



MT. ROSE REFORMED
ORTHODOX PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH

Getting Organized

Reverend Scott Johnson | August 14, 2025 | Exodus 18:13-27

Old Testament Reading

The Old Testament reading is Exodus chapter 18, verses 13 to 27, and this is God's infallible and inerrant word. Let's hear God's word.

The next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. When Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, what is this that you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone and all the people stand around you from morning till evening? And Moses said to his father-in-law, because the people come to me to inquire of God.

When they have a dispute, they come to me and I decide between one person and another, and I make them know the statutes of God and his laws. Moses' father-in-law said to him, what you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.

Now obey my voice. I will give you advice and God be with you. You shall represent the people before God and bring their cases to God. And you shall warn them about the statutes and the laws and make them know the way in which they must walk and what they must do. Moreover, look for able men from all the people, men who fear God, who are trustworthy, and hate a bribe, and place such men over the people as chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens.

And let them judge the people at all times. Every great matter they shall bring to you, but any small matter they shall decide themselves. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you. You will be able to endure, and all these

people also will go to their place in peace. So Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said.

Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, chiefs of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties, and of tens, and they judged the people at all times, Any hard case they brought to Moses, but any small matter they decided themselves. Then Moses let his father-in-law depart, and he went away to his own country.

Old Testament Reading

And now let's turn to 1 Peter 2, 9 and 10 for our New Testament reading. And then we'll turn back to Exodus after that.

1 Peter 2, 9 and 10. But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light. Once you were not a people, but now you are God's people. Once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.

The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.

Organization of the Church

You may have noticed in the bulletin that the title that I gave to the sermon is Getting Organized. And if you thought that this would be a sermon about how you can improve your time management or bring some order to the chaos in your life, I'm sorry to disappoint you. The title of the sermon actually refers to the organization of the church or church government.

And that will be our general subject today as we look at this passage from Exodus, the governments of the church. And now you may be thinking, well, I wasn't disappointed before, but now I'm really disappointed. And I don't blame you if church government is not your favorite subject. It's not your favorite thing to study in the Bible or in theology. I don't know that many people are filled with a zeal and a love of church government that just makes them impassioned about it.

I think some people are, but nevertheless, if you truly believe that the entire Bible is the word of God and that it is authoritative for every aspect of your life as a Christian, which I trust all of us

believe that, then you do have an interest in this subject of church government. And it's a subject that may be more important to you than you realize. In this passage, Moses tells us about the organization of the nation of Israel and specifically how these judicial matters were dealt with and how a better way to deal with them came up.

And as we consider this passage, we need to bear in mind here that the immediate concern of this passage from Exodus, from the Old Testament, has to do with the nation of Israel. It does not have to do with the Christian church, the church of the new covenant, the church that Christ established after his coming, but it has to do with the nation of Israel, what we might call the church of the old covenant, the church that existed as the people of God before the coming of Christ.

But for that reason, we can't always draw a straight line from how the nation of Israel was organized to how the church in the new covenant ought to be structured or organized. Israel was a political entity. It had land, it had an army, it had borders. The church today is far different from that.

We belong to a spiritual kingdom. Israel had men who were prophets, priests, and kings, but we have the great, the ultimate prophet, priest, and king in the Lord Jesus Christ, and he reigns over his kingdom from heaven. And for that reason, then, the new covenant church today will look a lot different from the nation of Israel back then. And so many of these specific structures that were given to the nation of Israel, they do not carry over into the life of the church today.

So for that reason, then, on the basis of this passage, we are not going to start electing chiefs over thousands and hundreds and fifties and tens and so on. However, there are certain lessons here concerning the structure, the organization of the church that do apply to the Christian church today. And the first lesson is this. The fact that the Lord gave to Israel then and the fact that the Lord gives to the church today a definite structure or organization for the church, this is one way in which God shows that he cares for his people.

In other words, church government teaches us that Jesus cares for his people. Jesus cares for his church. From what we've seen so far in our study of the book of Exodus, you could say that this is a story of God's love and care for his people. There's a lot of different ways we could approach Exodus and what we've seen so far, but this would be one way to look at it, that this is the story of God's love for his people Israel.

When the Israelites were hopelessly enslaved in Egypt, when they were suffering at the hands of the cruel and wicked Pharaoh, they cried out to the Lord in their misery and in their despair, and the Lord heard their cries. He had compassion on his people. He was merciful. He took pity. He raised up a Savior for them. He gave to them Moses, who would deliver them out of the land of Egypt. And the Lord's goodness and his grace towards his people only continued after that.

