετρος) and "bishop" (επίσκοπος). People holding this office are primarily responsible for making decisions, teaching, and church discipline. Chapter three explains this in greater detail.

Empowerment: Empowerment signifies that a person or group of people have been given authority to make decisions within specified boundaries, without seeking further approval.

Masterplan: "A written statement of assumptions about [an organization’s] direction, organization, and resources."

Submission: Submission refers to the act of willingly laying aside one's own desires and carrying out the desires of another. It contrasts with subjection, where one yields out of necessity or force. It also contrasts with "compromise," where yielding is mutual.

D. DELIMITATIONS OF THE STUDY

The purpose of this paper is to present a biblical model of decision-making, and show how selected current paradigms differ from that model. It is not within the scope of this paper to look at the history of decision-making between the New Testament and today. Nor is it possible to answer why modern paradigms differ from the New Testament model or specifically how churches became democratic in nature. This paper looks at the decision-making process in a United Methodist Church, a Southern Baptist Church, and an independent Community Church. This study does not, therefore, analyze the process of other denominations. I suggest some guidelines for churches moving from a democratic to the first century biblical model, yet those suggestions are, for the most

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13 Biehl, p. 9.
It is no part, theoretical. It is no within the scope of this paper to give a more detailed process. Instead, I hope that readers will learn more about the theological implications of the decision-making process and can translate that information to their own situations.

The process of moving from New Testament theory to the practical implications for a church today is one that may vary among churches. Readers may respond in a variety of ways. It is my hope that at least the reader will glean certain items from the proposed New Testament guidelines and find a way to incorporate these guidelines into their existing church structure. It may be the case that a church's structure can remain intact, while also incorporating the guidelines of New Testament decision-making. On the other hand, the reader may determine that incorporation of these guidelines would be either difficult or nearly impossible without making changes in the structure. It is not the purpose of this paper to design one structure by which churches must make decisions in order to be Biblical. Instead, it is the purpose of the study to present some of the clear, normative guidelines of New Testament decision-making which churches will, in the way they see fit (and through the guidance of the Holy Spirit), be able to emulate.

E. PRIMARY SOURCES/LITERATURE REVIEW

The church has been discussing differing models of decision making since the first Christian Pentecost or before. Other groups have been debating this issue for centuries going back before the incarnation. I have compiled a bibliography of books and articles which discuss leadership and decision-making. From this list the three books that seem most relevant are Luke Timothy Johnson's book, Decision Making in the...
In his book *Decision Making in the Church*, Johnson takes a look at the process the early church undertook in making several decisions in the New Testament. He looks specifically at the choosing of Matthias (Acts 1), the decision to keep preaching in the face of persecution (Acts 4), the choosing of the seven (Acts 6) and the so-called Jerusalem council in Acts 15. His conclusion based on these passages is that the elders made decisions that affected the body. There was neither an established episcopacy (overseeing several churches) nor were important decisions which affected the church left to individuals. Johnson also explains the qualifications for elders as described in detail in 1 Timothy 3. The qualifications for elders (the primary decision-makers in Johnson’s model) are of more importance than the procedures of decision-making.

Johnson’s study is decidedly theological in nature. He examines the philosophy of decision-making and places great emphasis on the theological implications of decisions and the process that leads to them. Every decision is informed and shaped by the “narrative” (by which he means world-view or presuppositions) of the decision-makers. For the church, the central narrative is (or perhaps should be) found in Scripture. Since every decision is the outcome of a core value (whether implicit or explicit), the process of decision-making affects the identity of a group. In other words, a group’s values shape and determine its decisions. Johnson states that often the decision-making process camouflages the true structure of a group. In the name of democracy a group may inadvertently forget its founding principles and values and make a democratic decision without examining the theology behind it. Decision-making is an articulation of
Yet the democratic structure of many groups does not necessitate an examination of those values or the way they inform the decision. Of course, an elder-led church may also fail to examine the theological implications of a decision or make a decision which don't reflect the group's preferred identity. So Johnson's advice to churches is that they become very clear and effective at articulating their core values so that they are able to evaluate how a decision reflects their identity. Michael Anthony gives direction to churches in his book *The Effective Church Board* which examines the causes of conflict and gives biblical insight for churches to reduce conflict. He explains the dominant paradigms of church governance and critiques the advantages and disadvantages of each. Anthony examines several different structures, among which he names the ecumenical, republican, corporate, presidential, and balance of powers models. In each of these models Anthony is looking for certain qualities and avoiding others. He desires a model where the leaders have freedom, but also accountability. Anthony recommends what he calls the “Team Ministry Model.” The congregation recommends or nominates the leaders. Anthony distinguishes between staff (paid leaders) and elders (volunteer leaders). These two groups provide accountability for each other and are seen as equals. The leaders should have responsibility as well as authority. Change among the leadership personnel or in the decisions that they make should be well-reasoned, but not slow or impossible. The pastor should have influence, but his absence should not cause the church to crumble. A balance of each of these concepts: freedom and accountability, authority and responsibility, change and stability is a lofty goal, but unfortunately churches often lean to the extremes.

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Anthony believes that appropriate balance can be found in a model where the elders are the primary decision-makers, but remain accountable to the congregation. The pastor serves among the elders and this body has the authority to make decisions, but the congregation has a role in selecting and retaining the elders.

In his book *The Decision Makers*, Lyle Schaller, who has written extensively on decision-making and change, explains how decisions are made in denominations, in theory, and in congregations. Schaller neither supports nor challenges the democratic process in decision-making. Taking a neutral stance toward the structure of church governance, he sets out to explain the philosophy behind these decisions, and explain how things happen. He states that churches struggle in decision-making because the prevailing systems of democratic governance are designed (implicitly) to support the status quo. Schaller presents steps that churches can take in order to overcome the problem of getting stuck in the status quo by explaining the philosophical background behind decision-making. For instance, he states that churches may think that they are operating democratically, while actually they are allowing a small number of people to have a disproportionate amount of power. This imbalance of power is often subtle, but is perpetuated by the simple fact that in many democratic churches, "the squeaky wheel gets the grease." The squeaky wheel in Schaller's model most often is the people supporting the status quo. Schaller also explains that the very presentation of an idea for vote (and not so much the idea itself) may affect whether a group supports it or not. Group behavioral dynamics affect decision-making more than reason or a true discerning of God's will. So rather than making a decision on the basis of whether it will achieve the group's goals, a decision may be the result of (perhaps inadvertent) political
maneuvering. Schaller addresses the issue that congregations often appoint trustees to make administrative, business decisions and leave the pastor to make spiritual decisions. He makes a good case, however, that such a distinction does not actually exist and that most decisions involve both theological and practical matters. Henry Blackaby’s book *Experiencing God* sheds great light on decision-making both individually and corporately. He explains how God has historically spoken to his people and outlines seven steps that people (as well as churches) can use to discern the will of God. The premise of the book is that God is always at work, and that his work can be known and accomplished by his people. The church’s and the individual’s task, therefore, is to identify his role in God’s plan. One hears the will of God through Scripture, prayer, circumstances, and the guidance of other believers. As the church embarks on the process of hearing God, the people of God are able to make decisions not based on personal preference, fear, or “common sense,” but out of faith in God’s will and direction.

Leadership Magazine published a series of articles concerning decision making which I have also found helpful to this study. Each of these articles addresses the problems with the democratic paradigm. The concept of challenging democracy is borne out of a business article by Richard Nehrbass entitled, “The Myths of Institutional Democracy.” Nehrbass shows that a democratic philosophy in the business sector began as a well-intentioned endeavor to incorporate workers and managers in the decision-making process. But time revealed that democracy increased frustration and resulted in poorer decisions. In his words,

Democracy actually creates more dissatisfaction by creating more opportunity for conflict.

Speed Leas and Paul Kittlaus support a democratic church government in their book *Church Fights*. They propose a model of democratic decision-making which aims to reduce conflict, primarily through the use of a referee or moderator (not the pastor).

Robert Ness also supports a democratic church government in his book *Toward a Theology of Church Management*. Working within the United Methodist Church model, he suggests guidelines which will reduce conflict and uphold democracy.

Nathan Hatch presents an in-depth study of the development of democratic church decision-making in his volume *The Democratization of American Christianity*. He suggests that democratic governance in churches is primarily the result of cultural changes within the last two hundred years. Hatch states, "The democratization of Christianity then, has less to do with the specifics of polity and governance and more with the incarnation of the church into popular culture."

As a wave of democracy spread throughout Europe and America in the eighteenth century, not only were governments transformed, but the cultures of these countries were also transformed. This had a profound impact on religious governance as well. Hatch explains, "First, they denied the age-old distinction that set the clergy apart as a separate order of men, and they refused to defer to learned theologians and traditional orthodoxies. Religious outsiders, flushed with confidence about their prospects, had little sense of their limitation. They dreamed that a new age of religious and social harmony would naturally follow."

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19 Nehrbass, p. 486.
The result of democratic influence, says Hatch, was the "rise of a full-fledged populist clergy." By "populist clergy" Hatch means that Americans have an attitude that all are equally qualified to make theological and practical decisions within the church. He states, "More than lawyers or physicians, American clergy have remained subject to democratic forces. In the first third of the nineteenth century, a stiff democratic challenge shattered the professional monopoly of educated elite over law, medicine and the church.

State laws permitted almost anyone to practice law, and various brands of medical practice were allowed to compete for the public's attention. Yet in the twentieth century, doctors and lawyers have reasserted their professional prerogatives. A free-market economy continues in the field of religion, however.

This "free-market economy," Hatch goes on to argue, is the result of several factors including the widespread rejection of seminary education for the clergy, popularity of camp meetings, the Methodist lay movement, the independent Baptist movement, the rise of inexpensive religious literature, and protracted meetings.

I also have interviewed pastors and lay leaders to evaluate their guidelines and model for decision-making. These interviews illuminate the process that churches use in making decisions and show how representative pastors and members view that process. I interviewed pastor John McFarland of Fountain Valley United Methodist Church (Fountain Valley, CA), Wayne Derrick of Orange Avenue Baptist Church (Orange, CA), and David Johnson of SeaRidge Community Church (Mission Viejo, CA).

21 Hatch, p. 10.
22 Hatch, p. 12.
The Bible is certainly the most important source of this study, and is referenced throughout. The Bible serves as a source of history, an example for leadership, and a basis for theology. Most Scripture citations are from the New International Version (NIV).

F. METHODOLOGY

This study is analytical and evaluative. It first offers a presentation of the current paradigm of decision-making in the United Methodist Church (a highly democratic structure), the Southern Baptist Church (a fairly democratic structure), and a Community Church (a non-democratic structure). After looking at these models, the paper examines a New Testament model for decision-making. In light of the New Testament model, chapter four analyzes the ways in which several current paradigms differ from the first century biblical model. Chapter five explains some of the key issues a church faces as it considers moving its decision-making process closer to the first century biblical model.

23 Hatch, p. 16.
CHAPTER II

A SURVEY OF SEVERAL CURRENT DECISION-MAKING MODELS

A. CURRENT PARADIGMS OF CHURCH GOVERNANCE

Michael Anthony conducted a survey on decision-making in over two hundred churches. His findings helpfully reflect several different contemporary models.

1. Ecumenical Model
   - Catholics, Lutherans, United Methodists, and Episcopalians fall into this category characterized by episcopal leadership. In each of these denominations a church officer oversees a group of congregations.
   - A strong denominational law governs the churches.
   - One of the greatest advantages to this model is stability. These churches do not often experience rapid change: either growth or decline.
   - Since the pastors are appointed by the denomination, they are less likely to be "people pleasers." One disadvantage, however, is that "the placing of clergy in local churches can become highly political rather than based on local needs" and that "many large denominations, in an effort to appease large sections of special interest, are forced to compromise their doctrinal distinctives. The result is a slow erosion toward biblical relativism."

2. Republican Model
   - Anthony calls the second model "republican." It is typical of the Presbyterian church where a synod oversees a presbytery, which oversees local churches.
   - These churches, however, are primarily governed by the local group of elders, and not primarily by a denominational discipline.
   - An advantage to this model is that it has a higher degree of local church autonomy than the ecumenical churches.
   - Because of the bureaucratic nature, however, change can be slow, if not impossible.

3. Corporate Model
   - Anthony calls the third model the "corporate model" which typifies local churches whose governance is similar to that used by companies in the corporate world.

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24 Anthony, p. 104.
churches have a board of directors, executive officers, elders and pastoral staff. The corporate model is certainly effective in that it allows for quick decision-making. There is a high degree of parity between responsibility and authority (in other words, the elders have the power to make and execute decisions). An equal amount of responsibility and authority must exist in a healthy church, but some churches fail to recognize this. For instance, the United Methodist Book of Discipline states that the pastor is to "oversee the total ministry of the church." That statement gives the pastor a great deal of responsibility. The Discipline, however, does not explicitly state what is meant by "oversee," and in comparison to that all-encompassing statement, the pastor has a lower level of authority. Anthony suggests that churches try to find a stronger relationship between authority and responsibility (which is best expressed in the corporate model).

A disadvantage of the corporate model, however, is that the deacons are elected by the congregation: a practice not necessarily supported by Scripture. As Anthony states, "the deacons mentioned in the Book of Acts were not elected to tell the apostle how to conduct their ministries."

A fourth model of governance is the "presidential model." In these churches the pastor "rules the roost" and his staff carries out his decisions. This model is found among some independent or mega-churches. It is certainly the most efficient model, though efficiency is not the only factor in evaluating a church's activity. Anthony states that one advantage is that the "pastor is able to build a team of assistants who support his personal philosophy of ministry. Little time need be wasted on trying to convince staff members to accept his way of doing things."

The obvious disadvantage is the instability that may occur when staff or church members leave as a result of the pastor's actions. This model would work well only if the pastor were perfect (which is never the case). Once a pastor...  

26 Anthony, p. 108.
loses charisma, compromises his character, or offends too many people, the congregation may (and often does) crumble.

Anthony calls the fifth model the "balance of power model." The church body is the structured basis of power. The congregation elects elders to carry out administrative functions and the pastor oversees spiritual matters.

Baptist churches typify this model, which is similar to the seventeenth century Puritan’s form of church governance. An advantage to this model is the high degree of accountability for the pastor, as well as a high level of local church autonomy. The great disadvantage, of course, is that people in these churches may see administrative matters as separate from spiritual matters, when in reality there is not a great distinction between them.

(Chapter four addresses the myth that spiritual matters may be distinguished from administrative matters). The model which Anthony suggests he calls the "Team Ministry" model. He suggests that the pastor and his staff have decision-making authority, but they are accountable to the congregation for these decisions. He also suggests that the church board is distinct from the pastoral staff, and that this board has a mutual relationship with the staff in making decisions. In this model the board and the staff are seen as "equals" and are both servants of the congregation.

Another model of governance is the elder-led church. Some independent or community churches practice this model, as well as some Evangelical Free and Assembly of God churches. The elders are the center of decision-making. The senior pastor is viewed as an "elder among elders." The elders are appointed, not elected, by the existing elders. The system is efficient and can minimize conflict over a democratic church. A disadvantage, of course, is that the congregation has a lower degree of "buy-in." In other words, people do not experience a high degree of emotional investment in the decision-making process. The elder-led church is also less stable than a democratic church, and

27 Anthony, p. 111.
28 I explain this mythical distinction in greater detail in chapter four.
One pastor of a large church exclaimed, "I always feel like our church is one week from extinction. Next week I might show up and no one will be there. Maybe they'll say, 'I didn't like the music last week,' and decide to go somewhere else." While stability is never a guarantee, democracy may decrease the chances for a "mass exodus" from the church.

This study looks in depth at the decision-making process in an "ecumenical" Methodist Church, a "balance of power" Baptist church, and an "elder-led" community church. Each of these church structures has some validation in the New Testament. And each, like the models described above, has its advantages and disadvantages.

B. UNITED METHODIST CHURCH (Committee-driven, democratic)

The Book of Discipline for the United Methodist Church (UMC) gives an outline for the processes of decision making, which sets the pattern for all UMC churches. Each year, before a charge conference (with the district superintendent presiding) the nominating committee nominates people to serve on all committees of the church. This process reflects what happened when the first Jerusalem church presented the names of prospective deacons to the apostles (Acts 6). The committee chairs and officers choose people from among multiple nominations (or, perhaps more commonly approve the list of nominations) at charge conference. One may argue this procedure reflects the approval by the apostles of the nominated men (Acts 6). Once the new calendar year begins, each committee elects a chair, who represents that committee on the Administrative Board or Council on Ministries.

Throughout the year the committees meet, and after voting submit to the Council on Ministries those decisions that do not have an impact on the buildings, finances, staff, or nominations. The Council on Ministries consists of the chairpersons of all committees (but not necessarily the chairpersons of Finance, Trustees, Pastor Parish Relations Committee, and Nominations). Once the particular committee submits its proposal, the
Council on Ministries then votes on the measure. If it passes, it is the responsibility of the originating committee to carry it out. If the decision has an impact on the building, finances, staff, or nominations, the measure is voted on at the Administrative Board. The Administrative Board consists of the chair persons of Trustees, Pastor Parish, Nominations, and Finance, other committee chairpersons, the pastor, other staff, and the lay leader.

Members of some committees serve for three years, and the nomination process is designed to have one third of the committee rotate off each year. The intention of this rotation schedule is apparently to allow new people an opportunity to serve, while preventing church members from becoming over-involved in the committee. The rotation is not mandatory, however, and is not construed to prohibit anyone from being re-elected.

The rotation of members raises the question of how spiritual gifts relate to areas of service. If one rotates off the education committee, does that mean that he has lost the gift of teaching? According to Dr. John McFarland, a UMC pastor, church officers and committee members are not necessarily selected for giftedness, but passion. In other words, it may not be the primary concern of the nominating committee whether someone is qualified to serve on a committee, but whether that person desires to be on the committee. And certainly there is little question that a person’s passions are more transient than his gifts. It is also true that no one has the “gift of trustee”, and no one has the “gift of nomination.” But it seems logical that a trustee should have the gift of administration, and that a person on the nominating committee should have the gift of discernment. So even though the committees do not directly reflect the spiritual gifts mentioned in Romans 12 or 1 Corinthians 12, a responsible nominating committee should examine giftedness.

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Interview with Dr. John McFarland, Senior Pastor of Fountain Valley United Methodist
In other words, the Methodist system of choosing decision makers may be based on interest rather than giftedness or qualification. The only stipulation regarding qualification is that churches may choose to limit those serving on committees to the church membership. Many churches do require committee members to be church members as well, especially members of committees which have control over the budget and building. By requiring decision-makers to be members, it appears that the church has some control over the character of the people who make decisions. This is, to some extent the case, but with the high “turnover” rate of pastors and members, it is difficult to ensure that the members of a church are, in fact, people of Christian character. And since some churches view membership as an avenue to making new people feel welcome, these churches may not hold members to the same level of accountability that elders are expected to have. (See 1 Timothy 3).

