

## Church Government

Due to increasing failure of church leadership over the last few decades, the idea of Biblical eldership has all but disappeared from the normal function of church government. As Howard Hendricks claims, “credible and trustworthy leaders are fast becoming an endangered species.” The religious scandals of the past twenty years have convinced many that the integrity of the church ranks along side that of marketplace traders and politicians. With such failures as adultery, fraud, and dictatorial attitudes, God’s idea of Biblical eldership is viewed with great suspicion. Because of a long heritage of democratic values and its long history of congregational church government, modern American evangelicalism often views the concept of elder rule with suspicion. Biblically, the focal point of all church leadership rests on the shoulders of God-gifted men called elders. An elder is of a plurality of biblically qualified men who jointly shepherd and oversee a local body of believers. The word translated “elder” is used nearly twenty times in Acts and the epistles to refer to this unique group of leaders who have responsibility for overseeing the people of God. The clear teaching of Scripture demonstrates that the biblical norm for church leadership is a plurality of God-ordained elders, and only by following this biblical pattern will the church maximize its fruitfulness to the glory of God.

To clear up any misunderstanding, it must first be noted that there are a number of titles given to this office. The titles of “elder” [presbuteros], “overseer” [episkopos], and “pastor” [poimen] all refer to the same office of overseer. Overseers and pastors are not distinct from elders. These terms simply refer to different ways of identifying the same office. The qualifications for an overseer [episkopos] in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and those for an elder [presbuteros] in Titus 1:6-9 are unmistakably the same. In fact, in Titus 1, Paul uses both terms to refer to the same man [presbuteros] in v. 5 and [episkopos] in v. 7). All three terms are used interchangeably in Acts 20. In verse 17, Paul assembles all the elders [presbuteros] of the church of Ephesus to give them his farewell message. In verse 28 he says, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [episkopos], to shepherd [poimaino] the church of God.” First Peter 5:1-2 brings all three terms together as well. Peter writes, “Therefore, I exhort the elders [presbuteros] among you, as your fellow elder and witness of sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, shepherd [poimaino] the flock of God among you, exercising oversight [episkopeo] not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God.” Clearly, the different terms indicate various features of ministry, not varying levels of authority of separate offices, as some churches claim.

Contrary to most Baptist churches, the pattern for the New Testament is the shepherding of a plurality of elders. Many today claim that a local body should be shepherded by one Senior pastor. However, nowhere in Scripture does one find a local assembly governed and ruled by one single a single pastor. The only pattern for church leadership given in the New Testament is a plurality of elders.

When the Apostle Paul left Titus in Crete he instructed him to “appoint elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). James also instructed his readers to “call for the elders of the church” to pray for those who are sick (James 5:14). When Paul and Barnabas were in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, they “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). In Paul’s first epistle to Timothy, the apostle referred to “the elders who rule well” at the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 5:17; Acts 20:17). The book of Acts indicates that there were “elders” at the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 5:2, 4;

21:18).

Every place in the New Testament where [presbuteros] “elder” is used it is plural, except where the apostle John uses it of himself in 2 and 3 John where Peter uses it of himself in 1 Peter 5:1. Nowhere in the New Testament is there a reference to a single-pastor congregation.

In other passages, reference is made to a plurality of elders even though the word [presbuteros] itself is not used. In the opening greeting of his epistle to the Philippians, Paul refers to “overseers [plural of eposkopos] and deacons” at the church of Philippi (Phil. 1:2). In Acts 20:28, Paul warned the elders of the church of Ephesus, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which God has made you overseers {plural of episkopos}” (Acts 20:28). The writer of Hebrews called his readers to obey and submit to the “leaders” who kept watch over their souls (Heb. 13:17). Paul exhorted the believers at Thessalonica to “appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction” (1 Thess. 5:12), a clear reference to the overseers in the Thessalonian assembly.

There is great blessing when leadership is made up of a plurality of godly men. Their combined counsel and wisdom helps assure that power won't corrupt and decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single individual (Prov. 11:14). The responsibility of these men are to agree on essential truths. If there is disagreement they are held responsible as God's stewards to study, pray, and seek the will of God in combined effort until agreement is achieved. In this way, the unity and harmony that the Lord desires for the church will begin with those individuals he has appointed to shepherd His flock.

Essential to the effectiveness of the local church is the quality of its leadership. Scripture places heavy emphasis on the spiritual qualities of God-ordained elders. Scripture delineates specific standards for such a high calling.

1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-8 give specific qualifications for elders. According to these passages, an elder must be above reproach, the husband of one wife (sexual fidelity), temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money, not fond of sordid gain, a good manager of his household, one who has his children under control with dignity, not a new convert, one who has a good reputation outside the church, self-controlled, sensible, able to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict, above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, loving what is good, just, and devout.

The single overarching qualification on which all the other qualifications rest is to be “above reproach.” This means that there cannot be any glaring sin as a reputation in the community. An elder is to be above reproach in his marital life, social life, business life, and his spiritual life. The biblically qualified elder is to be a model of godliness so that his congregation can follow his example (Phil. 3:7).

An increasingly unpopular idea is that men and women are qualified for this sacred office. However,

Scripture is clear that eldership is to be limited to men. First Timothy 2:11-12 says, “Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet.” In the church women are to be under the authority of the elders, excluded from teaching men or holding positions of authority over them.

As the apostolic dispensation came to an end, the office of elder emerged. Because it replaced the apostolic office, it carried with it a very responsibility. We must be cautioned however, it is not an exact parallel. The apostolic office carried unique responsibilities of inspiration laying the foundation for the New Testament church. Scripture gives ample evidence and direction for the office of eldership replaced the apostles. 1 Timothy 3:5 says that the primary responsibility of an elder is to “take care of the church of God.” Being a shepherd includes a number of duties. As pastors of the sheep, elders are to determine church policy (Acts 15:22); act as shepherds, setting an example for all to follow (1 Pet. 5:1-3); oversee the church (Acts 20:28); exhort and refute doctrinal error (Titus 1:9); rule, teach, and preach (1Tim. 5:17; 1 Thess. 5:12; 1 Tim. 3:2); and ordain others (1 Tim. 4:4). Those responsibilities place elders at the center of the New Testament church’s function.

A popular form of government has emerged called “congregational rule.” This form of functional government has become increasingly popular among many denominations, Baptists are included. It operates on the principles of democracy. The basic idea is that majority rules. However, this form of government is unbiblical in its modern form. In every area of responsibility, the elders are to rule with the congregations best interest involved. While, the congregation is responsible for recognizing and choosing godly leaders, even in these selections, the elders are to oversee and give the final OK. When it comes to doctrine, the use of funds, or general oversight, the elders have the final responsibility for the function and direction of the local church.