He himself would lead his people, as we've seen, he led his people in this pillar of cloud and fire, and he was leading them to a good place. It was God's will that his people should inhabit the land of Canaan, the promised land, a land flowing with milk and honey. And we've also seen how the Lord provided for all the needs of the Israelites during their wilderness wanderings. When they came to a place without water, the Lord provided them water.

When they came to a place without food, the Lord gave them quail and manna to eat. And so despite the unfaithfulness of the people of Israel, despite their complaining and grumbling, God has done nothing but good to them. And that's because he loved his people. He cared for them. And He wanted them to be free, to be secure in the land of Canaan so that they could worship and serve Him as His people.

And it was out of that same love, that same care for His people, that the Lord also gave to them an order and a structure to their nation. It would be for them a blessing. It was for their good. And in this passage, the Lord gives some of that structure to the people of Israel, to the nation of Israel, through the advice that was given to Moses through his father-in-law, Jethro.

Last week, we left off with verse 12 in chapter 18, and that tells us how Jethro, and Moses, and Aaron, and the elders of Israel, that they joined together to worship the Lord, ate this holy meal in the presence of God. And then the very next day after that, we read how Moses was adjudicating disputes among the people of Israel, how he was completely occupied with this from sunup to sundown. Jethro took notice of that. And he also saw that not only Moses, but the people of Israel were wearing themselves out in the process.

Remember, this was a nation of over 1 million people. And as we've seen, this is a people, this was a people who did a great deal of complaining and grumbling. And so you can imagine that there must have been an overwhelming number of disputes, conflicts that needed to be resolved among them. And so the people came to Moses as their judge to decide these disputes.

Verse 13 says, the next day Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood around Moses from morning till evening. This is what we would call today a serious judicial backlog. There were way too many cases that Moses could possibly handle. And also we would say today that Moses was crazy busy. Here he was listening to all the disputes, the disagreements that the people were bringing him from morning to evening.

We can imagine that the people were bickering and arguing with each other. And over and over again, Moses had to listen to the tedious explanation of every grievance that the people were bringing to him. He had to hear the accusations and the counter accusations that the people were throwing at each other. And somehow Moses had to be able to figure out, to sort through each one of these conflicts, to see who had done wrong, who was to blame, what the resolution should be, and so on and so forth.

And it's not hard to imagine that when Moses looked up from his judgment seat and he saw that he was in the midst of a sea of people all waiting to take their turn to argue their case before him, it's not hard to imagine that Moses probably at times sighed deeply and thought about the good old days when he was a shepherd in Midian, when all he had to worry about was a flock of sheep out in the fields. But now here he was, exhausting himself as the leader of Israel.

The Japanese have a word for working yourself to death. It's *karoshi*. And it's something that actually happens over there from time to time. It's a result of the absolute devotion that's expected of a Japanese employee to his job and to his company. And so there is a word for death by overwork, *karoshi*.

And Jethro recognized when he saw Moses working the way he was, that he was a prime candidate for *karoshi*. And so Jethro asked Moses about it in verse 14. He says, what is this you are doing for the people? Why do you sit alone and all the people stand around you from morning to evening? And then Moses explained to Jethro what he was doing, that the people were inquiring of God through him, that they needed to know what were the statutes and the laws of God and how they applied to their disputes.

Now, if you're reading carefully or hearing carefully, you'll ask yourself, well, how did Moses know what laws and statutes to apply to these various conflicts when God had not yet given all of his laws from Mount Sinai? That comes later in Exodus. Well, we don't know for sure. Either Moses had some advanced knowledge of these laws that would be given on Mount Sinai, and he was applying those to these various conflicts, or perhaps he was actually learning at the

time, perhaps God was communicating to him directly what these laws and statutes were as each case came up, but we don't know.

But in any case, the problem here was that Moses was handling this entire caseload all by himself. And so when Jethro saw what was happening, he voiced his disapproval. He said to Moses in verses 17 and 18, if you look at those verses, he says, what you are doing is not good. You and the people with you will certainly wear yourselves out for the thing is too heavy for you. You are not able to do it alone.

Now we'll look at a minute at the advice that Jethro gave to Moses and how he should better handle all these disputes that were coming to him. But for now, I want you to see this, that Jethro was concerned for Moses. He was concerned for the people of Israel. And we can safely say that this concern was not only on the part of Jethro, but the Lord himself was concerned, that he cared for Moses, for the people of Israel. And so when Jethro says, what you are doing is not good, we can say that this is also what the Lord, that the thought that the Lord had in his mind as well, that this is not good.