According to the United Methodist Discipline, pastors determine who may become members of the church, but the only way members can be removed is through the person’s request, death, transfer to another church, or a three year absence (during which the church must document an effort to contact the person). In other words, the church has no authority to remove someone from membership for any reason against his will. In addition, there is no way to remove a person from office involuntarily, once elected. That person continues to serve until his term is over. And even then, the person may likely be renominated unless a majority of the nominating committee decides to remove his/her name from the list.

These stipulations were no doubt designed to promote fairness and democracy, yet they have some negative effects as well. If properly elected, a person who is contentious or who perhaps is not even a Christian is allowed to continue to serve on a committee. The finance committee chair of a Methodist Church in Indiana openly stated that she was not a Christian, yet she continued to be the chairperson of that committee for years because the church had no policy for removing any officers.
In the United Methodist Church, usually there is only one elder: the ordained pastor. The lay people who serve on committees are not technically elders, so churches may not feel the need to hold them to the level of accountability outlined in 1 Timothy 3. The Discipline does not speak specifically of qualifications for elders or committee members. United Methodist office titles are misleading because they do not seem to reflect New Testament meanings. While the Discipline does not call key committee members "elders," they are the decision-makers. They are serving in the office that Scripture refers to as "elder." They are not elders in title, but they are elders in function. In light of this, nominating committees should sense the need to hold prospective members of key committees to the Biblical standard of character.

An example illustrates a typical United Methodist decision-making process. A member on the Education Committee of a growing Methodist church wanted to hire a children's pastor. The Education Committee approved the idea and submitted it to the Administrative Board. The board approved the idea, but wanted the Pastor Parish Relations Committee to interview the prospective minister, and the Finance Committee to determine whether the church could support his salary. The next month the Finance Committee approved the item in the budget and submitted this information to the Board. The Pastor Parish Relations Committee also approved the candidate the Education Committee recommended. At that meeting the Administrative Board approved the installation of the new children's pastor.

The senior pastor is not necessarily a key decision-maker. Instead, the pastor is responsible for carrying out specific tasks. According to the Discipline, the senior pastor is to:

1. Read and teach the Bible
2. Administer the sacraments
3. Hold prayer meetings
4. Supervise the work and program of the church:
   a. give an account of his work to the charge conference
b. participate in denominational and conference training opportunities
c. encourage distribution of UMC literature
5. Perform weddings
6. Counsel bereaved families
7. Visit the sick
8. Instruct candidates for membership
9. Preside over charge conference
10. Search out new pastoral candidates
11. Participate in the life and work of the community

In light of this job description, it is clear that the pastor does not have explicit authority to make major decisions in the church. But, according to Ness, “this does not mean that the pastor is expected to be an executive secretary whose role is only to carry out the decisions of the governing bodies. No, the minister is expected to actively participate in the decision-making process. The minister is free to initiate any idea, hopefully without dominating the scene.”

While it may be true that the minister is free to initiate and advise, he does not have the authority to make decisions. The church may allow the pastor one vote on each committee where he or she serves.

I have thus far described some of the potential difficulties in the United Methodist structure, but certainly many churches have been able to cope with or even overcome these. Fountain Valley United Methodist Church is a good example.

Dr. John McFarland, a United Methodist pastor, prefers not to describe his church’s process of decision-making as “democratic.” Instead, he says that “the committee members and the staff are mutually seeking to do God’s will.” In other words, the committees do not generally vote. And often the pastor’s opinion is perceived to be more powerful than “just one vote.” But technically (and when conflict arises, that is what matters), the relationship between staff and committee members is democratic. The staff members, if they are on a committee, merely have one vote among the many other committee members. And a majority vote determines the decisions. But according to Ness, p. 30-32.

30 Ness, p. 30-32.
31 Ness, p. 33.
to McFarland, the process in his local church does not function so rigidly. The leaders have agreed that if the vote is four to five, they will continue to discuss the matter and pray about the decision, before considering the matter settled. McFarland has a good relationship with the committee members, and they respect his opinion. For this reason, McFarland states that even though he technically has only one vote, he has a great deal of power on the committees. This is power which he has earned through time, and which the people have voluntarily given him. Therefore, despite McFarland's admission that his church does not intentionally adhere to a New Testament model of decision-making, he says that "nothing is keeping God from leading us."

McFarland points out that governmental structure is not the main inhibitor of church health. Jesus could have taught more on church decision-making. He could have outlined a plan for church structure. But instead, Jesus spoke to the heart. Jesus gave the church baptism and communion; not a church officer's handbook. More important than structure, according to McFarland, is the willingness of the people to hear God, and to grow in their relationship with God.

When the Methodist movement began in North America, the churches were growing faster than Methodists could train their pastors. Since there was a great shortage of Methodist pastors in America, some pastors were forced to oversee several congregations. Many pastors served as many as five churches. So while in the New Testament there were several pastors in each church, the new churches in North America were not blessed in the same way. The Methodists had to create a way to empower congregations to be more self-sustaining in light of this shortage. The Methodist system of lay-leadership was designed to allow for rapid growth, not to stifle the church. One may question whether the committee structure which grew out of the Methodist church was the best and Biblical model, but there is no question that the motive was to help churches grow, not to frustrate pastors.
It appears that the structure (imported from Wesley's Methodist movement in England) helped produce church growth for some time. The first United Methodist Conference in America was held in 1784. The early American system of church government reflected to a large extent the lay leadership which the Methodist church still preserves. And, in the United States, that denomination was one of the most evangelical and rapidly growing Christian movements throughout the nineteenth century. Wesley was known for being a "man of one book," and his commitment to Scripture and making disciples was carried on by the Methodist church throughout the nineteenth century. But in the last one hundred years, the United Methodist Church has moved from being one of the fastest growing to a period of numerical decline. The membership has declined from almost ten million in 1980, to about eight-and-a-half million in 2000. While numerical growth is not the only indicator, it is one indicator of health. So one may ask, "Why is the Methodist church less healthy today than it was after the Civil War?" The structure has not significantly changed, so it would be misleading to assume that the Methodist church is declining in membership because it employs many lay leaders. Instead, a number of factors influence health and growth. Likewise, a number of factors influence dissention and decline. Far more important than governmental structure is the motivation of the heart. For this reason, McFarland states, "Any structure can work if the people are hearing from God."

This may be an overstatement, but the changes in the United Methodist Church serve to show that the character of the decision-makers is of far greater concern than the process of decision-making. It is the purpose of this thesis, nevertheless, to aim higher than adopting "any structure that works," but to offer a process of decision-making described in the New Testament.

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32 Interview with Dr. John McFarland, Senior Pastor of Fountain Valley United Methodist Church, July 6, 2000.
According to the Baptist Faith and Message, "The church is an autonomous body, operating through democratic processes under the lordship of Jesus Christ. In such congregations members are equally responsible. Their Scriptural officers are pastors and deacons."

Hershall Hobbs states, "The will of the church should be the will of all, a will reached under the authority and guidance of the Spirit of Christ."

While the Southern Baptist Convention does not set up a certain process by which churches should make decisions, many Baptist churches operate through democratic processes. Traditionally, Southern Baptist churches (SBC) are governed by a balance of powers between a board of deacons and the pastor. The church holds business meetings (usually monthly) which all church members are encouraged to attend. Often either the senior pastor, an elected official, or the chairman of the deacons presides over the meeting. Those in attendance at the business meeting are the primary decision-making body of the church. These people determine budget, staff, building concerns, etc. Committees are expected to report to the congregation and seek approval at these meetings.

Many Southern Baptist churches have a clerk who keeps the minutes of the business meeting, and a treasurer who keeps financial records. Trustees are not, in general, decision-makers. They serve as legal agents to carry out the decisions of the church. Many SBC churches have a variety of task-oriented committees overseeing the areas of baptism, flowers, banquets, history, communion, preschool, education, stewardship, etc. These committees are empowered by the congregation to carry out specific duties.

R. Wayne Derrick is the senior pastor at Orangewood Avenue Baptist Church. This church is governed by the church council: a body of leaders elected by

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34 Hobbs, p. 66.
A nominating committee recommends persons to the church council, and upon approval this list of names is submitted to the congregation at the annual meeting. In addition to the members of the council, the chair of deacons, Sunday school director, church staff, and other committee chairs also serve on the church council. The council meets monthly, and the senior pastor presides as moderator. The congregation also votes on acceptance of staff (including senior pastor), the budget, and positions other than the church council (such as Sunday school teachers).

In theory, the pastor has almost no decision-making authority. He does not even have a vote on the church council. But in practice, his clout and personality give him an "unwritten" authority. Rev. Derrick attributes his clout to longevity: not only his tenure, but the tenure of a pastor who preceded him. He has been the senior pastor of Orangewood Baptist for nineteen years. He succeeded a pastor who served for four years. This pastor followed a man whose tenure spanned twenty-one years. This man followed the founding pastor who served for only six months due to illness. In other words, two pastors have served forty years of the church's forty-five year history. For this reason Rev. Derrick believes the level of controversy and dissention in the decision-making process has been quite low. In his words, "the congregation has always been very supportive of the pastor and has been non-controversial."

Another aspect of the church's decision-making process which gives the pastor more authority than one may realize is his role as moderator. Rev. Derrick determines the agenda for the church council meetings. While he does not have a vote, he has the ability to block items from discussion. In this sense the decision-making process is not truly democratic. For instance, if someone in the congregation wanted the church to buy a new organ (and Rev. Derrick did not want discussion on the subject) he could choose not to place the item on the agenda. While the person could bring the issue to the church council meeting for discussion, the pastor could (although he never has) end the discussion and block a vote. In a truly democratic system the congregation would have...
the ability to ask for a vote (and if such a motion passes, vote) on an issue against the moderator's wishes.

Not only does the moderator have the authority to determine what not to discuss, but he also has the ability to decide what to discuss. In other words, Rev. Derrick makes decisions daily (as do other staff members and leaders) without bringing these decisions to the church council. The church bylaws state only a few specific decisions which may be made without congregational approval. For instance, the congregation approves the budget before the beginning of a new year. Each ministry receives an "allowance." Rev. Derrick, for instance, has a $200/year allowance for gifts. He may spend this money without seeking further approval. But there are other decisions which leaders make without seeking approval, despite the lack of any explicit permission to do so. The Sunday school director determines curriculum without consultation or vote. Rev. Derrick bought bookshelves without consulting the church council. In theory, if the pastor desired to move the worship service to eight-o'clock, rather than ten-o-clock, he could do so since there is no bylaw which states that he cannot. Rev. Derrick assures me, however, that he is more shrewd. He has, on occasion, allowed the church to make a decision despite his disapproval. For instance, the church was looking for a minister of music and they nominated a member of the congregation. Rev. Derrick was not comfortable with the nomination, mainly because he was not confident in the nominee's musical ability. But seeing that the congregation was very supportive of her, he did not believe that his reservations outweighed the potential difficulties and grief that could have resulted in challenging the nomination. Rev. Derrick allowed the congregation to approve the nomination without expressing his concern.

One can see that this decision-making process is potentially open to great potential abuse. An unanswered question looms (though in the instance of Orangewood Baptist, no one seems perturbed) as to whether the pastor has decision-making authority.
unless restricted by the bylaws, or whether he does not have the power to make a decision unless specifically permitted by the bylaws. Is the pastor’s authority assumed granted unless otherwise stated, or assumed restricted unless otherwise stated? There are few guidelines as to which items the pastor must bring to the council, so as moderator a pastor’s own answer to that question greatly affects the agenda he sets. Orangewood Avenue has apparently survived (and thrived) with this question unanswered, but nevertheless, the potential for a difference in interpretation between the pastor and a number of members still exists. Use of a similar model in a congregation with a different history or climate may produce difficulties.

Rev. Derrick is not convinced that the decision-making process at his church reflects a biblical model, but in light of the success of the church’s model, he is not convinced that the process should change. He said, “I am a graduate of Talbot School of Theology, so my inclination is to say ‘if it’s not biblical, then don’t do it.’ But I’m not sure that the biblical model was necessarily intended for every church.” He believes (although he admits that he has not given a great deal of thought to the subject) that the decision-making process in the New Testament is descriptive (of a few churches), rather than prescriptive (required for all churches). This is not to say that Rev. Derrick approaches all scripture in this manner. He said, “Our decision-making process has at least the veneer of a theological background, that it is not anti-biblical, but the bulk of the background is pragmatic.” This is a very perceptive observation, for I am convinced that if the church had experienced more controversy and disunity in the decision-making process Derrick would have found his lack of explicit authority more frustrating. A certain culture had developed in the life of the congregation which allows the pastor to have implicit authority and for the congregation to handle dissension amiably. This culture, probably in large due to the longevity of pastorates, has reduced the need for Rev. Derrick to give a great deal of thought to the decision-making process.
D. COMMUNITY CHURCH (Elder-driven, non-democratic)

Independent, community churches are free to govern themselves without the oversight of a denomination. Often the rules of governance are determined when the local church is incorporated and are spelled out in the "by-laws." Generally the founding pastor and his team of church planters draft these by-laws. Since these churches are the least democratic, one might expect them to be less common than traditional, democratic, main-line churches (assuming that Americans want to be a part of a democratic church). This assumption reflects the sentiment of Dr. Robert Ness, a UMC pastor who wrote, "Authoritarian leadership fails to take into account the principal condition required for leadership in the modern educated world. This is one important reason for the major decline in local [UMC] membership."

Ness is arguing that the decline in the Methodist Church may be in part the result of authoritarian Methodist pastors. But the assumption that Americans want democratic churches may not be correct. In contrast to the decline in membership of most mainline denominations within the last few decades, independent community churches are on the rise. In fact, many denominational churches have changed their signs and names in order to "mask" their affiliation, and thereby attract visitors who are looking for an independent church. It may seem obvious that pastors would prefer an elder-driven church, but apparently church goers are increasingly attending these churches as well. There are, no doubt, several factors which have contributed to the success of non-democratic community churches. While it may be an overstatement to say that Americans are looking for non-democratic churches, apparently the fact that these churches are not democratic is not a large deterrent.

Many of the best-known mega-churches have expressly stated their purpose of planting new independent churches. Both Willow Creek (Barrington, IL), and Saddleback Valley Community Church, (Lake Forest, CA), have planted new churches at

36 Ness, p. 25.
a rate of more than one per year. Saddleback Church maintains an affiliation with the Southern Baptist Convention, but is not governed by the "traditional Southern Baptist structure." Willow Creek is the largest church in the country and Saddleback Church is the fastest growing. Both of these churches are non-democratic, yet they have seen unprecedented growth. Evidently, their lack of democracy does not turn away prospective members. And despite their non-democratic structure, both churches have a very high level of lay involvement. As a requirement of membership at both churches, candidates must understand the church's doctrine, enroll in a discipleship group or class and agree to serve the church with their spiritual gifts. Willow Creek boasts that nearly half its members are involved in some form of service or leadership. Yet, a definite and clear hierarchy exists in the governance of these churches. Rick Warren, the senior pastor of Saddleback, is by all means the main influence in the direction of the church.

This study examines a church planted by Saddleback Valley Community Church in 1988 called SeaRidge Community Church. The church was designed with essentially the same mission statement, vision statement, core values, and method of governance as Saddleback Church. Aside from some initial financial assistance, the church has been self-sustaining and self-governing. The church is governed by a group of elders. The initial elders were the senior pastor and a few other men he selected to aid in the church plant. Currently the elders are the five pastors: four paid, and one volunteer. The church uses the terms "elder," "staff person," and "pastor" synonymously. The elders are the final authority in decision making and are responsible for overseeing the total ministry of the church, including hiring staff, administering the budget, and overseeing the building.

The elders may involve lay people in the process of making decisions, in order to gain feedback and ensure acceptance of decisions. For instance, the senior pastor interviewed prospective youth pastors, and after choosing his preferred candidate, asked the trustees and the youth volunteers for feedback. The decision was his, but he sought confirmation among the concerned persons.
The elders meet on a weekly basis and each contributes to the agenda. Because the group is small, official votes are not taken, but each person contributes his opinion. Ultimately, however, decisions are not determined by vote, but by area of responsibility. Each pastor is empowered by the staff to oversee a particular area, and to be the final authority for decisions regarding that area. For instance, at the beginning stage of planning a summer outreach concert, the elders disagreed about the type of band to host for the event. The children's minister wanted a band that would be recognized by "boomers," and the youth pastor and senior pastor opted for a band that would be recognized by "busters." The event was the responsibility of the children's minister, so it was her decision. Even though it was not the senior pastor's preference, he empowered her to make the decision in her area of ministry.

When there is disagreement among the staff or when the ministry areas overlap, the final decision is determined by the senior pastor. The month when elementary students would be promoted to the youth ministry caused disagreement among the elders. The youth pastor was convinced that the fifth graders should enter the youth group at the end of the school year, but the children's minister insisted that they wait until the beginning of sixth grade. The senior pastor was the final authority in this decision. He decided to promote the children at the beginning of the new school year. One factor in his decision was the intensity of conviction among the two elders involved. The youth pastor was opposed to delaying the promotion, but he was not extremely passionate about the subject. The children's minister, on the other hand, was very passionate about delaying the promotion. In other words, it was clear that she possessed a greater intensity of conviction than the youth pastor.

The elders have recruited and trained a group of volunteers to serve in each of their areas of ministry. Those groups of volunteers are not necessarily decision-making bodies, but the staff person may empower them to carry out certain responsibilities. If there is disagreement among that group, the appropriate elder makes the decision.
instance, the youth pastor oversees three youth counselors. These counselors teach, lead music, and supervise events. The youth pastor appointed a short-term planning committee for a Valentine’s banquet. He was not a member of the committee, and had very little to do with the event. But a disagreement arose among the committee members whether the dinner would include a formal, couple’s atmosphere, or an informal, family-oriented atmosphere. The youth pastor made the decision that the dinner would be informal and family-oriented. The committee members, although some disagreed, did submit to the decision.

The church also has a board of deacons. The congregation suggests names of prospective deacons, and the elders review that list. The elders then conduct personal and corporate interviews with the nominated deacons. During these interviews the elders examine a person’s spiritual gifts, passions, and character. They ensure that the deacon is a person above reproach, that he will not be contentious, and that he understands and will uphold the vision and values of the church. The church does not have a process for evaluating or removing deacons, and has not yet been faced with a need to remove one. The deacons serve in specific ministry areas overseen by elders, and are not a decision-making body. The deacons’ primary responsibility is home visitation.

Searidge Community Church has a board of trustees and a finance committee. Because of previous incidents regarding building funds, the senior pastor has empowered the trustees to oversee the building funds and building projects in order to preserve integrity and accountability. The finance committee keeps the financial records and makes recommendations to the staff, but does not set or approve the budget. David Johnson, the senior pastor, says that the church tries to avoid making committees the center of decision-making. According to Johnson, the primary purpose of the elder is to cast the vision. He asks, “How can a committee cast the vision?” Johnson contends that
A committee is an excellent way to involve spiritually gifted people in the process of carrying out the vision cast by the overseers.

