

FIELD NOTE 01 / ASCEND NETWORK

Church Order: Who Governs What?

A field guide for pastors entrusted with a local house

The governing principle

Christ is the head of the Church. The local church is not a possession to be transferred between leaders, and apostolic counsel is not a substitute for a pastor's responsibility to shepherd the people entrusted to that house. Authority in the Church is received as stewardship, exercised under Scripture, and judged by its fruit in the lives of people. That is the ground on which every conversation about order must stand.

Paul told the elders at Ephesus to watch themselves and the flock among which the Holy Spirit had made them overseers (Acts 20:17, 28-31). Peter told elders to shepherd the flock among them willingly, eagerly, and by example, without domineering (1 Peter 5:1-4). Neither passage gives leaders permission to become owners of God's people. Both make them answerable for a particular flock. This is why a pastor cannot surrender the local church's judgment merely because another voice carries a title, an anointing, or a wider sphere of influence.

Order is not the enemy of the Spirit. It is one way a house protects what the Spirit is forming. A church can be passionate in worship and careless in governance. It can be administratively strong and spiritually empty. Neither imbalance is maturity. The Lord calls us to build a habitation for His presence and a trustworthy household for His people.

Four responsibilities that must be distinguished

1. Christ governs the whole house

Jesus is the chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4) and the head from whom the body grows (Ephesians 4:15-16). The authority of every pastor, elder, and apostolic leader is therefore derivative. No leader has authority to contradict Scripture, demand unquestioning loyalty, hide wrongdoing, or make personal preference equal to the voice of God. Spiritual language cannot make an unaccountable decision holy.

This has a practical implication. When a major decision is presented as "God told me," leaders still examine its fruit, its agreement with Scripture, its effect on people, and the process by which it will be carried out. Discernment is not unbelief. Testing is part of faithfulness (1 Thessalonians 5:19-22).

2. Local shepherds bear responsibility for the flock among them

Acts 20 addresses the elders of a particular church. They are to guard doctrine, care for people, and watch themselves. A senior pastor may lead the vision, but the ministry should not depend on one person's unchecked instincts. A healthy elder or governing structure can ask questions, record decisions, manage conflicts of interest, and protect the congregation when the leader is tired, pressured, or wrong.

The exact legal form of a church board varies by jurisdiction and organizational documents. The biblical point is more basic: entrusted people must be shepherded, and leaders must be accountable. A

constitution, bylaws, financial controls, and a clear decision process are not evidence that a church lacks faith. They are instruments that can help a church act truthfully when emotions run high.

3. Apostolic ministry equips, strengthens, and helps bring order

Ephesians 4:11-16 describes gifts Christ gives for the equipping of the saints and the maturity of His body. Apostolic ministry is measured by what it builds in Christ's people, not by how many churches it can claim. In Acts, Paul planted, revisited, taught, corrected, and strengthened churches. He could speak with weight because there was gospel labor, relationship, and recognizable responsibility, not merely a declaration of rank (Acts 14:21-23; 20:18-21).

An apostolic relationship today should be able to name its actual work. Does it bring sound doctrine, wise perspective, prayer, correction, leadership formation, and help in difficult transitions? Does it strengthen the local pastor's capacity to lead responsibly? Does it make the church more faithful to Jesus? A title without those fruits cannot carry the weight of governing trust.

4. The congregation is not an audience without responsibility

The saints are equipped for the work of ministry (Ephesians 4:12). The body grows as each part works properly (Ephesians 4:16). A pastor is not called to replace the gifts of the people. Nor should a board reduce the pastor to an employee who executes its preferences. Order makes room for gifts to function, questions to be heard, discipline to be fair, and the mission to outlive any one personality.

What Acts 15 teaches, and what it does not

The Jerusalem council confronted a doctrinal question that threatened the gospel and the unity of Jewish and Gentile believers. The apostles and elders listened to testimony, weighed Scripture, reached a judgment, and communicated it in writing (Acts 15:1-35). It is a powerful picture of leaders refusing to settle a church-wide dispute through private force or personality.