There needs to be, of course, the Lord knows everything, but we can imagine him saying, if we can put it this way, that this needs to be done in a better way for the good of Moses, for the good of God's people. And so in God's wise and sovereign rule over his people, he is the one who sent Jethro to Moses to bring about a fundamental change in the way in which Moses was leading the nation. And it was a change that was for good. It was for the good of Moses, for the good of the people of Israel.

And so again, when we hear Jethro's concern for Moses and the people of Israel, we should hear there really a reflection of or an expression of the Lord's concern. His care for the people of Israel. And just as the Lord cared for His people then back in Exodus, so Jesus is concerned for His church today. Jesus loves His people. And of course, we know what the greatest manifestation of the love that Christ has for His people is.

It was the fact that He, as the eternal Son of God, that he came into our world, that he humbled himself, he lowered himself, he took the form of a servant. He came into our world to identify with us, to take on our human nature, to live the life of obedience to God that we have failed to live, and in our place as man, as our representative, to bear the condemnation that belongs to you and me for our sin and guilt. And in that way, Jesus came into the world in order to save us.

And that was an expression not only of the love of the Father, in that he sent his son for us, but also of the love of Christ for us, that he laid down his life for us.

The Gift of Church Government

The good shepherd loves his sheep. He laid down his life for his sheep but the love and the concern that Jesus has for us as his people, that he has for his church did not end at the cross, but rather all that Jesus does for his church is a manifestation of his care and of his love for his people. And that includes even what we usually consider to be the mundane topic of church organization or church government. This too is an expression of the care of Jesus for his people. And so that's just the first lesson that we can take from this passage, is that the government of the church is really a gift, a gift of God's grace, a gift of his love for his people, because he wants us to be blessed. He wants us to experience good in our being a part of the body of Christ and of the church. And so that's the first lesson.

The Importance of Church Government

The second lesson that we find in this passage is the importance, the importance of church government. The problem that Moses was having, the fact that he was overwhelmed with all of these cases that were coming before him was really the result of the faithfulness, the goodness of God in fulfilling his promises for the people of Israel.

In the first chapter of Deuteronomy, Moses, he, tells us about this episode again in that chapter, in chapter one of Deuteronomy. And there he mentions that the reason that Moses couldn't bear all the people by himself was because God had blessed the people by making them so numerous. He had made them as numerous as the stars of heaven. And so you could say from one perspective that this was a good problem because God had truly fulfilled his promises.

Increase the people. They were as many as the stars in the sky. And yet it was still a problem. It was a serious problem. Moses was wearing himself out. But thankfully, Jethro had a solution. His advice was for Moses to lighten his load by delegating the majority of these cases to other men who were capable, who were God-fearing, who were trustworthy, who hated taking a bribe, or who would refuse to take a bribe.

And so Jethro says in verses 22, or 22 and 23, he says, and let them, that is these men that Moses would choose, let them judge the people at all times, every great matter they shall bring

to you, but any small matter they shall decide for themselves, so it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this, God will direct you, you will be able to endure, and all these people will go to their place in peace.

Now, when you consider the circumstances here, it is a remarkable thing that Moses took this advice so willingly in the way that he did. Verse 24 says this, so Moses listened to the voice of his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Here's one reason why the Bible says that Moses was the meekest man on the face of the earth. Here, his meekness, his humility are on full display.

Because remember, his father-in-law, Jethro, he was a recent convert. He did not know the Lord until the very day before, just as recently as yesterday, he was not a believer. But the day before, we would say he got saved, he came to know the Lord by faith, and so it's the day after his conversion that he takes Moses aside and he offers him this counsel. Now, if I knew somebody who had come to faith in Christ one day, and then the very next day he showed up in my study and he said, Pastor Scott, what you are doing is not good. Let me tell you all the things that you are doing wrong.

Let me tell you all the things that you should be doing in order to be the pastor of this church. I would find it very challenging to welcome his counsel with a humble and teachable frame of mind. But Moses and his humility and his wisdom He listened to his father-in-law. He followed his advice. Perhaps Moses knew that this was not just coming from Jethro, but that this was coming from God.

But in that way, the Lord gave structure, organization to the nation of Israel. And the result was that Moses was no longer burdened by handling all of these petty conflicts that were coming to him, but he could concentrate on his calling as the leader of Israel, as the prophet of Israel. He could pray for his people. He could lead his people in the way that he should. And the result was also good for the people of Israel.