Obviously a disadvantage to this form of structure is that the elders may carry a level of responsibility greater than they can bear. McFarland, a United Methodist pastor, states that, "If the budget goes sour, it's all on the senior pastor." This statement became reality at SeaRidge when the church began its first building campaign. The founding senior pastor contracted with InJoy Stewardship Services to raise the money, and over $100,000 was given to the building fund, as well as several hundred thousand more in pledges. The pastor signed papers with the city to lease a building and began the project. He obtained permits, drafted blueprints, and broke ground. When there was a turnover among the city's supervisors, they reversed the decision. The senior pastor had made no provisions to prevent such a reversal. The $100,000 was lost, to the devastation of the congregation and the pastor. In the mind of many in the congregation, the loss of money was the complete responsibility of the senior pastor. Nearly half of the congregation left over the travesty, and finally the pastor did too.

The church by-laws do provide for one democratic decision: the appointment of a new senior pastor. They state, "In the event that the pulpit becomes vacant … the pastoral staff will recommend a candidate to the congregation for approval as pastor." It seems ironic that in perhaps the most democratic denomination (the United Methodist Church) the congregation does not have the ability to appoint or fire the senior pastor, but among the least democratic churches (such as SeaRidge) the appointment of the senior pastor is the only decision brought to the congregation.

Since the members of the congregation have a role in selecting the senior pastor, the by-laws specify the rights of membership. Members are approved by the elders upon their request, baptism, and confession in Christ. Unlike many democratic churches, the

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37 Interview with David Johnson, pastor of SeaRidge Community Church, June 22.
by-laws also provide for dismissal of membership for reasons other than death, transfer, or personal request. The by-laws state, “Members shall be removed from the church roll for by the congregation/or officers according to the following conditions: (a) the member's life and conduct is not in accordance with the statement of faith in such a way that the member hinders the ministry influence of the church in the community. (b) Procedures for dismissal shall be according to Matthew 18:15-17 or Titus 3:10-11.”

The church has not removed any members in its twelve-year history, but this excerpt from the by-laws indicates the church’s willingness to entrust a great deal of power to the elders.

E. SUMMARY OF THE THREE MODELS

This study has examined three models of church governance. Each has some precedence and grounding in scripture. Each has advantages and disadvantages. Each has caused congregations and pastors grief, while each has equipped the body of Christ to accomplish great things. The First United Methodist Church of Fountain Valley is the most democratic model in this study. Because of its democratic structure, change is slow in comparison to the other models. The status quo (tradition) may be a stronger factor in the Methodist structure in comparison other models. The pastor has less official influence in decision-making, and the congregation has more influence. As a result, the congregation may feel a sense of security and stability, as well as a high level of accountability. The church is not likely to “fall apart overnight.” On the other hand, the democratic process and committee structure may at times increase frustration and disunity. The leaders may invest a great deal of time, emotion, and energy into a proposed change, which may subsequently be rejected by the congregation.

39 In Matthew 18:15-17 Jesus says that if someone is unrepentant, he is to be confronted privately, then by a few "brothers," then by the elders, and finally by the congregation.
potenial lack of decision-making authority may cause friction between them and the congregation. 

Orangewood Ave nue Baptist Church is a semi-democratic church. Both the senior pastor and the church council have significant influence. The representatives of the church council are elected by the congregation. This council meets monthly and makes most of the decisions in the church. The pastor has no official decision-making authority, although he determines the agenda for the church council. He decides whether certain items will be discussed or not discussed at this meeting. He determines whether certain decisions need to be brought to the church council before execution. The only decisions which must be brought to the council are those which affect the budget, staff, or nominations. Intentional change occurs at a moderate pace and the church is fairly stable. The church has not experienced rapid growth or decline. The congregation expects some, but not complete, involvement in the decision-making process. The pastor and congregation have at times experienced moderate frustration with the decision-making process, but the pastor's longevity has alleviated potential problems that could be associated with that process.

SeaRidge Community Church is the least democratic church in this study. The senior pastor, as well as the associate pastors, are the central decision-makers. The congregation has very little power in comparison to other models. Change is rapid and often favors innovation rather than the status quo. As a result, the congregation may feel a sense of insecurity or instability, and a lower level of accountability than in other structures. On the other hand, the congregation, at least presently, experience little frustration and disunity.
CHAPTER III
A CONSIDERATION OF NEW TESTAMENT EVIDENCE RELATING TO DECISION MAKING

A. PASSAGES REGARDING ELDESTERS AND DEACONS

1. THE OFFICE OF ELDER/PASTOR/BISHOP

Most scholars agree that the New Testament refers to only two offices in the church: deacon and elder. Although the word “deacon” does not appear in Acts 6, many scholars believe the “Seven” who were ordained to wait on tables were deacons. Elsewhere Paul speaks of deacons, but he only gives the qualifications for this office, not the job description. The word deacon means “servant,” so in light of the ordination of the servants (Acts 6), it appears that the office of deacon is not primarily a leadership or decision-making role. The New Testament also speaks of elders, bishops, and pastors. Because modern Protestant churches make a distinction among these titles, many people are unaware that there likely was little, if any, distinction between the three names for this one office in Scripture. To the New Testament writers, the three titles appear to be synonymous. In 1 Peter 5:1 the author says, “as a fellow elder I urge you to shepherd the flock.” He is addressing the elders, and encouraging them to pastor the church. In Titus 1:5, Paul encourages his fellow pastor, to “appoint elders in every town” and then he goes on to give the qualifications for these men. He says in verse 7, “an overseer (bishop) must be temperate.” So according to Peter, elders serve as pastors. And according to Paul’s letter to Titus, elders are bishops. One could conclude, therefore, that pastors are also bishops. Further evidence is found in Acts 20:28 where the Paul told the elders of the church at Ephesus to “be on guard for all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers.” Then he urges these elders to “shepherd the flock of God.” In this one passage Paul seems to have equated the titles of elder, pastor, and bishop. Finally in
1 Peter 5:2 the apostle says, “Shepherd the flock exercising oversight.” In other words, he is calling the pastors to act as bishops. From these passages not only is it apparent that there are three titles for the same office, but that a key responsibility of elders is decision-making. There may be only one English word to describe a single office, but perhaps the New Testament used different Greek words to describe specific nuances within that office. The bishop exercises oversight, the elder gives wisdom, and the pastor (shepherd) is to give guidance.

It appears that elders were not elected by the congregation, but appointed by those who planted the church. Paul says to Titus, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains, and appoint elders in every city as I directed you.”

The elders were not elected, instead, they were appointed by the church planters, Paul and Titus, or by other elders.

a. THE PURPOSE OF ELDERS

In Ephesians 4:11-13 Paul wrote that God has given “some to be apostles, some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors and teachers, to prepare God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.” Paul encourages the people of Philippi, “Do not merely look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.”

The purpose of every individual and office of the church is to build up the body. No leader in the church should be motivated by pride, power, or personal gain. Instead, “every man [ought] not to think more highly of himself than he ought to think.”

40 Titus 1:5
41 Philippians 2:4
think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith."

42 Michael Anthony points out that it is the responsibility of the elders (including the senior pastor) to provide the vision and direction for the church.

43 In the Old Testament "the office of elder was largely one of representation." Anthony believes that the office of eldership became prominent after the period of the patriarchs. According to Anthony, in the Old Testament, especially during the time of the patriarchs, "the office of elder was largely one of representation." In other words, the elders "spoke and acted on behalf of the people." He says, "Their function was one of rule and governance" with regard to "civil arguments in the community." They were "administrators of the civil code, and leaders for matters of the state."

44 But in the New Testament, he feels that the purpose of elders was primarily administration (decision-making) and teaching.

45 They engaged in teaching, leading (Acts 11:30), praying for the sick, administering financial aid to the poor and struggling churches, overseeing the decisions of the Jerusalem council, and solving doctrinal controversy (Acts 15:1-6).

46 Since elders in the New Testament are the group primarily responsible for decision-making, it is imperative that churches have a high degree of trust in these leaders. Trust becomes a key issue when conflict arises. Yet Speed Leas states that, "most ministers who have been working in a church for a time cannot function in the referee (conflict resolution) role."

47 His main reason for saying that pastors make poor moderators is that, "most ministers, by virtue of their formal leadership, have taken a position by word or deed on most issues. Therefore, a minister cannot be and will not be perceived as a trustworthy referee by all sides."

42 Romans 12:3
43 Anthony, p. 40.
44 Anthony, p. 47.
45 Anthony, p. 50.
democratic, it seems to ignore the Scriptural foundation of the office of pastor. If a pastor cannot be trusted, then he should not be the pastor. If the members of the congregation cannot empower him to carry out his responsibility, then they should either leave or encourage him to do so.

But some might say that leaving does not seem like an option when someone has been a member of a church for most of her life. Freida was a member of a Methodist church for all eighty-four years of her life. She invested thousands of dollars into the church. She invested thousands of hours of work and service in the church, as well as her heart and soul. She outstayed dozens of pastors. When a pastor came who she did not trust, she never considered leaving. But since the church was United Methodist, the congregation could not vote out the pastor. So instead of leaving or forcing the pastor to leave, she endured the pastors' stay with distrust. This distrust led to perpetual conflict between the pastors and the committees on which she served. Many times the conflict grew so great that the pastors finally resigned. So a church member must consider whether remaining in a congregation with a pastor she doesn't trust is better than leaving a church, regardless how much she has invested in that congregation.

Furthermore, it is the responsibility of a pastor to have strong convictions and take sides. Paul told Timothy, "Prescribe and teach these things." It was Timothy's job to confer some of his strong convictions to his congregation. So, following Timothy's example, pastors may take sides on some issues. That is not to say they should demand or even voice their opinion in all circumstances, but that a pastor's role in decision-making is more than that of the moderator. Nowhere in Scripture is the office of moderator mandated. Certainly the Bible tells us to "live at peace with all men." And Jesus said, "Blessed are the peacemakers." Nevertheless, a pastor may be both a peacemaker and also express his opinions. So while Leas' concept of the "neutral"

47 1 Timothy 4:11
The question of whether women may serve as elders is not within the scope of this paper. Numerous arguments have been made by both sides, and I have therefore chosen to stick to the less-discussed topic of decision-making.
"hospitable," He should welcome others and be gracious to them, for "by this some have entertained angels without knowing it."

"able to teach," The job description of elder/pastor/bishop may or may not include regular teaching, but nevertheless he should be able to teach. He should be theologically minded and have a grasp of Scripture. If he does not understand the doctrines of Scripture, he will not be able to make theologically sound theological decisions.

"not addicted to wine" He must not be consumed by alcohol. It does not mean that he must give up wine completely, for the elder Paul even instructed Timothy to "No longer drink water exclusively, but use a little wine for the sake of your stomach and your frequent ailments." But he must not be a drunkard.

"or pugnacious," This qualification is perhaps one of the most important for a church to consider in the selection of elders, because it is easily overlooked. A church can easily determine whether someone is a one-woman-man. Church members can make a fairly objective decision whether he is given to wine. And they can determine whether he is able to teach. But it is perhaps more difficult to determine whether someone is prone to argue or fight. One may appear pugnacious without realizing it. And one may perceive another as pugnacious, while still others do not. Nevertheless, Paul charges the church with the task of deciding whether the prospective elder is argumentative.

One can easily see why this is an important qualification. Many painful church board meetings could have been avoided if the elders had been selected with greater care. Many more efficient and benevolent decisions may be made in a church where the decision-makers are not hostile to one another. Of course, Paul is not saying that the elders must agree with one another in everything (which

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49 Hebrews 13:12
50 1 Timothy 5:23
would no doubt eliminate conflict) but that the elders must not be given to constant bickering. The elders may disagree without being contentious. So Paul is encouraging the church to prevent conflict by choosing amiable elders.

10. “but gentle,” The word may also mean patient or yielding.

11. “uncontentious,” He must not be “a brawler,” a person who is looking for arguments. “God has called us to peace.”

Anthony states that a major cause of conflict in churches is a “spirit of criticism, excessive faultfinding, which is extremely destructive to the work of the ministry.” (Consider how difficult it would be to remove an elder after a few years of service once the church realizes that he is pugnacious. In that case the church will surely be in for a fight! And the pugnacious man will claim that his removal has nothing to do with his personality, but is simply due to the fact that other elders don’t agree with him.) Scripture consistently warns against the quarrelsome, contentious, and argumentative. Paul says, “The Lord’s bond-servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all.” He warns, “If you bite and devour one another, take care lest you be consumed by one another.” Churches may be able to avoid conflict by ensuring that their leaders are uncontentious and able to live in peace.

12. “free from the love of money.” His focus should be on the Lord, and not on personal gain. After all, he cannot serve God and money.

13. “He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own...”

51 Romans 12:18
52 Anthony, p. 125.
53 2 Tim. 2:24
54 Galatians 5:15
55 Matthew 6:24
household, how will he take care of the church of God?); Paul is actually telling the church to consider the person’s personal life.

14. “and not a new convert, lest he become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.” Elders must not become prideful as a result of their position. Paul says that they are more likely to become conceited if they are given the position when they are young in their faith. Perhaps new Christians view the office of elder as an elevated position, when in reality the elder is a slave to Christ. The elder must view himself as one “under authority” as did the centurion Jesus praised for his great faith.

56 Anthony states that one cause of strife in a church is the “arrogance and pride of individual members.”

57 He states that leaders attempt to gain congregational prestige. Paul warns against such self-centeredness.

15. “And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he may not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” The church should take a look at his private and public life: his life inside and outside the church.

c. THE IMPORTANCE OF THE SELECTION PROCESS

No church should underestimate the importance of the selection process. By choosing elders wisely and carefully, a church may prevent conflict in the future. If a church is haphazard in this process, it will eventually pay the price. After all, the easiest time to remove an unqualified elder is before he starts!

56 Matthew 8:10
57 Anthony, p. 125.
although she willingly admitted that she was not a Christian, was very good at keeping track of money. The trustees, though they had no testimony of their faith in Christ, maintained the building well. Many people did not see a problem with having non-Christians serving in these areas, but that is because they did not view the financial and building decisions of the church as theological in nature. But every decision relating to the church building or money has theological implications. Non-Christians cannot be expected to make wise theological decisions, even if they are well trained in the area of money or building. When the church looked at the budget for the coming year, the non-Christian decision-makers were incapable of making a decision based on faith.

Some people in the church became aware that a mistake had been made in allowing these non-Christians to serve on committees, but there was a great cost to be paid in fixing that mistake. Most churches are unwilling to “fire” a volunteer, even if he is not a Christian, because it seems so unloving. In fact, it is not even an option in the United Methodist Church to remove a volunteer committee member. Once these non-Christians were on the committee, they would remain there for three years, or until they resigned. The nominating process was often taken very lightly, but the consequences would be felt for years. For this reason Paul urges Timothy to tell the church to choose “men of good repute” and to have them “be tested first.”

Paul knew that a scrutinizing the character of leaders and testing them before giving them authority would be of great value. For this reason he told Timothy, “Do not lay hands upon anyone too hastily and thus share responsibility for the sins of others; keep yourself free from sin.”

Therefore, since in the Methodist church leaders cannot be removed, careful selection is of even greater importance. Why is it that an elder, one who oversees the administration of the church, must be able to teach? What is it about these this office, that its holder must have the gift of

58 1 Timothy 3:10
59 1 Timothy 5:22
teaching? Would it not be sufficient for the elder to have the gift of administration and wisdom, but not teaching? Apparently not. Why? Administrators of the church need a firm grasp of Scripture. Every church decision carries spiritual implications, so the one making those decisions must be able to "rightly divide the word of truth."

The New Testament does not address in detail how leaders were selected, but there are some notable passages. According to Titus 1:4, Timothy appointed the elders in his church. We do not know whether the church nominated certain people, but in any case the final decision was his. It would not be surprising, however, if the congregation played a role in the appointment process. In Acts 6 the congregation submitted the names of prospective deacons to the apostles for approval. Timothy’s church may have submitted names of prospective elders for approval as well. We can speculate that either Timothy knew the elders well or conducted some type of interview to determine whether they met the qualifications listed in 1 Timothy 3. When Matthias was selected as the replacement apostle in Acts 1, the current apostles put forth the prospective names and made the decision. From these verses it appears that the congregation may have the responsibility of nominating elders, and the current elders have the responsibility of interviewing and approving them.

2. WHO AND WHAT ARE DEACONS?

In today’s church, the office of deacon has inadvertently replaced the office of elder. Congregational churches have a deacon board, and if anyone is called an elder, it is the pastor. The deacon board is often the decision-making body. What used to be referred to as the group of elders, is now known as the deacon board. The New Testament, however, shows that the primary responsibility of deacons was service, meeting physical needs, waiting on tables, and administering the offering.

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60 2 Timothy 2:15
61 Anthony, p. 53.
transition from servant to elder occur in the office of deacon?  Anthony asserts that this change occurred as the Protestant churches moved to America and there was a shortage of officially recognized pastors and bishops. In order to fill the void, deacons took their place, and “as a result, the concept of deacon as administrative decision-maker was firmly established in the North American church.”

One may ask, isn’t this merely a matter of semantics? What does it matter whether we call them “deacon” or “elder,” so long as the office is filled? It matters because of the degree to which we hold the people in these positions accountable. If we have deacons serving in the role of elder, by which criteria shall we judge them: the qualifications for deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13) or elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7)? The distinction is important because Scripture distinguishes between the qualifications for each office.

B. SCRIPTURAL PASSAGES CONCERNING DECISIONS

1. HOW DO ELDERS MAKE DECISIONS?

According to David Goetz, “Spiritual discernment is listening for God’s will. It’s done through consensus, which simply means that in a church board an important test of God’s leading is spiritual unity, a sense of peace after a prayerful and through discussion of a decision. Consensus means that despite disagreement, when the group looks at the decision as a whole, they can see God’s fingerprint.”

Blackaby explains how a group can see the fingerprint of God. The process starts by understanding that God is always at work and that He pursues a relationship with people. God takes the initiative to speak, so it is the job of the Christian to look for God’s initiative. God speaks through the Bible, circumstances, prayer, and the church to reveal his will. Then the church, or the

62 Anthony, p. 72.
63 Goetz, p. 48.
Christian, must make adjustments to follow and experience God. The most difficult step in the process is seeing where God is at work. It is presumed that the elders have a conviction in the authority of the Bible, but though the Bible is all true, it does not contain all truth. The elders can discuss the significance of circumstances and what God has said in prayer, and still disagree. But Blackaby asserts that the Lord speaks to the church. One of the most helpful ways for a church to determine God's will is to look for the theological significance behind each decision, and examine how a decision is influenced by the church's core values and beliefs.