Acts 15 is not a blank check for a modern network to overrule every local church. The apostles in that passage occupied a foundational role in the first-century Church, and the question concerned the gospel across congregations. We should learn from their submitted deliberation, attention to Scripture, clear communication, and concern for the churches without pretending every contemporary disagreement is the Jerusalem council.

The principle is clear: when the issue is weighty, widen the table of trustworthy counsel, establish the facts, hear the affected people, search the Scriptures, and put the decision in a form that can be understood and reviewed. An urgent decision may still need to be made quickly. Urgency does not remove the need for integrity.

Where counsel ends and local authority begins

If a pastor invites apostolic covering, the relationship should be defined before a crisis. Name the subjects on which counsel is expected. Name who makes the final decision. Name what happens when there is disagreement. Name the process for allegations, discipline, and exit. If these questions cannot be answered in peace, they will not be answered well under pressure.

ASCEND distinguishes between **Covering** and **Alignment**. Covering is a more direct relationship of apostolic counsel and accountability for the senior leader. Alignment is covenant community and shared conviction without formal governmental covering. In either path, the local church retains its legal and operational responsibility. The terms of any actual relationship belong in a written agreement, not in assumptions drawn from a website.

Consider four common decisions:

- 1 **A staff dismissal.** The local church's authorized leaders follow its employment policies and applicable law. Apostolic counsel may help the pastor discern character, timing, communication, and care for those affected. Counsel does not replace the employer's responsibility.
- 2 **A financial commitment.** The church's authorized financial process approves spending. A trusted apostolic voice may challenge haste or fear, but should not control the church's account or benefit from a decision without transparent disclosure and independent approval.
- 3 **A doctrinal dispute.** Elders and pastors examine Scripture and teach the house. Outside counsel can clarify the issue and bring perspective. The church should know who has authority to adopt a position and how members can raise concerns.
- 4 **An allegation against a leader.** Protect people first. Follow reporting duties, document the concern, avoid conflicts of interest, and use appropriate independent investigation. A spiritual father should not be the sole judge of an allegation involving someone he is close to.

These examples are not legal advice. They show why spiritual relationship and institutional responsibility must be named separately. The presence of God never requires a church to abandon truthful process.

A case for the leadership table

Imagine a church of 500 people preparing to launch a second gathering. The pastor senses momentum. The finance team sees a six-month cash gap. Several department leaders are already carrying too much. An outside apostolic voice says, "I believe God is calling you to expand."

What is the faithful response? Do not dismiss the word because it stretches the team. Do not treat the word as permission to ignore the gap. Bring the pastoral, financial, and operational facts into the same room. Ask whether expansion is the direction, the timing, or both. Test what would need to be true for the church to move without consuming its people. Invite the apostolic voice to help discern the assignment while the local leadership makes the decision it must own. If the answer is "not yet," obedience may look like building capacity before adding a service.

Faith does not become less spiritual when it tells the truth about cost. The people who carry the decision after the meeting deserve a process worthy of their trust.

Practice: write your authority map

In one meeting, write down five consequential decisions your church may face this year. For each, record: who recommends, who must be consulted, who decides, who documents, and who reviews the outcome. Include doctrine, senior leadership discipline, major expenditures, property, and succession. Compare the map with your bylaws and actual practice. If those three disagree, resolve the gap before the next crisis.

Then ask where an external apostolic relationship would add wisdom. Be specific. "We want covering" is a desire. "We want a trusted voice who will challenge our senior leader, pray with us through major transitions, and help us evaluate leadership health" is the beginning of a workable relationship.

Questions to bring to your table

- Where are we using spiritual language to avoid a decision process we should clarify?
- Which decisions can our senior leader make alone, and which require elders or board approval?

- Who can tell us the truth when our preferred plan is not ready?
- What authority would we invite an apostolic leader to exercise, and what authority remains local?
- If disagreement arose tomorrow, would every party know the process for resolving it?

The charge: Build a house where the Spirit is welcomed, Scripture is honored, people are protected, and authority can be explained without embarrassment. A healthy house is not afraid of clarity.

Scripture for further study

Acts 14:21-23; 15:1-35; 20:17-31; Ephesians 4:11-16; 1 Peter 5:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-22.

AT THE LEADERSHIP TABLE

One authority boundary to put in writing

Who must be in that conversation

Review date