They were no longer spending all their time, all day long, waiting for Moses to hear them. But as Jethro says, they were able to go to their place in peace. And just as the Lord gave structure to his people then, the nation of Israel, so Jesus has given structure and order to his church today. The New Testament tells us a lot about that. Everything that the New Testament says to us about elders and deacons, about the qualifications of men who would serve in those offices, how elders are to faithfully shepherd the people of God, the principles of church discipline, these

are all ways in which Jesus has revealed to us the church the way in which we are to structure, to order, to organize the church of Jesus Christ.

And when the church is faithful to structure itself according to God's will that he has revealed in his word, it is for the good of the people of God. And so again, the church government, this may seem to be a topic that will leave to the Parliamentarians will leave to the theologians. It's not so much of a concern of mine. Whatever, as long as the church is functioning, that's fine with me.

But that's not the way that the Lord Jesus sees it. It's very important to the head of the church, to Jesus Christ. It's not as though Christ says to us, All that really matters is that you love me with your hearts, that you love others. As far as the details of how you are to live together as the body of Christ, how you are to worship, how you are to be led, how you are to serve as my body, well, I'll just let you figure that out as best you can.

Clearly, that was not what the Lord has done for us because the scriptures give us so much in the New Testament concerning how the church is to be structured. Now, having said that, to be sure, the government of the church is not a matter of salvation. It is not the gospel. When Paul told the Corinthians in 1 Corinthians 15 that he delivered to them the things of first importance that he also received, he included in that list of things of first importance, quote, that Christ died for our sins in accordance with the scriptures, that he was buried, that he was raised on the third day in accordance with the scriptures.

And so this was Paul's burden when he went to the Corinthians to preach the gospel of Jesus Christ, that Jesus was crucified and raised from the dead according to the scriptures for our salvation. You'll notice that Paul did not include among the things of first importance that he delivered to the Corinthians, he did not say, I also delivered to you the latest copies of the book of church order. I know for us Presbyterians that we might think that that was a serious oversight on Paul's part, that he should have been a little more attentive to that.

But we could say that the government of the church is a matter, not of first importance, but of second importance, but it is important nonetheless. One way theologians have explained the relative importance of this topic is that, well, they make a distinction between what is necessary for the being of the church and what is necessary for the well-being of the church. And so biblical church government is not necessary for the church to exist.

No one is made a Christian, no one is saved from sin and death because of faithful church government. The existence of the church depends upon, rather, the truth, the power of the gospel of Jesus Christ. That is what creates the church. The Spirit of God is what sustains the church. But the teaching of church government is necessary for the well-being of the church.

Just as it was for Moses and the Israelites, God's will for the government of his church today is meant to be for our spiritual health, for our blessing. And so the second lesson that this passage teaches us is that church government truly is something important. It is very important. Not of absolute importance, but very important. It is for our good.

Jesus Rules Over His Church

And the third lesson in this passage is this, that Jesus rules over his church through human leadership. Notice how Moses led the people here. Moses was no Dr. Phil, just dishing out advice on the basis of his own understanding and wisdom. But in verse 16, it says, Moses says, I make them know the statutes of God and his laws. And we can safely assume that these lesser judges that Moses would go on to appoint, that they would adjudicate these disputes in the very same way, that they would apply the law of God, the statutes of God to these various conflicts that came to them.

And so really in this way, it was not Moses, it was not these lesser judges, but it was the Lord himself who was ruling his people. But he ruled them, he governed them through these human leaders. And the same goes for the church today. There is one supreme king and ruler over the church of Jesus Christ. It is not your pastor, it is not the elders, but it is the Lord Jesus Christ.

He is the supreme head of the church. He is the one who rules sovereignly over his people, but Christ carries out that sovereign rule and government through the leaders whom he equips and calls and gifts to serve as office bearers in the church. And so Jesus also rules over his church through the human leaders that he raises up to serve in those offices. So what does this look like?

It doesn't look exactly like it did for Old Testament Israel, but the New Testament speaks of two offices of leadership, elders and deacons. The elders have the responsibility for the spiritual care, the spiritual governing of the church. The deacons are to lead in the mercy ministry of the church and caring for the poor, for example. And as far as elders go, there are two kinds. There are teaching elders, those who are devoted full-time to the ministry of the word.

This would be pastors and missionaries and so on. And then there are ruling elders, men who join with the ministers in governing the church. And so just like these men chosen to help Moses with judging the cases of Israel, so there are teaching elders, ruling elders who join together in governing or ruling the church of Jesus Christ. And with that in mind, one very important thing to see from this passage was the basis on which these men were chosen to govern God's people.

First of all, they were to be able men, verse 21, able men. And so today as well, the leaders in the church, those who would be officers in the church must have some basic competency to carry out the functions of that office. But far more crucially, far more important than that, was that Jethro told Moses to appoint godly men, men of character. Verse 21, men who fear God, who are trustworthy and hate a bribe.