Though the process of selecting elders and making decisions is not democratic per se, godly elders will seek the Lord’s will over their own. As a result, they will not seek to gain control or get their way, but as a team they will seek to hear the voice of God. They will practice the example of our Lord, who, "being in the nature of God did not count equality with God something to be grasped, but humbled himself in the form of a servant."

Jesus told his disciples to go against their culture’s tendency to be autocratic leaders. He said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them. It is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave; just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

So even if decisions are not made on the basis of a vote, the elders can maintain a democratic attitude and personality. Anthony describes this democratic leadership style, noting that each of its participants believes in shared governance. Decisions are arrived at by consensus rather than through decree. Because they believe that the feelings of others are important, they will want to determine what the group wants before pushing ahead. These leaders know that any decision not "owned" by the group will not be supported by the group.

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64 Blackaby, p. 126.
65 This concept is explained in greater detail in chapter five.
66 Philippians 2:6
67 Matthew 20:25-28
thereby undermining its implementation. They are easy to get along with and enjoy interpersonal relations with others around them. The use terms such as "we," "us," and "the team" to describe the ministry.

A servant's heart, irreproachable character, and a team spirit are the essential characteristics of an elder and a healthy elder board.

2. THE ROLE OF THE CONGREGATION IN DECISION-MAKING

Scripture makes at least one distinction between decisions which affect individuals, and those which affect congregations. Paul states that individuals must answer to God for their behavior. He emphatically states that it is not the place of the church to make dogmatic judgments of behavior which lean toward legalism. Specifically in regard to holy days, the eating of meet, and the drinking of wine, Paul states that the church has no authority in making dogmatic judgments. He says, "Let each man be fully convinced in his own mind."

But there is a place for the church to be involved in decision-making. And while elders are the focus for decision-making in the church, they are not the only body responsible for this task. The congregation of believers also has a role in making decisions. The congregation may, for instance, bring charges against their leaders. Paul cautions, however, that the charges against leaders in the church must be verified by the testimony of two or three witnesses.

Paul greatly esteemed the congregation's role in decision-making with respect to church discipline. He did not believe that discipline was the responsibility of the elders only. Paul chastised the congregation at Corinth for not expelling an immoral man. This individual called himself a Christian, but was committing adultery with his father's wife. The church did not confront the man, but instead took a passive role. Paul harshly

68 Anthony, p. 134.
69 1 Corinthians 8-10
70 Romans 14:5
71 1 Timothy 5:19
rebuked the church in his first letter, and exhorted the congregation to excommunicate the man. In this case, Paul saw that the church had a moral and spiritual responsibility not only for the well-being of the congregation, but also for the man, to "deliver him over to Satan." Paul's hope was that the man would repent and that the church would uphold its integrity. Deciding to do nothing, according to Paul, was disobedience to God.

Jesus also commanded the church to have an active role in church discipline. He told his disciples that if any of them were wronged, he should confront in private the person who sinned. If that person did not repent, two or three brothers should confront the sinner. If he did not repent, the elders of the church were to confront him. Finally, the church was to confront the man, and if he did not repent, the church was to treat him as a tax-collector or a sinner. The purpose of Jesus' command was that the brother might be "won over" with repentance. Jesus did not give the church the option to "decide to do nothing."

Paul states that it is the responsibility of the congregation to maintain order in worship. In other words, the congregation is not merely an audience in worship. Instead, the members are active participants. Paul encourages each believer to come to worship with a hymn, word of prophesy, or exhortation. And he commands that if anyone speaks in tongues, there must be an interpreter, and only two or three should speak in tongues. Since God is the author of order, not confusion, the church should see that order pervades the worship.

It is clear that the body of believers was active in many forms of decision-making, and that the elders were not the exclusive group fulfilling this role. The church participated in the nomination process of elders, confrontation of sin, expulsion of "carnal believers," administration of church discipline, and maintenance of order in worship.

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72 1 Corinthians 1-5
73 Matthew 18:15-20
74 1 Corinthians 14
3. GUIDANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT

In a discussion on decision-making one might expect to find methods and rules. Methods and rules are perhaps more convenient, more transferable, and more objective than the elusive concept of "guidance of the Holy Spirit." But it would be unwise in a treatment of New Testament decision-making to dismiss the work of the Holy Spirit, and to concentrate only on the rules of order for decision-making. Some get uneasy at the idea of depending on the Holy Spirit for decision-making, rather than rules of order. One may protest that the work of the Holy Spirit is not an objective method. One may contest that it is impractical to speak of the Holy Spirit's leading because such a practice is not easily translated into the local church. A great objection which I, and doubtless other pastors, have heard is that it is impossible to make a case that the Holy Spirit has spoken. One cannot objectively prove that the Holy Spirit has spoken to him, so a person making such a claim places himself in a position of great power beyond reach. Furthermore, some object that the Holy Spirit may speak one thing to one person, while another will sense a different word from the Spirit. But the Bible assumes that God's people believe in the Holy Spirit's ability to speak and impact humanity. Without the work of the Holy Spirit, many of the actions, decisions, and events of the Bible are either meaningless or non-historical. A belief that the Holy Spirit speaks, directs, and works in the life of the believer enables the church to take a different view toward decision-making. The humanistic world-view assumes that a church must make decisions based only on such factors as logic, common sense, fairness, and moral responsibility. But a belief in the Holy Spirit enables the church to make decisions based also (if not primarily) on the work of God.

The Holy Spirit guided Philip to speak to the Ethiopian eunuch. Then He snatched Philip and placed him in Azotus (Acts 8). The church at Antioch was gathered together in prayer when the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the..."
work to which I have called them.” (Acts 13:2). Paul traveled with his companions throughout Phrygia and Galatia, but the Holy Spirit forbade him from preaching the word in the province of Asia. (Acts 16:6). Not only did the Holy Spirit speak, but He also acted by setting Peter and John free from prison (Acts 5:19-21, 12:6-17). The Spirit guided the early church; he still can guide the church today.

4. DECISIONS BASED ON SCRIPTURE

Paul began his ministry in each new community by trying to convert his Jewish brothers and sisters. When he saw that many of his attempts were futile, he changed his focus to the Gentiles. He eventually would refer to himself as the “apostle to the Gentiles.” This notion was offensive to the Jews, and they were filled with jealousy. But Paul’s decision was based on what he read in Scripture. Luke wrote, “Paul and Barnabas answered them [the Jews] boldly, ‘We had to speak the word of God to you first. Since you reject it and do not consider yourselves worthy of eternal life, we now turn to the Gentiles. For this is what the Lord has commanded us; “I have made you a light for the Gentiles that you may bring salvation to the ends of the earth.”’” (Acts 13:46, 47). Paul’s decision was based on Isaiah 49:6.

Likewise, in the face of opposition to the new movement of speaking in tongues, Peter substantiated the work of the Holy Spirit by appealing to the prophet Joel. The church accepted Scripture as a basis for making decisions.

One of the first major decisions the church faced was what to do with the vacancy among the number of twelve apostles, created by Judas’ betrayal and suicide. The passage is found in Acts 1:15-26.

75 Acts 2:21
And at this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together), and said, "Brethren, the Scripture had to be fulfilled, which the Holy Spirit foretold by the mouth of David concerning Judas, who became a guide to those who arrested Jesus. For he was counted among us, and received his portion in this ministry. (Now this man acquired a field with the price of his wickedness; and falling headlong, he burst open in the middle and all his bowels gushed out. And it became known to all who were living in Jerusalem; so that in their own language that field was called Hakeldama, that is, Field of Blood.) For it is written in the book of Psalms, 'Let his homestead be made desolate, And let no man dwell in it;' and, 'His office let another man take.' It is therefore necessary that of the men who have accompanied us all the time that the Lord Jesus went in and out among us—beginning with the baptism of John, until the day that He was taken up from us—one of these should become a witness with us of His resurrection."

And they put forward two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias. And they prayed, and said, "Thou, Lord, who knowest the hearts of all men, show which one of these two Thou hast chosen to occupy this ministry and apostleship from which Judas turned aside to go to his own place." And they drew lots for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was numbered with the eleven apostles.

The assembly which made this decision was aware of its many theological implications. Peter began by appealing to Scripture and the prophecy concerning Judas. Peter substantiated his claim that one ought to replace Judas by quoting Psalm 69:25 and Psalm 109:8. The final decision "to replace Judas is based on a theological interpretation of the event of his betrayal." Peter also made it clear that the new apostle must be a man who had witnessed Christ, as well as a man whose character the assembly had time to evaluate. The apostles' prayer evidences the fact that the group expected the Holy Spirit to make the decision based on "heart" of each man. The brethren prayed for the guidance of the Holy Spirit, and seemed convinced that the Lord's will would be accomplished. The assembly participated by listening to Peter's proposal, nominating two men for the position, praying for guidance, casting lots, and carrying out the decision by designating Matthias as the new apostle.

76 Johnson, p. 62.
77 Johnson, p. 62.
explicitly stated, the group must have been convinced that God would answer their prayer through the lots. If they were not convinced that God would intervene, the tying together of prayer and subsequent casting of lots would seem absurd.

This was not a blind toss or random selection. The decision was not to be made among twenty randomly selected men. The lots were cast for two men: presumably both were equally qualified. At first glance it may appear that the assembly chose Judas' replacement merely by lot, but such a statement is deceiving. Though we can only speculate, it seems reasonable to assume that a great deal of work, perhaps debate, and ultimately decision making is not revealed in this passage. The whole process is summed up in the words, "They proposed two men." The lots were used only to choose between the two men for whom the assembly had already taken appropriate measures to propose.

It would be a mistake, however, to pay too much attention to the lots. The passage does not address the legitimacy of casting lots as an appropriate means of hearing the Holy Spirit. What is vital to the process in decision-making is that the assembly submitted to the outcome. It seems that the assembly was equally prepared for Joseph (the other candidate) to be chosen. What legitimated the casting of lots was not the lots themselves, but the community's commitment to submit to the outcome. The people must have been amiable either way.

Acts 4:23-31

The disciples were persecuted, flogged, and imprisoned for speaking in the name of Jesus. When the Sanhedrin ordered them to not speak in his name any longer, they were faced with an implicit decision: to preach or not to preach. The process involved in this decision is found in Acts 4:23-31:

And when they had been released, they went to their own companions, and reported all that the chief priests and the elders had said to them. And when they heard this, they lifted their voices to God with one accord and said, "O Lord, it is Thou who didst make the heaven and the earth and the sea, and all that is in them, who by the Holy..."
Spirit, through the mouth of our father David Thy servant, didst say, 'Why did the Gentiles rage, and the peoples devise futile things? The kings of the earth took their stand, and the rulers were gathered together against the Lord, and against His Christ.'

For truly in this city there were gathered together against Thy holy servant Jesus, whom Thou didst anoint, both Herod and Pontius Pilate, along with the Gentiles and the peoples of Israel, to do whatever Thy hand and Thy purpose predestined to occur.

And now, Lord, take no note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence, while Thou dost extend Thy hand to heal, and signs and wonders take place through the name of Thy holy servant Jesus. " And when they had prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness.

In the recorded events in this passage, the disciples began with prayer. The disciples asked the Lord to defend them and give them courage. They recognized the movement and work of the Holy Spirit; specifically in reflection on words He spoke to King David. They appealed to Scripture and quoted Psalm 2:1, 2. They interpreted their group's present circumstance in the light of this Old Testament passage. The assembly was aware that their identity would be shaped by their decision whether to continue preaching the Gospel of Jesus. They understood that their theology of God's sovereignty would influence their decision.

When the Holy Spirit filled them, the outcome was clear: they continued to preach with boldness.

Acts 6:1-6

As the assembly of Christians grew, the elders faced the difficulty of carrying out both the ministry of teaching and service. Acts 6:1-6 describes their decision to install a group of deacons:

Now at this time while the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food. And the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to serve tables. But select from among you, brethren, seven men of

78 Johnson, p. 63.
good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. But we will devote ourselves to prayer, and to the ministry of the word.” And the statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them.

In addition to the conflict over how to care for widows, this passage deals with the nature and identity of the apostles. This conflict forced the apostles and the congregation to decide what roles the apostles would or would not continue to play. The decision began with a proposal from the twelve. Then the apostles entrusted the congregation with the task of nominating seven men. No one knows the exact process of nomination, but the twelve required that the men be “of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom.” They expected that the deacons would be men of great character. After the congregation submitted the names, the apostles prayed. It is clear that they approved the men by ordaining them by the laying on of hands. It is noteworthy that the apostles said they would “put them in charge of this task.” The deacons were given more than a title; they were empowered by the twelve to do the work.

Acts 9:26–30

Saul of Tarsus was an infamous persecutor of Christians, so it is not surprising that after his conversion many disciples were suspicious of his true intentions. We read of the church’s reluctance to accept Paul as an apostle, or even a Christian, in Acts 9:26–30:

And when he had come to Jerusalem, he was trying to associate with the disciples; and they were all afraid of him, not believing that he was a disciple. But Barnabas took hold of him and brought him to the apostles and described to them how he had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had talked to him, and how at Damascus he had spoken out boldly in the name of Jesus. And he was with them moving about freely in Jerusalem, speaking out boldly in the name of the Lord. And he was talking...
and arguing with the Hellenistic Jews; but they were attempting to put him to death. But when the brethren learned of it, they brought him down to Caesar and sent him away to Tarsus.

The assembly did not believe Paul's own account of his conversion. They must have wondered why he so quickly wanted to associate with Christians. It is remarkable, however, that what did convince the disciples was Barnabas's testimony of Paul's character. Barnabas testified to Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus, and that Paul had been preaching in the name of Jesus. Johnson states that, "This narrative had convincing power. It enabled the community to accept Paul as a fellow believer, because in the narrative they could discern the work of the Lord."

Acts 10:1-48

Perhaps the most controversial decision in the New Testament was whether or not to bring the gospel directly to Gentiles, or to require them to convert to Judaism first. This decision had to be made on an individual level; each Christian needed to decide whether to associate with Gentiles. But it also had to be made on a corporate level; the church needed to decide if it could free Gentiles from the law of circumcision.

The narrative in Acts 10 deals with Peter's personal decision to eat with a Gentile, Cornelius. An angel of God spoke to Cornelius and told him that his prayers had been answered. The angel instructed him to invite Peter to dine at his house. While Cornelius' two servants were on their way to invite Peter, he had a divine dream. When Peter went up on the roof to pray, God lay out a feast of "unclean" animals before Peter, and commanded him to kill and eat. Peter's response was, "Never, Lord." His was not a response of blatant disobedience, but of confusion. He did not think that the Lord would command him to eat something unclean, which would be contrary to Scripture.

80 Johnson, p. 66.
interchange occurred three times, but Peter did not understand its significance. When the servants invited Peter to dine with Cornelius, he apparently still did not know what the dream meant. Peter obeyed the Holy Spirit, even though he could not reconcile the apparent contradiction between the dream and the law. The meaning was revealed to him at the home of the centurion. He explained it to all in the house when he said, “I most certainly understand now that God is not one to show partiality, but in every nation the man who fears Him and does what is right, is welcome to Him.”

After he preached the gospel and the people believed, Peter exclaimed, “Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?” Then, “he ordered them to be baptized in the name of Jesus Christ.

Peter's decision was influenced by the work of the Holy Spirit and the revelation given to him by the Spirit. His decision was validated by the conversion of the Gentiles and the subsequent work of the Holy Spirit in their lives.

Acts 11:15–18

Peter's individual decision became a corporate decision (Acts 11). This chapter marks the beginning of a crisis where the church had to decide what to do about Gentiles. Peter was chastised for eating at the house of uncircumcised men. Peter recounted the whole story of his dream and the occurrences at Cornelius' home. His defense is given in Acts 11:15–18:

And as I began to speak, the Holy Spirit fell upon them, just as He did upon us at the beginning. And I remembered the word of the Lord, how He used to say, ‘John baptized with water, but you shall be baptized with the Holy Spirit.’ If God therefore gave to them the same gift as He gave to us also after believing in the Lord Jesus Christ, who was I that I could stand in God's way?” And when they heard this, they quieted down, and glorified God, saying, “Well then, God has granted to the Gentiles also the repentance that leads to life.”

Acts 10:34, 35

Acts 10:47, 48
Peter’s defense began with the retelling of his story. He then justified his actions by saying that the Holy Spirit came upon the Gentile believers just as He had upon the apostles. By saying, “just as He did upon us,” he may simply have meant that the Gentiles also received the Holy Spirit. But the phrase more likely means that the Holy Spirit came upon them in the same manner as the apostles. In this case, Peter would mean that the Spirit was evidenced through speaking in tongues. Peter then appealed to the authority of Jesus to justify his actions. He quoted the words of Jesus (recorded in Luke 3:16) as evidence that the Gentiles’ belief in Jesus led to their filling with the Holy Spirit. The people were convinced by Peter’s defense, his narrative, his appeal to the words of Jesus, and his evidence of the work of the Holy Spirit.

Acts 15

In Acts 15 we read of the apostles’ decision to allow Gentiles to convert without adopting the law of Moses. The specific issue at hand was circumcision. Some “Judaizers” were pressuring the apostles to require circumcision (and the whole law of Moses) for Gentile believers. Some thought that these Judaizers were placing on the Gentiles a burden that even they were unable to bear. Adult circumcision would have been an extremely painful procedure, and adopting the law of Moses would have been even more difficult. But as long as the Gentiles were uncircumcised, they were unclean, and could not fellowship with Jews (according to Jewish law). There were three possible solutions to the problem. First, the church “ignore” the problem. This was probably never considered, because it would mean a division so great in the church that Jews and Gentiles could not fellowship together. Second, the Jews could require the Gentiles to convert to Judaism along with their Christian conversion. This was proposed by the “party of the Pharisees.” Peter, James, and Paul believed that this was an unreasonable request. They also thought that requiring the Gentiles to keep the law of Moses would...
deny the grace of Christ. Since these apostles were convinced that we are saved by grace through faith, they viewed the Judaizers' request as a denial of Jesus' work on the cross.

The third solution was for the church to undergo a radical change in the way they viewed cleanliness and the law of Moses. James, Peter, and Paul suggested that the Jews overcome their scruples and fellowship with Gentiles. In order for the Jews (not just the Pharisees) to accept this proposition, God would have to speak loud and clear.

So Peter, James, and Paul gave three arguments for the inclusion of uncircumcised believers. First, Peter related that God appeared to him in a vision and told him to eat unclean meat. Three times Peter refused, but finally God told him, “Do not call unclean what God has declared clean.” Then the Lord told Peter to go eat with and preach to a Gentile named Cornelius. Peter understood that this vision was permission from God to overcome a taboo which he had avoided his whole life.

