

Church Leadership: An Overview

Does a clear pattern for Church government emerge from the pages of the New Testament (NT)? I believe it does. The NT reveals a pattern in which each local Church was placed under the spiritual care of a plurality of godly leaders called elders. When Churches disregard this plan, they invite trouble on their assemblies. Churches who follow congregational-rule (the opposite of elder-rule) will experience long-term, debilitating problems.

Tracing the history of NT Church leadership, God initially gave the Church apostles and prophets. These leaders did the foundational work after the birth of the Church (Ephesians 2:20;4:11). As the Church grew, the apostles handed the baton of leadership to elders. Elders were appointed for each Church (see: Acts 14:23;15:6,23; 20:17,28). These men were given responsibility to shepherd and oversee local churches (I Peter 5:1-4).

There is no indication in the NT that the office of apostle was meant to continue beyond the first century. In fact, in the restricted sense, no one today would meet the qualification for apostle (Acts 1:21-22; I Cor.15:8). And, since the early church gave itself to the teaching of the apostles (Acts 2:42; now found in the NT epistles), we would have to ask what level of authority we would give to the teaching of people who want to be viewed as apostles. Appointing apostles for the Churches is not an action supported by the pattern of the NT.

Understanding Biblical eldership:

#1. Elders in the Old Testament:

Exodus 3:16; 4:29; 12:21; 19:7-8; Lev. 4:13-16; Deut. 21:3-9; II Sam. 5:3; 17:4; Num. 11:10-17; Gen. 50:7 - Egyptian elders Psalm 37:25 - Older corresponds to (*presbyteros*) Luke 15:25 “Israel’s elders were not mere figureheads. Although there is no explanation of their origin, appointment, or qualifications, Israel’s elders are mentioned approximately 100 times in the Old Testament. Their vital leadership role is displayed by their active involvement in every crucial event in Israel’s history. From the time they were slaves in Egypt, the elders provided leadership of the people. God acknowledged the elders’ leadership role by sending Moses to them first to announce the people’s deliverance (Ex. 3:16).

“When Israel settled in the Land of Promise, each city, each tribe, and the nation as a whole had a council of elders. As community leaders, the elders were to protect the people, exercise discipline, enforce the law of God, and administer justice. According to Mosaic law, as well as by traditional practice, the elders exercised far-reaching authority in civil, domestic, and religious matters. The elders’ role as a judicial body is described in the legislative portions of the Old Testament. The book of Deuteronomy especially lays out specific situations that required the elders’ judgment and counsel — from hearing murder cases to judging the most intimate family matters (Deut. 19:11, 12; 21:1-8, 18-20; 22:16-19; 25:7-9; Josh. 20:2-4). The elders were to know the law, to bear (along with the priests) responsibility of communicating the law to the people regularly and publicly, and to ensure that the law was obeyed (Deut. 27:1-8; 31:9-11)” (Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, pp. 122-123).

#2. Elders in Judaism:

Matthew 15:2; 16:21; 26:3; 27:57; Mk. 8:31; Lk. 22:66; Acts 22:5- elders, chief priests, scribes

#3. Elders in the early Church: Acts 11:30

—elders appear without explanation in the early Church.

This is because the elder structure of government was well known to the Hebrew Christian. Yet this does not require that “new” believers were appointed as elders. Many of the earliest members of the early Church were previously devote and godly believers under the OT scriptures.

Some thirty years later qualifications for eldership would be provided for Timothy and Titus as they worked among gentile converts (See: I Timothy 3 & Titus 1 and chart below). Generally, the gentile believers were new to the faith and unfamiliar with eldership.

Three interchangeable terms for NT Church leadership

The NT uses three primary words with reference to spiritual leaders. The term of title is elder. The functional terms are pastor and overseer. All three terms may be used interchangeably to refer to the same body of leaders.

Consider Acts 20:17 and 28

Acts 20:17 - Elder (*presbyteros*) - I Peter 5:1; Titus 1:5,7

Elder: A mature adult recognized for his wisdom and experience.

“Although the strict sense of advanced age is eliminated from the meaning of elder when referring to a community leader, certain connotations such as maturity, experience, dignity, authority, and honor are retained. Thus the term elder conveys positive concepts of maturity, respect, and wisdom. When *prebyteros* is used of a community leader, it is most commonly used in the plural form *presbyteroi*. This is because the elder structure of leadership is leadership by a council of elders” (Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p. 125).

Acts 20:28 -Overseers = bishops Phil.1:1; Titus 1:5,7; I Tim. 3:1.

To shepherd= pastor I Pet. 5:2; Eph. 4:11

Note: All of the above terms are equally applicable to each leader.

Elder is the designation of the leader himself. **Pastor** and **overseer** are functional terms referring to the work of elders.