It's not hard to see why this was so important for those who would be judges over Israel because these were men who would make judicial decisions and if they could be tempted with a bribe, if they did not fear God, justice would be corrupted among the people of God. And in the same way, when you read the qualifications for elders in the New Testament, which includes pastors and ministers, what stands out in those qualifications is that almost all of the emphasis is not on competency, but it is on moral, spiritual character, godliness, Christ-likeness.

To be sure, elders and pastors must be competent to fulfill that office, 1 Timothy 3.2, says that elders are to be able to teach, but above all else they must be mature men of God, wise, faithful, devout, above reproach in their personal lives. And so men who are gifted and called to lead as elders and pastors are the leaders through whom Christ rules over the church. And because Christ himself is the Lord of the church, because he is the great shepherd who shepherds his people, those whom he laid down his life for, for that reason, the role of the leaders of the church, the elders of the church, is merely to minister the word of God, to minister the word of Christ.

The way that our book of church order says it, all church power is only ministerial and declarative. And so a pastor, an elder, he does not have any power in himself just because he occupies that position, but he is merely a servant. He declares the word of God. He ministers the word of God. And in that way, it is Christ himself who rules over his people, who leads his people, who shepherds his people.

And so Christ rules over the church through those officers whom he has gifted and called to serve. Well, what does this mean for you? Well, first of all, as a Christian, you ought to be under

the authority of a local church body with leaders, leaders to whom you have promised to submit to their leadership. And there are some Christians who refuse to do this.

refused to come under the authority, the leadership of a local church. But the question for those who refuse to do so is this, how does a verse like Hebrews 13, 17 apply to you? Hebrews 13, 17 says, obey your leaders and submit to them for they are keeping watch over your souls as those who will have to give an account. Well, if you have not submitted yourself to the leadership of a local church.

How Does This Apply to Us?

How does Hebrews 13 17 even speak to you? How does it apply to you? Who are your leaders? Have you submitted to them? When you read the New Testament, you will find that there is no category of a Christian who is not a part of a local church body and under the authority of the church leaders of that body.

There is no category of a Christian who separates himself from the authority of the church in that way. It simply doesn't exist in the New Testament. And so one, every Christian should be under the authority of the leaders whom God has called and who's placed in a church body. Secondly, pray for your leaders. Pray that those who are elders, your pastor, deacons, pray that they will serve faithfully.

And three, pray that God would raise up godly men to serve the church as leaders. Pray that the Lord would raise up men who have the heart of Moses here, who was spending himself day and night to minister to, to serve the people of God, who was humble and meek, who took advice from his father-in-law to do things better. Pray that the Lord would raise up such men who have a love, not only for Christ, but for his people, for the good of the church, to serve in those offices of elder and deacon.

To bring all of this to a conclusion, I'll end with this observation. Why did the Lord deliver his people out of Egypt? Was it only because he took pity on them and their suffering? Was it only because he wanted to fulfill his promise to bring them into the promised land, the land of Canaan? That wasn't the only reason, but we might say the primary reason was this, the word that the Lord gave to Pharaoh through Moses was this, let my people go that they may serve me, that they may serve me.

So the purpose, the reason why the Lord brought his people out of Egypt was that they would be his servants. In other words, that they would worship him, that they would worship him. But the Israelites, they needed what Jethro had to offer. They needed to get organized. They needed their chiefs over thousands and hundreds and fifties and tens.

They needed that structure, that organization to enable them to devote themselves to their true purpose, to be a people redeemed by God in order to serve and to worship him as their God. And in the very same way, God has saved us from sin and death through the work of his son, Jesus Christ, not just so that we can avoid condemnation, not just so that we can look forward to the hope of heaven when we die, but the apostle Peter tells us the true reason, or the greatest reason, why God has brought us salvation.

First Peter 1.9, we read this or we heard this earlier from the New Testament, that you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession, that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness and into his marvelous lights. We have been redeemed by the grace of God. God sent his son into the world to save us from our sins, to make us his people so that we would be the people who proclaim his excellencies.

In other words, we are saved in order to be God's worshipers. And if the church is unstructured, undisciplined, disorganized and disordered, We cannot really devote ourselves to our purpose as the people of God to serve and to worship the Lord Jesus Christ, to declare his praises as we wait for the world to come. And so God has given us his will for the government of the church. And Jesus has shown us how he wills to rule over us as his people so that we can be what God has saved us to be, a holy nation to proclaim the excellencies of our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Let's pray.