Second, Paul explained that the Gentiles were genuinely converted, even though they were uncircumcised. The Gentile's conversion was authenticated by their speaking in tongues. Peter asked, “Can anyone prohibit these men (Cornelius and his family) from being baptized, since God has given them his Holy Spirit?” Third, James explained that the inclusion of Gentiles had always been in God’s design and program. He quoted the prophet Amos, saying that God’s name would represent all nations.

The exact process by which the apostles reached their decision is not clear. Apparently, they did not vote, nor did they form a committee. There was no dictator, nor was there an elected moderator. But immediately after Peter, Paul, and James spoke, we read that the church sent a delegation back to Antioch with an answer.

Despite the lack of more detail, it is noteworthy that those present in the discussion were church members, apostles, and elders. Those who spoke and made the final decision fulfilled the requirements of an elder, and were people of good repute. Who was there is of great

83 Some commentators have suggested that Luke downplayed the controversy in order to present the church in a positive light. This paper, however, assumes the veracity of the Bible at “face value.”
importance to the author, Luke, and of course to the process of decision-making. The group reached a consensus based on the impact of the decision on their theological beliefs. The decision would have an explicit influence on shaping the identity of the group. Would the church henceforth be primarily Jewish believers in Christ? Or would the church be primarily believers in Christ who happened to be both Gentiles and Jews? Johnson says, “Here we have a picture of the church articulating its faith in response to new and threatening circumstances. It reaches decisions, not by prescription, but by way of a paradigmatic story.”

The decision to include Gentiles is rooted in the apostles’ interpretation of the theological implications. They understood that this decision would be profoundly affected by God’s program, prophecy, and blessing.

The decision was so monumental, that it would require more than Peter’s opinion or Paul’s philosophy. The decision would rewrite Scripture, and would nullify a previous command of Scripture. Because of its importance, the church required a significant work of God. This work was evidenced by the Gentiles speaking in tongues.

The church has accepted for nearly two thousand years that the canon is closed, and that we will not be “rewriting Scripture.” In this sense, it may seem that the decision in Acts 15 is irrelevant. There are no longer apostles, at least in the sense of the apostles who presided at this council (witnesses of Christ in his ministry and resurrection). The church is not likely to universally accept a new idea which nullifies a position of Scripture. But there are some parallels between this decision and the process of decision-making today. First, the congregation entrusted the decision into the hands of elders (and apostles). Second, the decision makers were people who the congregation deemed trustworthy. And third, the theological implications of the decision were examined.

Johnson, p. 56.
While many scholars believe that Paul's conflict with the Judaizers in Galatians refers to the same event in Acts 15, the presence of several differences make it more likely that Paul, in Galatians, is referring to an earlier event. In Acts 15, it appears that Paul was appointed to represent Antioch in the debate, while in Galatians 2 he took his own initiative. Titus is not mentioned in Acts 15, but is a key figure in Galatians 2. Paul does not mention a decree in Galatians 2, but it is central to Acts 15. It seems that the event in Galatians 2 precedes the event in Acts 15. In general, the conflict in Galatians 2 is somewhat informal and localized, while the conflict in Acts 15 influences the whole church and concludes with a decree. Paul explains the Galatians 2 conflict in this way:

Then after an interval of fourteen years I went up again to Jerusalem with Barnabas, taking Titus along also. And it was because of a revelation that I went up; and I submitted to them the gospel which I preach among the Gentiles, but I did so in private to those who were of reputation, for fear that I might be running, or had run, in vain. But not even Titus who was with me, though he was a Greek, was compelled to be circumcised. But it was because of the false brethren who had sneaked in to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, in order to bring us into bondage. But we did not yield in subjection to them for even an hour, so that the truth of the gospel might remain with you. But from those who were of high reputation (what they were makes no difference to me; God shows no partiality) -- well, those who were of reputation contributed nothing to me. But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles, and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, that we might go to the Gentiles, and they to the circumcised.

The Judaizers and Paul disagreed whether Gentiles should be included in the Christian fellowship, or whether they should first be required to become Jewish (particularly through circumcision). Paul began his defense by "submitting to them the gospel." He explained the theological implications of the decision. The leaders reached consensus after examining the theology behind the decision, how it would affect their identity, and seeing the work of the Holy Spirit. As Johnson points out, the Judaizers
recognized that in both Peter’s ministry to the circumcised and Paul’s to the uncircumcised, God had been at work. It was Paul’s account of his work with the Gentiles which finally persuaded his opponents. It was his “narration of what he did and taught among the Gentiles, which allowed the other leaders to discern that this was God’s work.”

This decision was a reflection of the group’s theology: it was influenced by where they saw the Holy Spirit at work.

C. SUMMARY OF NEW TESTAMENT DECISION MAKING

These Scripture passages do not likely record all the detail of the events they describe. Similar to what John said about Jesus, “I suppose that even the whole world could not contain the books” that could be written about what happened in the early church.

While each of the passages is different and no clear prescription of decision-making is laid forth, there are elements throughout which shape an understanding of New Testament decision-making. Not all the passages contain all these elements, but a common pattern emerges. First, the leaders (whether elders or apostles, depending on the context) have a strong role in teaching and admonishing the congregation. They make the community aware of the need for change.

Second, the leaders examine and clarify the theological implications of potential decisions, and determine how those decisions will shape their identity. Johnson states, “The process is theological. It is an articulation of faith, seeking understanding, not in some abstract sense, but in an immediate and practical way.”

Third, the leaders appeal to Scripture for justification or guidance. Fourth, the leaders look for a clear movement, work, or word of the Holy Spirit. Both the leaders and the congregation are actively.

85 Johnson, p. 45.
86 Johnson, p. 45.
87 John 21:25
88 Johnson, p. 86.
involved in listening and discerning the work of God. Fifth, they greatly esteemed the role of prayer and expected immediate answers to their prayer to guide the decision. Sixth, the assembly and the leaders submitted to the outcome of the decision.

D. SUBMISSION

1. PASSAGES REGARDING SUBMISSION

For many, the concept of submission may seem frightening, archaic, and perhaps even unjust. Submission is certainly a delicate subject (whether addressing submission in marriage or to church leaders). I have heard only a few sermons about submission within a marriage (even though Paul dedicates three separate passages to the idea). I have heard a few sermons about submitting to the government, which doesn't seem to be a real threat to most law-abiding Americans. But I have never heard a sermon about submission to elders. The thought of “church submission” seems like something from the inquisition. Church members today hear of submitting to the church and fear a return to lines such as these: “The masses of subjects are to pay their tithes and do their penance, lest they suffer some ill consequences. Never shall they differ from the opinion of the men of the cloth.” If this is what the word “submission” brings to mind, then it’s no wonder that the concept is near-extinct in our churches. Yet, the concept of submission pervades the New Testament. So we may have reservations about submission, we may not even like it, but we must deal with the passages which refer to it.

The strongest passage says, “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 once was teaching a group of junior high boys who were rambunctious and talkative. Finally, I had one of the boys

89 Hebrews 13:17
read this verse, and before the words came out of his mouth, it was evident that he had gotten the message. It is wearisome for a pastor to deal with a wild bunch of boys. And the chaos resulting from a lack of submission does not profit them, either.

As with children, so too, with adults, the chaos produced from a lack of submission does not profit them. A pastor can just as easily lose the joy of ministry when the congregation “gets out of hand.” The author of Hebrews exhorts congregations to submit to their elders. He stated that the elders have a spiritual responsibility of watching over people in their churches. When a church elects a representative for a year, the congregation may feel less need to obey that leader. The election process sometimes is treated with such a worldly-minded (rather than spiritually-minded) attitude, that most church members don’t view the elected officials as ones who “watch over their soul.” So there may be a connection between the flourishing of church democracy and a diminished concept of submission. But if church members realized that their elders had a spiritual responsibility for them, they might be more likely to submit to these elders, and no doubt that congregation would take the nomination process very seriously. After all, if one is going to submit willingly to another, he will first ensure that the person to whom he is submitting is worthy.

When the writer of Hebrews said that failing to submit, “would be unprofitable for you,” he made it clear that submission is not for the benefit of the elders: that their egos would be boosted, but appropriate submission benefits the whole church. If congregations agreed to submit to their elders, perhaps the church would see a reverse in the high rate of turnover among pastors. That reversal would not only make for a more joyful clergy, but a more joyful and successful laity as well.

Submission is a spiritual discipline. Jesus commended a centurion for his great faith. A centurion was a powerful leader in the Roman army. One would have expected this centurion to be puffed up with arrogance. But he said to Jesus, “I am a man under
He did not emphasize the authority he had over a hundred men, though his authority was certainly remarkable. Instead he emphasized the one to whom he reported.

Although he was a man of authority, he was also a man of humility. Jesus commended this man and his faith. Since the centurion emphasized his submission, rather than his position, one can infer that he saw the benefit of placing himself under authority. The church today can take the centurion's example by reversing our natural tendency to grasp for power, and instead (as people of great faith) submit to the authority which God has designed for us.

Submission begins with a willingness to place the desires of another before one's own. It can bring peace and order to a church. As an associate pastor, I am "a man under authority." Our youth group has a large van, for which I am the primary driver and overseer. Yet our senior pastor decided to have the van cleaned out twice a month, which costs the church $15 each cleaning. I thought this was an excessive cost, so I suggested that we have volunteers do the cleaning. We discussed the issue with our elders, and I could have made the matter a big issue. I could have played any variety of political cards and excuses, starting with, "It's the youth van!" But instead, with the desire to live in peace, I submitted to his desire, and let go of my desire to control.

The issues are not always this simple or small, yet the principle of submission endures. Hank was the youth pastor of a church which was in the process of calling a senior pastor. The church finally called a bi-vocational pastor who was also on staff at Planned Parenthood. Hank, desiring to live in peace and submit to the church's decision, knew it would be better to leave the church than to stay and be contentious. He understood that as a youth pastor, the Lord was calling him to be under submission to the senior pastor. But he could not in good conscience submit to a man who worked for an

Matthew 8:9

90 Matthew 8:9
Knowing that God has called us to peace, he determined to leave the church. This decision was itself a godly act of submission, rather than contention.

2. **EMPOWERMENT: MODERN-DAY SUBMISSION**

The lack of submission in today's church is evident in Anthony's assertion that, "Church boards are notorious for handing out miles of job responsibilities but only inches of authority. For the worker, the result is a loss of self respect, low motivation, miscommunication over expectations, and feelings of inferiority."

He gives as an example: a committee asked to organize a church retreat, but that could not book the reservation without the approval of the board. The retreat committee received responsibility, but no authority. Anthony suggests that churches strive not just for responsibility, but parity. Parity is "authority plus responsibility." Churches today have come to call this concept "empowerment." Churches are perhaps most reluctant to empower their leaders in the area of finances. For instance, the photocopier at a Methodist church needed repair. The only way that it could be fixed was for the Trustees to bring a recommendation to the Administrative Board, the Finance Committee to recommend the expense, and the board to approve the repair. This process took two months (not including the time required to repair the copier). But there are other ways for churches to retain control without diminishing effectiveness. The church could have pre-approved a certain amount of money that the trustees could spend without bringing the proposal to the board. This compromise in control is an example of empowerment.

Anthony states that one way to create parity between authority and responsibility is to have a clearly defined job description.

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91 Anthony, p. 79.
92 Anthony, p. 78.
eliminate potentially frustrating "unwritten expe

Most corporations try to ensure that when someone is given a job responsibility, he is also given the authority to carry it out. If he does not fulfill the responsibility with the given authority, or if he does not perform to the liking of the body which hired him, he may be fired. Why are things different in the church? Perhaps because churches don’t want to see anyone fired. And perhaps because churches don’t want to hand over authority. In either case, the church’s reluctance to empower its leaders may be a sign of unwillingness to submit. In the end, the hesitancy to submit becomes a "burden to those who watch over" the church.

In summary, submission is a key component of a New Testament model of decision-making. Submission adds to the health of a church by reducing conflict and empowering leaders. The act of submission need not be one of inequality, nor need it conjure a feeling of trepidation (if one has confidence in a leader’s character). If the church has confidence in the elders it has selected, its members will experience freedom by willingly submitting to the elder and empowering them to "equip the saints for the work of ministry."
CHAPTER IV
AN EXAMINATION OF THE PHILOSOPHY OF DECISION-MAKING AND HOW CURRENT MODELS DIFFER FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT GUIDELINES

A. SUMMARY OF THE NEW TESTAMENT GUIDELINES

The previous chapter explained several characteristics of New Testament decision-making. One may ask, however, "Does the fact that the early Christians made decisions in a certain way mean that churches today must follow their example?" This is a legitimate question, since there are many things which occurred in Scripture that we may not be bound to do ourselves, or perhaps which we should even avoid. For instance, one would have a hard time defending polygamy simply because Solomon had a thousand wives. Just because a certain practice is mentioned in Scripture does not mean that we (Christians or churches today) ought to imitate it. But many of the passages regarding the New Testament model of decision-making appear to be more than historical narrative; they contain commands and theological assertions which may apply to the church today.

Many conservative interpreters agree that a biblical practice or command is applicable for the church today if it fits one of two criteria. First, if the command is spoken to a general audience, that may indicate that it carries a timeless truth. Second, if the practice or command was recognized by all of the churches and among the apostolic fathers, then it may be considered normative.

The following paragraphs look at key characteristics of New Testament decision-making in relation to these potential standards of timeless.

93 These are the criteria by which Michael Anthony justifies his position regarding church governance in The Effective Church Board.
The qualifications of elders fits the first criterion of a timeless, general command. Paul's description of elders was spoken to a general audience and appears to state a timeless truth. Though he is speaking to Timothy, he says, "An elder must be above reproach….

Paul is not merely telling Timothy to look for elders in one church who are blameless, but stating a fact about who elders should be.

The process of making decisions through a plurality of elders fits the second criterion of universal practice. The first churches were different in many ways. The church at Jerusalem was distinctly Jewish. The believers could not imagine accepting uncircumcised men in their fellowship. They observed the dietary laws of Moses, worshipped on the Sabbath, and met in the temple. The church at Antioch, on the other hand, consisted of many Gentile believers. They ate pagan food, did not follow the law of Moses, worshipped on the first day of the week, and worshipped in synagogues or homes. Despite these differences, the New Testament records that the church in Jerusalem, Antioch, and Ephesus each had a plurality of elders who were the primary decision-makers of the church.

Paul's teaching about the presence and importance of spiritual gifts also indicates a timeless application. He says that God "has given some to be prophets, some to be evangelists, and some to be pastors…so that the body of Christ may be built up until we all reach unity in the faith…attaining to the whole measure of the fullness in Christ." Paul explains, "if a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach."

Are all apostles? Are all prophets? Are all teachers? Do all work miracles?

In these verses Paul is explaining the theological background (which seems to have a timeless character) behind the role of spiritual gifts in the church. Christians today recognize that each person is
gifted differently, not everyone has certain gifts, and that the church should allow for
believers to exercise their gifts.

There are some details (such as the use of musical instruments in worship, or the
church meeting in synagogues) which are described by Scripture, but neither prohibited
nor mandated by Scripture. But some timeless characteristics of the decision-
making process seem to apply to the modern church.

B. SEVEN NEW TESTAMENT GUIDELINES

Francis Schaeffer studied normative (always true) and descriptive (specific to one
culture/time) elements among the early church and proposed eight characteristics of
every true Christian church. Among the items on Schaeffer’s list were “church officers
(elders) who have responsibility for the local churches, deacons responsible for the
community of the church in the area of material things, a serious view of discipline, and
specific qualifications for elders and deacons.”

Schaeffer’s observations of a “true church” are similar to the characteristics of decision-
making discussed in this paper. The passages examined in chapter three suggest that a New Testament decision-
making process would be characterized by the following qualities:

A. Empowered leadership. When the church appointed elders, the office was not
a matter of title only. Office holders’ authority was proportional to their responsibility.

For instance, the congregation in Jerusalem entrusted its elders to make the decision in
appointing deacons, thereby setting at ease the complaint that the Hellenist widows were
being overlooked (Acts 6). The congregation also entrusted the elders with the decision
of whether or not to accept Gentiles who were not circumcised (Acts 15). Congregations
also apparently empowered their leaders to appoint elders (Acts 14:23).

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B. Carefully selected leaders

The leaders were selected because of their character and experience. Paul explains that they were to be tested first, and if found above reproach, they were allowed to serve.

The selection of elders was viewed with great gravity, and the potential candidates were carefully scrutinized.

C. Elders appointed by elders. Paul commanded Titus, the elder of a church, to appoint elders. He did not expect the congregation to vote for the elders.

We do not see the congregations laying hands on and ordaining elders. Instead, the elders perform this function.

D. The elders were the primary decision-making body. In the case of the decisions recorded throughout the New Testament, the decisions were usually made by the elders, and were not generally brought before the congregation or committees.

Sometimes, however, the elders did submit their decision before the congregation, such as the suggestion to appoint seven men (Acts 6).

E. Leadership-led and congregation-driven. The leaders were the primary decision-makers, but everyone in the congregation had a responsibility for "doing the work of ministry.

For example, the congregation submitted two people to replace Judas, and entrusted the apostles to make the decision.

F. In general, local church autonomy. The churches had no Book of Discipline as their authority. The bishop was not in a position above pastors (chapter three argues that the offices of bishop and pastor were synonymous). In general, the elders of each church were free to make their own decisions. It was the local church (or its leaders) which selected deacons (Acts 6:1-6), appointed elders (Titus 1:5), administered the ordinances (Acts 2:41-42), approved the work of evangelism (Acts 11:1-18) sent out missionaries and received their reports (Acts 13-14), and administered church discipline (1 Corinthians 10:27).

99 1 Timothy 3:10
100 Titus 1:5
101 Ephesians 4:13-17
That the churches were generally autonomous does not imply that they were completely independent. Many factors served to unite them, not the least of which was their loyal allegiance to Christ. The major New Testament exception to local church autonomy was Acts 15 (the Jerusalem Conference, examined in chapter three).

We also see that the apostles regularly traveled from church to church and that the churches sent offerings to one another.

G. Congregational submission to leaders. When Paul gave a command, he expected that it would be carried out. He said, "If anyone thinks he is a prophet or spiritual, let him recognize that the things which I write to you are the Lord's commandment. But if anyone does not recognize this, he is not recognized."

In 1 Corinthians, Paul refers to a man who was sleeping with his father's wife. Paul commanded the church to put this man out of their fellowship. When they did not, he wrote back "harsh words" and said that he expected the man to be rebuked by the time he returned to Corinth.

The author of Hebrews admonishes the churches to obey their leaders and "submit to their authority, so their work will be a joy."

C. SOME COMMON DEVIATIONS FROM THE NEW TESTAMENT GUIDELINES

Many churches today do not exhibit all of the New Testament guidelines for decision-making described above. We can also note, that on this side of eternity no church has found or will find perfection. The governance within each of the three types of churches this study examines falls somewhere between complete adherence to the above guidelines and complete deviation from them. None of the three types is on either extreme. Yet, in theory, there is no reason why each of these churches could not benefit...