The New Testament also refers to deacons (see: I Timothy 3:8-13). These men are not a spiritual governing body of leaders. They lead in areas of service designed to alleviate the elders for their devotion to spiritual oversight.

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Consider also: plurality of leadership in:

1) Provinces of Asia Minor (Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; I Tim.3:1ff; 5:17; Eph. 4:11; I Pet. 5:1-4)

2) Achaia and Macedonia (Phil. 1:1; I Thess. 5:12,13), Corinth (I Cor. 12:28)

3) Island of Crete (Ti. 1:5 ff)

4) Communities addressed by James (Ja. 5:14)

5) Communities addressed by Hebrews (Heb. 13:7,17)

6) Lystra, Iconium, Antioch, (Ac. 14:23; Ac. 15:39)

(Rom. 12:6-8)

* **Other N.T. References to plural leadership:** Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2, 4,5, 22,23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18;

I Cor. 12:28 —

1) teachers

2) helps

3) administrators

1 & 3 relate to (elders)

2 relates to (deacons)

Q. Is there any basis for distinction among the elders?

I Tim. 5:17, 19-20 — Note four possible categories or distinctions among elders:

1. Elders who rule well - exceptional, v. 17

2. Elders who are average - by implication

3. Elders who rule well in preaching and teaching. This group probably corresponds to the pastor/teachers of Ephesians 4:11-14. Elders who sin - this could relate to any of the above, vv. 19-20. (cf. Acts 21:18-25 - the relationship of James and the elders - some distinction is involved).

Q. How does a man become an elder? Who determines this? What procedure should be followed?

1) The Holy Spirit, Acts 20:28

2) Others elders appoint them, Acts 14:23 “appointed” Titus 1:5 (prayer and fasting); cf. Laying on of hands, I Tim. 5:17-22; I Tim. 4:14—meaning: “hand to stretch” or “To extend the hand” – not to vote but laying on of hands (cf. Acts 13:1-3).

Q. Should the congregation be involved?

The qualifications imply the need for congregational input in the process - open communication is essential! Congregational vote is not based on any NT requirement.

Logical problem: A man who is a novice is disqualified for eldership (I Timothy 3:6), why then would a Church ask a novice to decide who will be his leader? God would not ask this of the new believer. But if a Church follows congregational vote on leadership, it essentially hands this important decision to all members whether new believers or immature believers. This is simply unwise and wrong.

Note: Some wrongly appeal to Acts 6:1-7 as a model for choosing Church leaders. Six considerations should help us avoid this error:

1. These men are selected based on qualification and recognition by the congregation.
2. The congregation chose certain men to meet the need at hand and recognizing the authority of the apostles brought the men to them for final approval.
3. The men are not being chosen to be spiritual overseers or elders. The Apostles (and later elders) fulfilled this function.
4. There is no evidence that these men represented an official board of deacons or any official ongoing committee.
5. No such title (as deacon) is applied to them — even though one could argue that there is a parallel to the later New Testament position of deacon. We simply need to be careful not to stretch too much from Acts 6 in regard to the selection or appointment of overseers.
6. The situation reflects the way the church in early stages delegated responsibilities in the face of major needs — not the way it appointed spiritual overseers.

Q. What is the role and function of Elders?

They are to be involved in the following:

* Training and appointing other leaders (II Tim. 2:2; Titus 1:5; Acts 14:23)

- * Leadership, admonishment (I Thess. 5:12; Heb. 13:17)
- * Ministering the Word (Titus 1:9; I Tim. 5:17; Heb. 13:7)
- * Representation (Acts 20:17)
- * Spiritual oversight (Heb. 13:17)
- * Governing the believers (I Tim. 5:17)
- * Equipping (Eph. 4:11-12)
- * Spiritual restoration (Gal. 6:1-2)
- * Refuting false doctrine (Titus 1:9)
- * Guarding the flock (Acts 20:17, 28-31)
- * Qualifications for elders touch areas of character, conduct, and competence. (see chart: "Qualifications of an Elder")

Conclusion:

The NT teaches elder-rule with congregational involvement and input (e.g. Acts 6:1-4; 15:2-24; 22). The instructions on total church action (I Cor. 5:4; 7:13; II Cor. 8:16-19) need to be understood in keeping with Scripture on leadership. A democratic congregational form of Church government is not God's design for His Church government. The church consist of people at all different levels of spiritual growth and maturity. God would not request church governing decisions of all people equally. But the involvement of every part of the body is crucial to the growth, stability and unity of the body. There is no room for spectatorship in the church (Eph. 4:11-16). In this regard, a consideration of the priesthood of all believers is worth noting (I Peter 2:5; 9-10). (Yet multiplicity of ministry do not dissolve distinction within ministry cf. I Peter 5:1-6 in the same book).