102 Hobbs, p. 69.
103 See page 66, 67.
104 1 Corinthians 14:37, 38
105 1 Corinthians 5:1-5
106 Hebrews 13:17
from moving closer to these characteristics within their own structures. It is my hope that through this study church leaders will be able to identify ways their churches deviate from New Testament guidelines, and see how to make their process of decision-making more peaceful, effective, and biblical. The deviations (from the New Testament picture of church governance) listed below may appear in any decision-making structure, any church, and any denomination (though structures may affect the tendency and type of these deviations). Similarly, in theory, almost any structure, church, and denomination could exhibit some or all of the New Testament guidelines. Some common deviations from the New Testament guidelines include:

A. Leadership with responsibility, but not empowerment. As the pastor of Oak Chapel United Methodist Church, I observed that the church gave people and committees responsibility to carry out specific tasks, but they did not generally allow the responsible party to make decisions which affect the budget, facilities, or programs of the church without seeking specific approval. In other words, committees were given only the authority to carry out tasks which the congregation or their overseeing board approved.

This restriction on authority often reduced ingenuity and innovation, because committee members said such things as, “We can’t do that,” or “We don’t have the money,” or “The board won’t approve that.”

If a church enlarges the parameters of authority given to a committee, that committee could be freer to explore change and examine new possibilities. This increased freedom allows for greater efficiency. For instance, the church council at Orangewood Avenue Baptist Church authorized the building committee to make all decisions on design, décor, and furnishings without seeking further approval. The only decision which the church council made during the renovation concerned total amount to budget. The building committee had the discretion to work out the details of this budget.

Though enlarging these parameters involved risks and required trust on the part of the
church council members, the payoff in efficiency, change, and leadership development was great.

B. Leaders selected by the congregation. Churches fall somewhere between complete congregational involvement and no congregational involvement in the selection of elders. Both the United Methodist Church and Southern Baptist Church examined in this study allow the congregation the final approval of nominated names. These churches are not completely democratic, however. Though members vote on nominations at the annual charge conference, the nominating committee has the ability to do the majority of the work in the process of selection. Technically, the members on nominating committee would be elders themselves, because they are primary decision-makers in the church (and that is the function of elder proposed by this study).

C. Leaders selected on the basis of tenure, popularity, or willingness. Nearly every church has a list of jobs. And most churches have difficulty finding willing, dedicated, and qualified people to fulfill these tasks. The United Methodist Book of Discipline calls for at least twenty positions in the church. For a small church, the task of filling these positions can often be overwhelming. For this reason, many churches may resort to nominating persons simply because they are willing, or because they have filled this position in the past.

The United Methodist Book of Discipline has no requirements for selection of committee members based on character. Furthermore, there are no provisions in the Book of Discipline to remove a person from office or from membership in the church. This is typical of mainline, democratic churches.

D. Congregation-led (rather than leader-led). The congregation has the ultimate authority to make decisions. The pastor’s responsibilities are not decision-making, but carrying out specific tasks. For instance, in the United Methodist Church the pastor’s tasks include preaching, overseeing the nomination process, and moderating charge conference. The structure of Orangewood Avenue Baptist Church (described in chapter
two) reveals that a great potential cause of conflict looms among churches which are congregation-led. The question remains whether the pastor has the authority to make decisions which are not specifically prohibited by the bylaws, or whether he does not have the authority to make decisions which are not specifically granted by the bylaws.

E. Groups of lay members are the primary decision-makers. In the United Methodist Church, decisions are made at committee or administrative board meetings. These lay members, though they are not commonly called "elders" are serving in the capacity the New Testament deemed as such. Similarly, in Southern Baptist churches, decisions are often made at monthly business meetings with the deacons and committee members. These deacons and committee members are not commonly called "elders," but they fulfill the role known as "elder" in the New Testament. In other words, even in churches which have only one recognized "pastor," there is still often a group of people serving in capacity of "elder/pastor/bishop" (whether they have the title or not). For this reason, the size of the pastoral staff may not accurately reflect the number of elders. A church may have two paid elders, but twenty unpaid elders. If the church recognizes these leaders for the function which they are already fulfilling (the office of elder), that church will have the ability and desire to hold these elders to the biblical qualifications.

F. Denominational hierarchy. In the United Methodist Church, the democratic process which takes place at the general and annual conferences establishes doctrine. These resolutions become the Book of Discipline, which is the authority for all Methodist Churches. While the Southern Baptist Convention does not have disciplinary authority over its churches, local churches are admonished (albeit, this is an unbinding exhortation) to agree to the Baptist Faith and Message and abide by the resolutions passed at the annual Convention. While there is nothing in Scripture which expressly prohibits denominations, it does not seem that the notion was envisioned by the apostles. Denominations can be of great advantage. Although many claim that the presence of thousands of denominations proves the disunity of the church, in reality they unite...
churches rather than divide them. Were it not for denominations, we would not have one church, but hundreds of thousands of independent churches. And through the unity of these churches greater things can be accomplished, such as extensive mission programs, pensions and benefits for pastors, and efficient support for struggling churches.

Nevertheless, churches ought to remember that the voluntary association with other churches in a denomination should not be the primary identity of the church. Fundamentally, the church belongs to Christ, and he deserves our ultimate loyalty.

G. A fear, if not rejection, of the concept of submission. No doubt, many pastors are reluctant to preach a six-week series on congregational submission, lest they seem self-serving. Submission does not seem to be a virtue esteemed or practiced regularly among Christians. Perhaps submission goes against human nature, and seems to open a church to the possibility of being ruled by a malevolent, autocratic leader. This fear or hesitancy of submission can be fostered (rather than reversed) by the democratic process, since it may perpetuate the idea that the elders or pastor should not be entrusted with decisions.

D. THE PLACE OF COMMITTEES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT MODEL

If one grants that the guidelines given in Scripture regarding decision-making do not invest primary power in assorted committees, but in a group of elders, then one must ask whether there is a place for committees in the modern church. In other words, does Scripture’s silence on committees demand that the church have no committees? No. If a body of elders governs a church, the elders may empower committees to carry out specific or temporary duties.

Sheffield claims that, “the need for administrative services such as church officers and committees cannot be denied.” He goes on to say, “The other option—no committees...
or officers—does not appear to be a logical choice."

This is an overstatement, because some churches are completely elder-driven and elder-led, but in general, he is right that churches may operate more efficiently with committees in place. The most obvious example of committee efficiency is board meetings. Sheffield says, "if a church tried to handle all of the details during a business meeting, the meeting would become chaotic."

Of course, he is assuming that churches need board meetings, when in fact there are churches which operate without any board meetings. By empowering certain officers to oversee such tasks as grounds keeping, financial record keeping, and membership record keeping the elders are not relinquishing their responsibility. Instead, they are following the example of Acts 6 where the apostles appointed deacons so that they could devote more time to prayer and the teaching of the Word. When the elders appoint a finance committee, that committee need not become a primary decision-making group, but a group which performs a service (ministry) for the church.

Committees offer benefits beyond the tasks they complete. They allow a place of service for people who are new to the church, or who cannot or do not wish to serve as elders. By giving committees a certain level of responsibility and "buy-in" (a level of personal investment or responsibility) committee members also increase their commitment to the church. Committees make people feel useful and give them an opportunity to exercise their spiritual gifts. The church benefits from the work committees contribute, and the members benefit by developing their gifts within the committee.

So the church can preserve the New Testament guideline of elder-led decision-making, while empowering people to serve on committees. With the right paradigm and guidelines in place, the committees make a positive contribution, without the confusion that can lead to a power struggle. One of the safeguards a church can put in place is to

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107 Sheffield, p. 5.
108 Sheffield, p. 4.
create committees for specific tasks, with the understanding that the committee will cease functioning upon the completion of that task. Sheffield points out, "churches have abused the committee structure by starting committees but never deleting them after their work is completed."

E. POTENTIAL PROBLEMS WITH BIBLICAL MODEL

One of the great advantages of church democracy is the degree of personal investment that the members experience. By giving members a vote, they develop a higher degree of ownership for decisions and responsibility (or "buy-in"). In a church which is staff-led, the degree of buy-in decreases, often to a frustrating level. For instance, it is a constant struggle for the staff of one non-democratic community church which meets at a high school to find volunteers to help set up each Sunday morning. In fact, this church has hired a team of immigrant workers who do not attend the church to do the work because of the lack of volunteers. When the workers did not show up, and when some of them quit, the difficulty was not felt among the congregation. Few of the members noticed or were concerned, because they did not have a part in hiring the team or setting up. Either the congregation was oblivious or unconcerned about the problem.

But the high degree of buy-in at a democratic church can also be frustrating. At a very democratic and rural Methodist church some of the members wanted to put up a mailbox. The church did not have a mailbox, and most of the members did not know the address of the building. The church, however, had survived for over a hundred years without one. But some of the members realized that a mailbox would centralize the shipping of curriculum and bills, which had been sent to various members' homes. The issue became a heated debate, however, because others in the congregation liked the idea.

109 Sheffield, p. 6.
of a rural church without a mailbox. There was something sentimental and nostalgic about not having one. Since this was a democratic decision, there was a very high degree of buy-in and ownership over the decision. Everyone felt like he had something at stake. But in a non-democratic church, fewer people feel that they have anything at stake in this sort of decision.

This controversy is far less likely at a church which has no history of democratic decisions.

The democratic church faces a challenge if it wishes to exemplify the biblical model of decision-making, and to avoid its members feeling a severe loss of "ownership." A biblical model will necessarily mean a lower degree of buy-in compared to the democratic system, but the church leaders should take efforts to ensure a healthy sense of ownership, lest the congregation become unconcerned about the affairs of the church.

Leas explains that when conflict disappears from the church, then apathy sets in. Since public conflict is less likely to exist in a non-democratic church, there is a greater tendency to apathy.

For this reason, a moderate level of conflict can empower a church to have a greater level of momentum among the members.

There is also the obvious risk that an elder-led church faces with a possible abuse of power. Just as the dictator Mussolini made the trains run on time in Italy, one could challenge that elder-led churches are made possible an efficient dictatorship. This is a reasonable and worthwhile caution. But the New Testament writers, though they must have been aware of the potential for abuse, apparently did not sense that the risk outweighed the benefit of the elder-led church model. There is the safeguard, of course, that a plurality of elders is perhaps less likely to abuse power than a single elder. But members of an elder-led church must recognize the risk of power abuse, and in their sensitivity to such abuse be ready to leave the church if necessary.

Leas, p. 38.
Perhaps the pervasive presence of democracy in church governance is a reflection of our culture's values. In the United States, democracy is sacred. And today many churches in America are convinced that the best decision-making process is democratic. To suggest that a church be governed in any other way elicits hesitation, if not fear among Christians who are accustomed to democratic leadership. Some fear that pastors are able to gain too much influence and that, "If the pastor stood up at a board meeting and moved that they burn the church down, someone would second it and it would pass unanimously."  

No doubt every Christian has heard of a power-hungry, autocratic pastor. But churches may overreact in fear by adopting the so-called "safeguards" of democracy. There are many myths associated with the presence and value of democracy in the church. So, in addition to straying from New Testament guidelines by overemphasizing the need for democracy in church decision-making, churches may experience the very problems they try to avoid by practicing democracy. Some of these problems are described in the "myths" below.

Lyle Schaller has written extensively on church structure and decision-making, and has identified some of the misconceptions under which many churches tend to operate.

In the quest to develop a model of decision-making which is biblical, peaceful, and effective, it is helpful to examine some common misconceptions or "myths." An examination of these myths may heighten the awareness both causes of conflict and ways in which churches may be advocating counter-productive procedures in decision-making. Perhaps even more important than the process of making decisions is the attitude and frame of reference of the decision-makers. Chapter three and the first part of this chapter look at the procedure of church decision-making, but the following problems are described in the "myths" below.

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112 These misconceptions are found in Schaller's book, *The Decision Makers.*
myths will look at the important role of attitudes and frames of reference within the process of making decisions.

Myth #1. In a church with a democratic philosophy of government, committee decision-making (voting) is always democratic. A church may be under the impression that its process of decision-making is democratic, while in reality it is not. Luke Timothy Johnson, in his book *Decision-Making in the Church*, says that "the decision making process in groups can be camouflaged so that it takes effort to discover the genuine structure of the group."

In other words, a church may be convinced that it employs a democratic structure, when in reality, a few people are making all the decisions. For instance, one church was going to host one of the largest gatherings in the history of its community. The event would be 700 guests at a fund-raising dinner in the town hall. The evangelism committee suggested that the church distribute flyers or tracts inviting the guests to the church and explaining the gospel, lest the church miss this prime evangelistic opportunity. The administrative board chair said, however, that he would not rubber-stamp any flyer without carefully scrutinizing it. Finally he said that he would not allow the flyer to be distributed at all. Because of his use of authoritative language and his strong personality, his vote alone killed the idea. No vote was ever taken. No vote needed to be taken. While the church claims to have a democratic structure, in reality it is autocratic. But the authority of the person who makes a decision may not be recognized officially with a title or ordination; his authority lay in unspoken tradition. This unspoken authority presents a façade of democracy. Schaller recognizes this dynamic. He points out that most people "pick sides before hearing an issue."

\[113\] Johnson, p. 17.

is the case, then the vote will not be a matter of which option is more rational or in line with God’s desires, but who on the committee or board has greater influence.

McFarland points out that even though a committee chair technically has only one vote, in reality he has a great deal of power over the committee. The chairperson in the Methodist church has the ability to call meetings or cancel them. He sets the agenda and calls for motions. By handling these responsibilities cleverly, the chairman can exert greater influence, thereby making a seemingly democratic process quite undemocratic.

Myth #2. Not deciding is always a safe decision. Churches and boards believe that the fairest thing to do when a decision cannot be reached in unity is to wait or “table” the discussion. But in reality, a decision to wait or table is (at least for the time) a “no” vote. There is an ever-present struggle in churches to distinguish between “waiting on the Lord” and voting “no.” What church must realize, however, is that every vote to table or wait is also a no vote until a decision to do otherwise is reached. When a board votes to wait, it presents the façade of democracy; its members are giving everyone a chance to think and vote wisely. But in reality, there is an implicit decision against the idea.

In reality, there is no such thing as a simple “no vote” anyway. Every decision in favor of an idea is a decision against another idea, whether stated or not. Every decision against an idea is a decision in favor of another idea, whether anyone has articulated that other decision or not. To put it simply, every decision is a trade. My brother recently accepted a staff position at a church which is very committee-driven. He has some responsibility, but practically no authority. Someone asked me why I thought he would accept such a difficult assignment. After all, making changes and reaching decisions at his church is going to be a slow and perhaps painful process. Why did he take the position? Because he made a trade. The explicit acceptance of his position was an implicit rejection of another possible job offer where he could have had more authority.
He "voted down" the possibility of working in a church which is not committee-driven, but staff-driven. Yet he made that trade for a variety of reasons. First, he knew that the Lord had provided and led him to his church. Second, he knew that a committee-driven church, though slow to change, is also stable. His church is unlikely to grow by leaps and bounds, but it is also unlikely to fold or crumble. On the other hand, he knew that a staff-driven church is less stable. It is more likely to have huge growth spurts, yet he would live with the constant possibility of the church disintegrating. The decision to take his job was a trade for personal authority in favor of stability. Every decision is a trade. And an informed decision-maker will scrutinize that trade.

Myth #3. Democracy is always right. Many people believe that a church should be democratic simply because they have a strong presupposition that democracy is right. It would never occur to many church members otherwise. This is an unchallenged conviction. To challenge democracy is sacrilegious, and perhaps even dangerous because it exposes a person to the accusation of being a dictator. Whether the notion of democracy is Biblical is discussed below, but even common sense should cause an honest person to question the logic of an unwavering belief in democracy. Most of us do not go to the doctor expecting to hear his opinion, and then weigh his with ours, and then take a vote. Nor do we tell the CPA how to do our taxes. That is not to say that we give an unlimited amount of trust or faith to these people either, but that we esteem their advice as higher than ours. When we make a medical decision it is not a democratic one, but a wise one based on our level of trust in our doctor's level of ability. Yet in the church people are convinced that everyone is qualified to make decisions. In other words, everyone has the same level of ability to make decisions. Now, I could understand that if twenty people were deciding on where to go to dinner, and all of them were equally able to pay for the dinner, that a vote would be very natural. No one person is more able to make a decision on a place to eat than another person. But when people say that the
church should be democratic, they may also be saying that the decisions of the church are at such a trivial level that they require no expertise in order to be a part of the process. But do decisions in the church require expertise? Surely if a church were starting a building campaign its members would call in an architect. They may even vote on the way the building should look. But they will not vote on the integrity of the structure or even the issues relating to the local building codes. They will leave these things to the expert. The decision to build in the first place is often democratic, but in the areas of finance and construction, most people acknowledge that there may be decisions where the rule of the majority is not necessarily the best decision. Yet the structure of most churches reveals that people do not acknowledge the potential dangers of majority rule in the church. Yet, "there is ample biblical evidence available to be marshaled as proof of the foolishness of the majority."

Myth #4. Most church decisions are not a matter of right and wrong. Many people are under the impression that when a church board is making a decision, there is no right or wrong answer. Instead, they think, the board is simply going to find the answer which the majority of the people prefer. In fact, according to a Barna survey, 26% of people think that a leader should sacrifice his own convictions in order to support the majority. To imply that there is a right answer seems arrogant, and anti-democratic. Furthermore, if a small minority claims to have the right answer that this minority will be deemed self-righteous. But to say that there is no right or wrong means that God does not have a will, rather, God just wants to see the church make a democratic decision regardless of what that decision is. In addition, the view that decisions are merely a matter of preference, and not right or wrong, denies the obvious fact that every

116 From [www.barna.com](http://www.barna.com) survey on “Leadership.”
decision reflects core values. For instance, if a church is deciding whether or not to increase the budget for youth ministries during the next year, that decision reflects the value placed on the youth ministry. One might ignore this fact and simply assume that the youth pastor (who obviously wants more money) is going to try to persuade the rest of the board to give him some of their money. But in reality, the whole board is about to make a statement regarding their level of value of the youth ministry. That is not to say that if a church decides not to spend more money on youth, it doesn’t care about the youth. But in deciding not to spend more money on youth, the church is declaring that there are other priorities. Again, to say that there are other priorities does not mean that the church does not care about youth, but does demonstrate that every decision is founded on a value.

The last time I bought a car, one may have assumed that I was making a decision which was neither right nor wrong. I was deciding whether to buy a Jeep Wrangler or a Dodge Neon. But this was not a simple decision of taste. My decision reflected my values. I was deciding whether I would place a greater value on going off-roading (while going into debt) or on having a comfortable commute to work (and not going into debt). The fact that I bought a Neon proves that I preferred financial freedom and a comfortable commute. The corporate world recognizes that decisions reflect values. Successful companies often can articulate their values well. Too many churches are oblivious to the values behind their decisions. Perhaps the church can learn something from the corporate world, while still depending on the guidance of the Holy Spirit. While many people try to shy away from doing things like the corporate world, I agree with Johnson who writes, “I find it refreshingly straightforward. The implicit values by which a corporation lies given explicit expression in the making of a concrete decision.” 117

117 Johnson, p. 22.
companies make no apology for their values (the greatest of which is making money) and their decisions reflect those values. We may agree that decisions are based on values, but does this mean that decisions are right or wrong? The answer to that question is found in a more fundamental question: “Are there right and wrong values?” Once someone admits that he places a greater value on the supporting missions than on having his toothbrush professionally steam cleaned, who is to say whether he made the right decision? Yes, we know that his actions prove that his core value is to support missions, but is that intrinsically right or wrong? The Bible esteems many core values as right, and regards other values as wrong. The greatest value is to know and do the will of God. Other values esteemed by the Bible include, peace, love, joy, patience, gentleness, self-control, etc. The Bible condemns the opposite of these values. Where the Bible speaks concerning the values behind a decision, one may feel comfortable saying that a decision based on those values was right or wrong. But that there are other decisions where the Bible offers little direct help. The greatest value here is to know and do the will of God, which I believe he makes known to the church. It is important for churches to realize that their decisions are based on values, and that these values may or may not be in line with the values condoned in Scripture. With this realization, the church is in a better position to analyze its decision making process and view their task not as winning a taste contest, but as determining the will of God.

Myth #5. Some people are opposed to change and can prevent its occurrence. According to a Barna survey, 29% of people desire to resist change at all costs. But in reality, no one is opposed to change. When people say that they are opposed to change, or when people accuse other people of being opposed to change, they are denying the fact.

118 Galatians 5:22
119 From www.barna.com survey on “Leadership.”
that every decision is a vote for change. That is not to say that every change is explicit or even obvious. Blackaby puts it this way, "You cannot stay where you are and go with God."

God is always at work. That doesn't mean God is always doing something different today than he was yesterday. But if God is always at work, then He is always trying to effect change in the lives of people. Let's assume we are currently in a right relationship with God. If God wants us to join him in his work, but we do not, we will not be staying where we are. We will be moving from a right relationship with God to a relationship of disobedience. And if we were obedient, we would be going from a state of not joining God, to joining God. We cannot stay where we are, and go with God. In other words, stagnation is decline. When we don't join God, we move from our relationship with him. The same is true on a more earthly (corporate) level. When a church is facing a decision which will affect growth (for instance, advertising), the church cannot stay where it is and also go with God. A country church in Indiana is located three miles from a state highway on an unpaved road. The church does not have a yellow-page listing, so there is no realistic way that the church can attract visitors, except by word of mouth. Some people at the church wanted to advertise in the yellow pages so that the church would have some exposure, but the idea was voted down because the church was opposed to change. Let's assume the church does indeed want to grow. If the church was not growing previously, and no different action was planned in the future, why should the church expect to grow? Why should the non-effective action of the past become effective in the future? A vote against advertising was a vote in favor of not growing. Without growth, every church will eventually die out. So a vote against growth is a vote in favor of death. Whereas the vote against advertising was based on resistance to change, it actually was the cause of change. In fact, both a vote in favor and a vote against advertising were a vote for change. One was a vote to change with the

\[\text{Blackaby, p. 19.}\]
hope of growth, the other was a vote to change from stagnation to future inevitable decline. So in reality, no one is opposed to change, because change occurs inevitably. The question is not whether to change, but how to change.

F. PRESUPPOSITIONS OF A NEW TESTAMENT MODEL

In order to adopt the New Testament model of decision-making set forth in this paper, one must be aware of and hold the same presuppositions. This study of decision-making assumes that readers want to do God’s will, and that they believe God’s will can be known through the inerrant word of God: the Bible. In a church where the Bible is not esteemed infallible, or where the people do not believe God’s will can be known, or where the leaders are not committed to doing God’s will, that there may be unnecessary problems in decision-making. But there “ought to be some connection between what it (the church) claims to be and the way it does things. In other words, “when the church makes decisions, the Bible ought somehow to be involved.

Presupposition #1. A quality church wants to do God’s will. Who would consciously say that he does not want to do God’s will? No Christian would. In the world perhaps there are some who would say this, but in the church no one would say it. But through our actions we daily say (subconsciously) that we do not want to do the will of God. Every time we sin we also say that we would rather do our will than God’s will. But wanting to do God’s will reaches even further than just not committing sins. If we want to do God’s will then we “seek him first” in every decision. By far the more common way that churches fail to do God’s will is by sins of omission: failing to do what He desires. But perhaps the most common way the church fails to do God’s will is by not even being aware that this is an issue. So often prayer at a board meeting is tacked on to the

121 Johnson, p. 12.
122 Johnson, p. 12.
beginning or end, but forgotten in the middle. When the pastor at one church suggested that the leaders spend a half-hour in prayer (it was an hour meeting) the leaders were dumbfounded. How could so much precious time be wasted? Of course, the core issue is whether one even believes that God has a will in certain issues. One man prays before L.A. Laker games that the Lakers win. Does God have a will in such situations? When the building committee is deciding on what color of carpet to put in the entrance, does God have a will? When the board is considering whether to make their worship service more "contemporary," does God have a will? Is the pastor's raise next year a matter of following God will? I believe that God does have a will, and churches ought to want to do God will.

But the fact is, many churches are unaccustomed to seeking God's will. In most cases I do not think that this is due to a lack of desire, but a lack of awareness that God does indeed have a will. When observing a church board meeting one may wonder, "Is there space for God in these meetings?" McCain states, "There are two ways a church can approach decision-making. One is to ask, "What shall we do?" This is a common sense approach, relying more or less on reasoning capabilities. The other is to ask, "What is God yearning for us?" This phrase points to a more intentional focus upon connecting our dream with God's intention for us."

Some churches go about making decisions in a worldly manner with little awareness that they are making a theological decision. What happens then, is often a pooling of ignorance and a vote of opinions, rather than a divine decision. The most common example may involve the setting of the pastor's salary. A church board was deciding how much raise to give its pastor who was making about half what he needed to live. How much should the board give him? How would your church make that decision? Nobody knew where to start. Every number seemed arbitrary (and of course, was). Finally someone asked if anyone knew what the last year's cost of living increase was. That was a

123 McClain, George. "Is There Space for God in our Meetings: As We Make Decisions Do We Ask, 'What Shall We Do?' or 'What is God Yearning for Us?'" Christian Social Action, 8 (Fall 1995): 13.
very natural way to go about making the decision, but it was, of course, absurd since the pastor was only making half of his cost of living. What raise did the other churches of similar size give their pastors? Someone said 3%. And so the pastor received a 3% raise.

Now, you can probably think of some other factors the church could have looked at: budget, job performance, etc. But that is not the point. The point is that this church, by failing to seek God or his Word in this matter (implicitly) said that God does not have a will with regard to the pastor's salary. The church did not explicitly hold the presupposition that it should want to do the will of God. The result is that the board did not do God's will, instead it made a decision in the flesh.

Presupposition #2. A quality church is convinced that it is possible to know and do God's will. It is a basic assumption in decision-making that "conflict is inevitable and resolvable." And it is an assumption of Christians that God has a will, and wants to make it known to us. For this reason, Paul encourages us to "not quench the Spirit, do not despise prophesying, but test everything; hold fast what is good, abstain from every form of evil." One way to "quench the Spirit" is to deny that He guides us in God's will. If it is not possible to know God's will, then there is no point in saying that one wants to do His will. During his Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-6) and his prayer for the disciples (John 15) Jesus talked extensively about God's will and modeled how his disciples could know God's will: through abiding in Christ. To say that one knows God's will is not an arrogant claim; it is a biblical expectation. The decision-makers of the church must ask themselves, "Are we acting as if God is dead or alive?"

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124 Leas, p. 67.
125 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22
126 Biehl, p. 82.
McCain encourages churches to look for God's will in the process of making decisions. He assumes these five "realities" about God and church decisions:

1. The group is called by God for prophetic ministry.
2. God cares about our mission: even its details.
3. Surrender to God's yearning is not giving up, but giving over.
4. God passionately loves us.
5. Discernment is seeking God's yearning.

These five realities serve to move a church from a worldly frame of reference to a theological one. What would be the point of seeking God will in prayer, if we could not find it? What value would there be in the admonition to "Get wisdom, get understanding" if we could not get it? A most helpful resource in understanding how to know and do the will of God is Henry Blackaby's and Claude King's Experiencing God.

Blackaby and King state that the first step for a church to know the will of God is to realize that God is always at work, and that he always takes the initiative. If the church is convinced of these two truths, then it will be more likely to view its work as a loftier task (which it is). The church will be more likely to see the eternal consequences of its decisions. The next step is to look for invitations from God to join him in his work. The burning bush was Moses' invitation. Pharaoh's dream was Joseph's invitation. God gives us invitations when he wants us to know his will. If a church is convinced that God gives invitations, the people will not view that junior high Sunday school teacher as the one who has been making crazy suggestions for years, but as the one who perhaps through whom God has been giving invitations. The church will be less likely to dismiss the ideas (radical or not) that it may have dismissed in the past if it views these suggestions as invitations from God, and not personal agendas.

After the invitation God speaks in four ways: the Bible, the church, prayer, and circumstances. The order is important. God speaks infallibly through the Bible. When the church is gathered, it is likely to hear God's voice than when his people are separated.

127 McCain, p. 13.
128 Blackaby, p. 65.
If this were not the case, then God would not have given us a church, but would have made us lone Christians. God speaks through prayer, but the Christian is admonished to correlate his personal life with the church community. And God uses circumstances, but they are never enough alone to provide direction. Blackaby states that joining God in his work always leads to a crisis of belief, which requires major adjustments. Some people may interpret this to mean that the right decision is always the "big" decision, but that is not the case. A crisis of belief simply means that when someone makes a decision, he must make a judgment (crisis) between two options. Choosing between those options reflects his values, thus he has a crisis of belief. A church may be in the midst of a decision whether to buy a bus or not. The crisis of belief is first, do we believe God has spoken? Second, which do we value more: the camaraderie and convenience of a bus, or the cost, liability and maintenance of the bus? Either decision will require major adjustments. The church will incur major expense and work if it decides to buy the bus. On the other hand, the church will incur whatever consequences the person who came up with the idea saw: recruiting drivers, getting lost on trips, etc. The point is that following God requires adjustments.

Presupposition #3. A quality church is convinced that God's will is made infallibly through the Bible. Every group of decision-makers will use some set of presuppositions as their authority. According to Biehl, "Scripture is the bedrock of decision-making; character is the bedrock of board membership." There can be no intelligible talk of core values or knowing God's will unless a church agrees on the source of those values and the source through which Christians know God will: The Bible. It is not enough to say that one believes the Bible is inspired, for it does not necessarily follow that the Bible is authoritative. And one cannot believe that the Bible is

130 Biehl, p. 16.
simply authoritative without sensing its source of authority. The Bible gets its authority from God, and Christians should read the Bible the way God meant it. Furthermore, it's not enough for the church to agree that the Bible is its authority, and then be ignorant of what it says. If the Bible is the source of the church's values, then the church needs to know what those values are. If the Bible tells how to know God will, then the church needs to know what it tells. If the Bible describes a godly decision-making process, then the church is responsible to know and seriously consider what it says.

H. PHILOSOPHY OF DECISION MAKING

What issues are theological issues? Is there such a thing as a theological expert? If so, should he be consulted in the decision making process?

The first question asks whether there is even a connection between decision-making and theology. What issues are theological? Most people underestimate the degree to which issues are theological. Shortly after my first appointment at a church I realized that our church had no budget. The treasurer was paying bills as necessary, but there were no allocated funds and no projected expenditures. I began talking to the leaders and encouraging them to put together a budget. This would allow the leaders of various ministries to spend money without having to come before the board each time. But there was a great deal of resistance on this issue. I remember a leader in the church telling me to leave the business items to the board; and to only be concerned with the spiritual items in the church. I told her, however, that I could not distinguish between the two. That seemed to be the very thing she feared. Yet I told her that every so-called business decision has theological implications. If the church decided to decide against having a budget (either by ignoring, tabling, or voting on the issue) it would also be deciding not to set aside money for ministry. The result of not allocating ministry would be a lack of initiative among our leaders to try new ideas or to expand their area of...
The result of this lack of initiative would be a stagnant ministry. And the result of stagnation would be numerical, spiritual, and financial loss in the church. To put it bluntly, people are not likely to hear the gospel if the church does not allocate money for people to hear the gospel.

There is a direct connection between business and theological issues. If a church decides not to increase the size of its parking lot (and it's lot is normally full on a Sunday morning), it may also be deciding not to grow numerically. As a result, the church could lose influence in the community and not reach more people with the gospel. A church cannot ignore the difference it can make in the eternal lives of others by considering its "business" decisions non-theological. Anthony makes it clear that there is no distinction between the spiritual and non-spiritual matters. He says, although pastors should be seen having final responsibility for spiritual matters in the church, this does not mean that deacons are free to make all other decisions. Such a misguided approach assumes that such matters as budget allocations, building programs, and policy do not affect spiritual ministry.

Schaller points out that, "Frequently the most influential reference point for making decisions is precedent." This means that precedent is more influential than mission, purpose, vision, or theology. As an example Schaller speaks of a church whose primary stated purpose is growth. During the summer months, when this church receives most visitors, its board is trying to decide how to fill four Sundays when the current pastor will be absent. "Within five minutes it is agreed to ask three retired ministers to share those four Sundays. No one ask whether that emphasis on yesteryear will create a favorable impression on first-time visitors born after 1960."

The decision was based on an immediate reaction, opinion, feeling, and precedent, rather than theological implications (that the sermon series by "turn off" visitors, who may subsequently decide not to attend church).

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131 Anthony, p. 73.
Throughout the time of Israel’s judges and kings, the leaders sought the Lord in order to find out whether they should go out to fight. These leaders were both theologians and generals. They understood that there was a direct connection between business (war) and theology (God’s will). They regularly sought God and asked him, “Should we go out?” His reply would be either “Yes, you will be victorious,” or “No, today is not good.” When the Israelites obeyed, they were blessed. One time King Saul did not seek the Lord. He became confident in his ability to fight. He probably looked at the situation rationally. He counted his men, counted his enemy’s men. He counted his chariots, and counted his enemy’s chariots. He handled the business side well. But because he forgot that there was a connection between business and theology, he did not seek the Lord. God brought a great devastation that day on Israel because of the leader’s sin.

If there is a connection between business and theology, shouldn’t an expert in theology be consulted? Or to ask the question differently, “Is everyone equally qualified to make theological decisions?” We live in a culture that is convinced everyone is qualified. In fact, to say otherwise is considered arrogant, self-righteous, narrow-minded, and ridiculous. Of course, the source of this belief is rooted in relativism and postmodernism. When one says that everyone is equally qualified to make theological decisions, he may be indicating that he does not believe in absolute truth. If a person says that everyone is equally qualified to choose the best flavor of ice cream, he also implicitly says that there is no best flavor of ice cream (and that is the case). When someone says that everyone is equally qualified to make a decision regarding the stock market, he also implicitly says that there is no best stock (and I believe that it is not the case). The only person qualified to answer that question is an investment advisor or broker, who has experience and a proven track record. When someone claims that we are

133 Joshua 9:14
all equally qualified to decide whether adultery is a sin, he claims that there is no right or wrong answer. The only person who is qualified to answer that decision is God, who determines right and wrong. And the best person to ask is someone who knows God.

One way in which people come to know God is through his word. Just as people vary in their knowledge of his word, they also vary in their knowledge of God. While the world may vote on whether promiscuity is wrong, we do not vote moral issues in the church. And while the world may be completely convinced that we are all equally qualified to answer theological questions, the church looks to God and His Word. While the world calls this narrow-minded, the church calls it wise.

Most church members, however, have bought into postmodernism and relativism. For instance, every pastor has a few stories of complaints, comments, and suggestions that they have received from their preaching. I remember making a reference to the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter Day Saints (Mormons) as a cult during a sermon on what Peter called “cleverly devised myths.”

As the church people were lining up at the end of the service to shake my hand, one woman who was visiting for the first time told me that it was not appropriate for me to say anything negative about Mormons, or to ever use the word “cult” in relation to them. Now, this is not the place to debate whether the Mormons are a cult or not, but it is interesting to ask a few questions about this woman’s comment. Why did this visiting woman feel so comfortable and confident telling me that I was wrong? Why did she feel that she was qualified to make a decision on the veracity of Mormon doctrine in relation to Christian doctrine, and that I was not? The answer is that she is a postmodernist who believes in the relativity of truth. She does not look to the Bible for theological truth.

Postmodernism has done more than diminish the effect of preaching; it has permeated church decision-making. Take the elements of a worship service as an example.

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\[134\] 2 Peter 1:16
example. As any pastor looks over the liturgy of his worship service, he may be able to explain the reason for each element. I doubt any pastor would strike the sermon from the agenda. Yet some elements exist with no purpose, and others are even counterproductive. The first church I pastored had never said the Lord’s Prayer during the service. Why? Previous pastors and board members feared that prayer would be “vain and repetitious,” which is exactly what Jesus taught against. In fact, Jesus said “When you pray, do not use vain and endless prayers like the hypocrites do.”

Elsewhere Jesus taught his disciples what is called the Lord’s Prayer, which people might pray in vain today. But one leader in the church desperately wanted the Lord’s Prayer added to the worship service. He brought it up at every committee and board meeting, for years. When asked why this was important to him, he responded that his previous church always prayed the Lord’s Prayer, and that he liked to pray it. Because of his persistence, the board grew weary, disregarded their theological conviction which had served as the decision-making basis in the past, and voted in favor of adding the prayer. Whether you think churches should or should not say the Lord’s Prayer is irrelevant here. The point is that the church abandoned a theological conviction because of a man’s persistence. This man was convinced that he was qualified to make a theological decision, when he clearly did not understand the issue. You could probably make a good theological case why churches should say the Lord’s Prayer, but this man could not. He just wanted to say the prayer.

Furthermore, the Bible tells us that God has given us various spiritual gifts in order to build up the body of Christ. To say that everyone is equally qualified for decision-making is to deny that God has given various gifts to the body. After all, “It is he who gave some to be pastors, teachers, and evangelists!”

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135 Matthew 6:5
136 Luke 11:1-10
137 Ephesians 4:17
not qualified to make theological decisions is not to say that one must go to seminary to become qualified. God is more concerned with the character and giftedness of an elder than his education. Education is certainly encouraged by Scripture and upheld as profitable, but the primary qualification is the character of the elder.

138 2 Timothy 2:15
A. Suggestions for Moving a Congregation Toward a Biblical Model

This last chapter offers twelve steps which a church may want to consider in order to incorporate the New Testament guidelines of decision-making.

Step #1. Determine your church's presuppositions. According to Jerry Ballard, "all miscommunication is the result of differing assumptions." A discerning church accepts the presuppositions stated in chapter four, as well as the eight characteristics of New Testament decision-making identified in chapter four. These questions may seem too basic for a church to consider voting on them. People may be repulsed at the idea of voting on whether they want to do God's will. Who could vote "no" to such an idea? Yet there is great benefit in vocalizing and publicizing that decision. What's more, if the church is so in favor of doing God's will, the people ought to be convinced enough to raise their hands for that conviction. One Methodist pastor served a traditional church for four stagnant years. He was perplexed at the stagnation, yet could not effect much change at the church, either. But there was one board meeting which changed the course of the church. That board meeting marked the beginning of unprecedented growth for the church. The church soon went from being stagnant and small to the largest and fastest growing church in the county. There were many factors involved in the church's growth (The Lord gave the increase) but the board meeting was monumental. At that meeting

\[139\] Biehl, p. 8.
\[140\] Page 75.
one of the long-term members of the church raised his hand and said, "I move that we grow." Some thought it was corny. Some thought it was ridiculous. How can you vote to grow? Some thought it was a threat. "Of course we want to grow, so why are you acting as if we don't?" But the church took a vote, and all members favored growing. Now, that didn't make any difference in itself, but as time went on, whenever the church faced a decision, the pastor could ask whether that decision would help the church grow, and whether the church wanted to grow. In the same way, a church could "move to do God's will." That decision will only have value, of course, if the people are convinced that they can know God will.

Step #2. Determine your church's core values. Decisions which were previously difficult will seem obvious when a church determines its values, for "decision making is a process wherein a group's identity is revealed." On issues where a decision directly relates to a core value, there should be little question. If a church has decided that its number one value is sharing the Gospel, then whenever a decision arises whether to share or not, the answer will be straightforward. Johnson is so convinced of this that he writes, "Reaching decisions in the church should be an articulation of faith. He says, "The reaching of decisions requires the assertion of the community's identity. It may call for the invocation, therefore, and rereading of Scripture."

In the corporate world, companies make decisions more easily when they have a well-articulated purpose. If the bottom line is of utmost importance, decision makers move toward that goal. One may not feel completely comfortable with the concentrated effort on making more money, but one can not deny that the purpose and value of the

141 Johnson, p. 22.
142 Johnson, p. 25.
143 Johnson, p. 43.
144 Johnson, p. 22.
145 Anthony, p. 90.
146 Anthony, p. 91.
147 Schaller, "What's behind your decisions?" p. 27.
specific decisions, and how they reflect the stated values of the organization. As a result, a decision can be made by the majority, without anyone (either the majority or minority) reflecting upon the theological implications. The decision, therefore, may have implications which the group did not foresee. And these implications may conflict with the purpose, identity, or direction of the group. Conrad explains that, “a simple majority decision can readily undermine the sense of identity that the minority can gain through participation in decision-making.”

In other words, the minority's reason for not agreeing on a decision should be carefully examined to see if it has any bearing on the group's desired identity. When a conflict exists, the healthiest step is not to take a vote, but to determine which values are at stake. Which values will be upheld by the decision, and which will be undermined? This does not mean that a vote should never be taken, but that voting can have other unintended side effects.

Rick Warren recommends that churches develop a mission or purpose statement that every member of the congregation can remember and articulate. He suggests this so that churches do not waste time taking on responsibilities which do not further the cause of the church. Drafting a church mission statement can have a profound impact on decision-making. A pastor of a Methodist Church, after reading Warren's *Purpose Driven Church*, attempted to bring his congregation through the process of writing a mission statement. One of the members on the administrative board, the president of a large corporation, was unfamiliar with the process, but he finally exclaimed, “This isn't a mission statement; this is a process for making decisions.” It was both. When a church determines and agrees on its values, it may avoid conflict and more clearly see the theological implications of decisions. Anthony states that a mission statement, “helps

148 Conrad, p. 357.

Every major decision is influenced by a value. And behind every value is a core belief. For this reason, Leas’ suggestion that churches appoint a neutral referee to handle conflict seems insufficient, and even counterproductive. He states, “[The referee] is not an advocate for any particular solution, nor does he take sides on the issues in this conflict.”

Leas’ notion of a neutral referee seems to imply that it doesn’t matter which solution the group adopts, so long as the conflict is resolved. But if every decision is influenced by a value, and behind that value a core belief, then it would be naïve to think that a referee has no core beliefs. It would be wise for the referee to expose which core beliefs are at the root of the conflict, and to contend for the belief that most reflects the church’s mission.

While there still may be disagreement, the elders will have more understanding of the implications of a decision when they examine the values behind it.

Step #3. Identify the present elders or decision makers. As mentioned in chapter four, every church has elders, whether they are identified as such. In other words, every church has an office which fulfills the decision-making function referred by the New Testament as “elders,” even if churches employ different names, such as “committee members.” It would be good for a church to identify which offices (committee member, committee chair, administrative board member, board chair, Sunday school director, moderator, etc.) fulfill the function of elder. It could then begin officially recognizing these people as elders, even if doing so goes against tradition, for the sake of remaining consistent to New Testament guidelines. Calling these people elders may also heighten the perceived responsibility, which in reality is great, but not always perceived as such.
Step #4. Determine the character guidelines for those who make decisions. This may perhaps be the most important step in a church’s decision-making process. The New Testament offers two extensive narratives which most clearly reveal how the early church made decisions (Acts 1, and Acts 15). A few other passages briefly discuss decision-making. But the Bible talks extensively about who ought to make decisions. The question “How?” is important, but not nearly as important as “Who?”. If the right group of godly Christians who are completely dedicated to the will of God are making decisions, it matters less how they arrive at a decision. The more disintegrated the group, the more there is a need for policy. If a church board is made up of people who do not share the same values (and perhaps is not even a Christian), the board spends more time discussing how to make decisions. But if everyone shares the same values, decision-making may be less of an issue.

Step #5. Consider alternatives to voting. There is no record that the early church used voting to make decisions (although that does not necessarily exclude the possibility). Many churches today recognize that there are alternatives to voting. One alternative although not expected to be come popular among modern churches is casting lots. A more common, yet not necessarily the most effective or healthy, alternative to voting is seeking consensus (which usually means a unanimous vote is required to change the status quo). Another option is voluntary submission on the part of one group to allow another group to make a decision (a summary of the concept “empowerment”). Once a group empowers another group to make a decision, the members of first group agrees to support the decision, even if it is not their preference.

Step #6. Determine the extent to which the church is willing to pay the price for its values. If a value is really a core value then members should be willing to die for it. After all, if they is not willing to die for it, then some other value supersedes it for "core
position. If the church is committed to doing God's will, then members should be willing to stand on their heads for the hour of the worship service, if that's God's will. If one of a church's core values is members standing on their heads, then there would be no talk of what visitors might think when they come in and see a bunch of feet in the air. No one would likely be strongly opposed to an idea, simply because it's never been done that way before. No one would immediately say that a proposal is impossible, and therefore not worth trying. And no one would be strongly opposed to a decision simply because the insurance company won't cover upside-down worship. While each of these arguments has some validity, when they are raised with such great passion that they "kill" a proposal, they reveal that standing on one's head is not a core value. The decisions which a church makes reflect whether its values are actual values, or merely preferred ones.

After stating its values, a church's will quickly face the question, "To what extent do we hold these values?" Take for instance, the question of who makes decisions. The Bible is very clear on this issue: a group of well-qualified, godly, appointed elders. Picture a church that has decided to do God's will, and to obey the Bible. Let's assume the finance committee chairman (and member of the Administrative Board) of a Methodist church is an alcoholic. 1 Timothy 3 states that an elder (or deacon for that matter) must not be given to much wine. Yet the United Methodist Discipline states that a member of the Finance committee is to be nominated by the nominating committee, and approved by the Administrative Board. That person is not to be removed from office until the next charge conference, unless he resigns. What is the church to do? The Bible says that the man must be removed from office, but the Book of Discipline does not permit the removal. If the church is truly committed to the will of God, it pays the price. Though one may object: "But the Discipline," the church may overcome such an objection in light of the New Testament guidelines.
Step #7. Share the vision for change. Ken Gangel suggests that churches can evaluate their present form of governance by doing the following:

1. Chart the church (governance) as it presently exists
2. Circulate it among all the teachers and leaders
3. Construct another chart with suggested change to improve the organization and administration
4. Continually update the chart

When a church puts its present process of decision-making on paper in a clear format, and compares the church’s present model with the New Testament guidelines mentioned in chapter four, the church can see any gaps that exist between the two. The leaders should discuss ways in which their decision-making process (whether in procedure, practice, theology, or attitude) is not “up to par” with the eight New Testament guidelines listed in chapter four. At that point the leaders may be faced with a decision whether to bridge that gap with action, and decide what price must be paid. It seems natural that the people of the church would be willing to forfeit their policy, their procedures, their tradition, their buildings, and even their lives for the will of God.

Step #8. Determine the process of elder selection. Paul told Titus to appoint elders in every city.

152 Gangel, Ken quoted in Michael Anthony’s The Effective Church Board, p. 115.
153 Titus 1:5
154 Acts 6:6
155 Acts 1:23-26
Other options exist for the selection of elders besides a congregational vote. The leaders may take suggestions or nominations from the congregation or from a core group. The elders can conduct private or public interviews with the candidates. Prospective elders may be required to answer questions regarding their qualifications based on 1 Timothy 3. An examination of a candidate’s character should at some point be considered by the nominating committee, charge conference, or elders responsible for selection of leaders.

Step #9. Determine your church’s position on the number of elders. Scripture gives no definite answer to the number of elders in a church. Some object to the high standard of elders given in 1 Timothy 3 because it would exclude almost everyone in the church. Of course, Paul was aware that his standard would narrow down the number of prospective elders. Perhaps that was his goal. After all, Paul asks if all people in the church have the same gifts.

Not all people are gifted or even qualified to be elders. If only a couple people can be found who fit the requirements, then the church might have only a couple elders. So if many are gifted, able, and willing to serve as elders, the church can have many. If few are gifted, qualified, and willing, then the church can have few. But Paul promises that the church is not lacking in any spiritual gift, so the church can be sure that the Lord has provided the number of pastors, teachers, and evangelists that He needs.

The number of elders in the church may be influenced by the bylaws (or in the case of the United Methodist Church, the Discipline). The Discipline allows people to fulfill multiple roles, but it is not uncommon for a United Methodist Church to have over twenty members on the Administrative Board, even if the congregation only has fifty members. It seems unlikely that in a church of fifty there would be twenty people with the qualifications to be elders.

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1 Corinthians 12:29
1 Corinthians 1:7
the gifts, character, and calling to the role of elder. In this case, the congregation, in its effort to fill positions, should not lose sight of the more important task of ensuring that the elders are gifted, qualified, and called.

**Step #10**

Have a process for evaluating and removing elders.

The New Testament makes it clear that elders (and deacons) must have integrity of character. Paul did not say that an elder must be above reproach upon ordination, but can do as he pleases afterward. He said, “An elder must be above reproach.” He is to continue to be above reproach. Paul chastised the Corinthian church for not removing an immoral man. He was not an elder, but an attender. If Paul expected a church to confront a member, how much more must God expect churches to confront elders! The purpose of confrontation, according to Paul, is that the brother’s eternal life may be spared. Without this confrontation, the church does the man a disservice by allowing him to live under the illusion that he is a believer, when his actions show that he clearly is not.

Many churches and denominations do not have a process for removing someone from leadership, nor do they have a process for evaluating volunteers (or often staff). If a church does not have a process of evaluation, it cannot have a process for removal, so this step is primary. The corporate world evaluates workers on performance, but an evaluation of an elder takes into account character and performance. The church should make the expectations and method of evaluation clear before the elder takes office. A church may also want to give thought to the process for confrontation and removal of elders. Jesus gave guidelines for this in Matthew 18. Again, the purpose of this confrontation is that the brother may be “won over.” Confrontation is an act of love.

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158 Biehl, p. 82.
Step #11. Place people in areas of giftedness. The New Testament speaks in several places about the gifts of the Spirit. Paul encourages believers not to be ignorant of spiritual gifts.

159 Paul said that the purpose of spiritual gifts was “for the building up of the body, until we all reach unity in the body and attain to the full measure which is in Christ.”

160 Today, however, many people serve in areas of need, rather than where they’re gifted. And often people serve where they are not qualified or gifted, but where there is a great perceived need. Paul asks, however, “are all teachers? Are all pastors? Are all prophets?” The obvious answer to these questions is, “no.” Since not all members of the body are granted the same gifts of the Spirit, then it does not make sense for a church to place a person in ministry simply because he is willing. The church has a responsibility to help its members discover and use their gifts. After all, God has given pastors “to equip the saints for the work of service.”

In addition to encouraging Christians to serve where they are gifted, Paul warns believers not to think people with different gifts are less important. He says that the eye cannot say to the foot “I have no need of you.”

161 Even Christians often esteem their gifts as better than someone else’s, but each is equally important to God. Following Paul’s analogy, the body needs all its parts. An evangelist comes to the table with a different agenda than a person with the gift of mercy. And a gifted administrator may see things differently than a person with the gift of hospitality. When a church is faced with a decision, or is in the midst of conflict, believers must remember that each member needs the other, and that the conflict may be a reflection of the various gifts. I presided over a committee meeting where the leaders were deciding on the amount to budget for youth for the next year. The committee members were in sharp disagreement. After an hour of debate the youth pastor made a very astute observation. He said, “I think what we are..."
experiencing is a fight among different body parts. The eye (speaking of the lay leader) sees the need for this increase in budget. The hand is worried about how we will cover the costs. The mouth has not collaborated with the ear. Each of the parts need to consult the head.” Many of the leaders understood the metaphor. They realized that independently the eye, the ear, and the hand were incapable of making a decision. They also realized that the hand (let’s say, a person with the gift of helps) could not effectively act as the eye (let’s say, a person with the gift of discernment).

Step #12. Reconsider having term limits for elders. Many churches reelect or re-nominate the officers each year or so. This limit for terms can be advantageous for churches which do not have the authority from the denomination to remove someone from office: they can simply not re-nominate the person. So churches need not eliminate terms of office, yet they should consider that terms of office does not appear to be a New Testament practice. In addition, since the New Testament indicates that position should be a reflection of giftedness, one must ask whether people are receiving new gifts from the Holy Spirit and losing old ones every few years. Of course, one may discover that he has been serving in a position where he is not gifted, and the term limit makes a convenient time for him to reevaluate. In any case, it seems that turnover should be the exception, and not the rule, since one’s place of service should be a reflection of one’s spiritual gifts.

Step #13. Wash one another’s feet. During the last supper, Jesus commanded his disciples to wash each other’s feet, following in his example. At minimum, this means that we “consider others as better than ourselves.”

Step #14. Consider the role of prayer and fasting. Throughout the New Testament godly leaders often delayed making a decision until they had spend
considerable time in prayer and fasting. It appears that they dedicated more than just the opening minutes of a board meeting to this task. Prayer and fasting was not an "add-on" to the meeting, but a focus in itself. And it appears that the elders prayed and fasted with a purpose: they expected the prayer and fasting to illumine the decision. In other words, they expected to get an answer.

The board of a United Methodist Church was divided on an issue. When it was clear that the board had too much disagreement to make a decision, the Administrative Board Chair said, "I think we should pray about it, and forget it." His sentiment is a blunt depiction of the attitude with which many may be tempted to treat prayer: without the expectation that God could speak and give an answer. The disciples, on the other hand, seemed to have a greater sense of the importance of spiritual discipline.

B. INVESTMENT AND TRANSFERRANCE IN DECISION-MAKING

Conflict in decision-making can be heightened as the level of investment among leaders increases. In other words, the level of conflict may be related to one's degree of passion for a certain issue. But there may be a negative effect when investment in an issue becomes transferred at a personal level. Leas explains, "One must assess the amount of investment that each side has in the issue itself."

For instance, most pastors want their church to grow. This is a noble and biblical goal. A pastor should have a high level of investment in that task. But when the growth of the church reflects the pastor's own emotional or spiritual well-being, the pastor has gone beyond investing in growth. He has now transferred the church's health to his own health. Jesus invested three years in his disciples. He taught, fed, loved, cried, and healed them. But when he was on the cross, he was deserted by almost all of the m. Even Peter denied him. Many pastors would feel like failures if this were the fruit of three years' work. But surely our

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162 Leas, p. 88.
perfect Lord was not a failure. There was not a direct relationship between Jesus' ability and his appearance of success. The same is true for pastors. An elder cannot personally take on the health of his church to the degree that it affects his own health. Ultimately, the process of decision-making is in the Lord's hands, for it is His church, and we are just the sheep of his pasture.
To make good decisions, elders must each have a servant’s heart, an understanding of the direction of the church, guidance by the Holy Spirit, a knowledge of the importance of the body, and shared values. They may also take into consideration the logistics of the decision such as the quality of the decision, time, commitment, attractiveness, and learning.

Gangel suggests this seven step process:

1. Orientation to the situation -- seven whys?
2. Identification of the key facts -- open rather than closed
3. Identification of the major problem or problems -- causes rather than symptoms
4. Proposal of possible causes
5. Listing of probable solutions -- brainstorm, don’t evaluate
6. Test, select, apply best solution
7. Evaluate

Gangel also suggests these questions for evaluating decisions:

1. Are the objectives of the organization clear to me and my leadership team?
2. Do we carefully consider the mission of our ministry when making decisions?
3. Can we usually distinguish causes properly?
4. Do we have sufficient rapport with colleagues and subordinates to effectively work together during the decision making process?
5. Do we consistently regard the accuracy of the facts in every decision-making situation?

Gangel, p. 133.
Do we face the issues open-mindedly, honestly considering their various alternatives?

Do we generally achieve good acceptance of our decisions by others in the organization?

Do we tend to get unduly involved in decisions to the point that we react emotionally if someone challenges the wisdom of the decision?

Can we effectively evaluate the wisdom and correctness of the decision?
APPENDIX E
HOW DECISIONS ARE MADE

According to Schaller, decisions in the church are usually made in a three-part process: initiation, approval, and execution. He breaks this process down into twelve more detailed steps:

1. Preliminary agreement on the question
2. Analysis of the facts
3. Listing of alternative courses of action
4. Review in the context of overall policy
5. A more detailed examination of the facts
6. Review of probable consequences of each alternative
7. Elimination of several alternatives
8. Analysis of all possible consequences of each of the remaining alternatives
9. Selection and recommendation of one or two alternative courses of action
10. Formal communication of that recommendation to members of the final decision-making group
11. A formal decision
12. Implementation

Schaller, *The Decision Makers*, p. 43.
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