

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

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As a dean and instructor in seminary, a speaker at church seminars, church consultant, and pastor, this writer has observed an increasing (and sometimes not so harmonious) experimentation with church leadership models. At the center of the experimentation and shifting has been a discontent with the status quo of plateaued or declining churches. A few very large American churches have experienced dramatic growth and have been viewed as models. As people examine the growth and apparent success, the leadership factor often surfaces. Sometimes the observation is, "If we changed our church government to match theirs, we would be successful too!" Often the conclusion is that changing to elder rule or at least leadership by a board of lay elders will solve the stagnation problems and help the church become what it should be.

On the other hand, the stories of lay elder boards ruling the churches have been many and unsettling as well. A typical pastor in an elder board-run church states in explaining his resignation:

But I also believe that part of the problem is the organizational structure of the church in which the perspective of elders is that they are to lead and make decisions on what needs to be done within the church. This style of leadership elevates lay people to the role of shepherds while at best minimizing and at worst removing the call of God upon the individual(s) who will serve as Elder/Pastor/Bishop. I have observed first hand how this simple use of the term *elder* has convinced men that they need to make arbitrary decisions related to the church in many cases where there is no prior knowledge of any details of the situation.¹

These dueling perceptions of the role and results of church leadership by an elder board indicate the need for clarification and

¹ From a private letter to the author.

an understanding of the office of elder in Scripture for the NT church. This brief and limited document addresses one dimension of the discussion—**what is an elder?**

WHAT ELDERS ARE NOT

Prophets: The prophets of the OT and those possessing the prophetic spiritual gift in the NT were mouthpieces for God who received revelation directly from him. They spoke for God, penned scripture, and gave people decisions and directions from God. Since the completion of the canon, this function has ceased.

Priests: The OT priesthood was an inherited office charged with the duty of bringing sacrifices to God on behalf of people. The priesthood was not a governing/leadership role. In the NT, every born-again child of God inherits the right to be a believer-priest who presents sacrifices of praise and service to God along with a prayer ministry of interceding for others (1 Pet 2:5, 9). Priests were and are different than elders. As John Stott notes, “It is indeed a well known fact that the word is never used of the Christian minister, who is a presbyter, but not a priest.”²

Deacons: Deacons were first appointed in Acts 6:1-6. The qualifications for the office of deacon are given in 1 Timothy 3:8-13. We know by the meaning of their title, *διάκονος*, that they were given a ministry of serving, encouraging, and ministering in physical and spiritual ways. They are referred to as distinct from elder/pastor/bishops in Philippians 1:1 and were godly men who linked arms with the elder/pastor in the NT church.

WHAT ELDERS ARE—A DEFINITION

In establishing the definition of a term used in the NT, it is very helpful to understand how it was used in the OT. This is especially true of titles, practices, and understandings with which people in the early first century would be familiar. This look at biblical history helps establish that *elder*, *bishop*, and *pastor* were terms that came to be used interchangeably for the pastoral office.

² John R. W. Stott, *One People: Laymen and Clergy in God's Church*, exp. ed. (Old Tappan, NJ: Power Books, 1982), 41.

Elder:
One who rules, leads, represents, judges, or governs.

The Greek word for elder (πρεσβύτερος) is used often in the NT both to refer to one of respected age as well as the title for one holding a church office. There is an emphasis upon maturity of spiritual experience and qualifications. The *nature* of the man himself is of major concern.

The word *elder* was of OT Jewish origin. It was used of the seventy tribal leaders who assisted Moses in Numbers 11:16 and Deuteronomy 27:1. They were charged with judging the people in Deuteronomy 1:9-18.

Elders were members of the Sanhedrin and enforced Jewish law in Matthew 16:21 and 26:47. They were also involved in the leadership of cities in 1 Samuel 11:3-10, 16:4, and 30:26-31. Gerhard Friedrich includes a very helpful study on this period in the *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*.³

When the Jews were in captivity in Babylon and elsewhere, there were no Israelite kings/governors or Jewish temples or priests. Consequently, the elders established and led in the exile synagogues in each town. They thus were the religious leaders or rulers. Of elders in this OT period, the respected Bible scholar and historian J. B. Lightfoot states:

Illustrations are found among the chosen people we meet at every turn with presbyters or elders in Church and State from the earliest to the latest times. In the lifetime of the lawgiver, in the days of the judges, throughout the monarchy, during the captivity, after the return, and under Roman domination, the "elders" appear as an integral part of the governing body of the country. ... Over every Jewish synagogue, whether at home or abroad, a council of "elders" presided.⁴

It is easy to see why the Holy Spirit should move the inspired writers to use the term *elder* and, in fact, establish a church office with that title. Jewish believers would be very familiar with the

³ Bornkamm, "πρεσβυς, πρεσβύτερος" in *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. G. Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich, trans. Geoffrey W. Bromily (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1968), 6:655.

⁴ J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 96.

significance and responsibilities associated with the term *elder*. The church thus took an existing word from one familiar setting to use in another.

In the NT church, there are references to elders ruling and teaching (1 Tim 5:17-19), shepherding (1 Pet 5:2), and taking oversight (Acts 20:28). Elders were at the core of what God did in the NT church.

**Bishop:
One who oversees, superintends,
guards, or provides directive care.**

The Greek word for bishop (ἐπίσκοπος) is used in the NT of the Lord Jesus Christ in 1 Peter 2:25 where he is referred to as the “Shepherd and Bishop of your souls.” Most of its usage relates to the office, qualification, or function of a local church officer. The *function* of the bishop’s office is of major emphasis.

The word *bishop* is of Greek origin from pre-New Testament times. Secular usage of the word referred to those whom the Greek or Roman emperor would appoint to lead the captured city-states of that day. The bishop of the city was responsible to the emperor for the well-being and order in the city.

Lightfoot has provided valuable insight by his historical research. He states, “‘Bishop, overseer’ was an official title among the Greeks. In Athenian language it was used especially to designate commissioners appointed to regulate a new colony or acquisition.”⁵ He further points out that the usage of the word *bishop* “suggests two subsidiary notions also: (1) Responsibility to a superior power; (2) The introduction of a new order of things.”⁶ Both of these ideas clarify the use of the word *bishop* by the NT church.

When the churches began springing up, the Greek converts would naturally look for (and be guided to) a term to describe their leaders. *Bishop* was a logical selection as they already understood its meaning in secular life.

The term *bishop* seems to be used fewer times in the book of Acts, but there were also probably fewer saved Greeks than Jews at

⁵ Ibid., 95.

⁶ Ibid., 96.

that point in church history as well. *Bishop* is used in the epistles written to the city churches in Gentile areas.

In the NT church, there are references to the bishop's caring for the church (1 Tim 3:5), teaching the scriptures (Titus 1:9; 1 Tim 3:2), and protecting the flock (Acts 20:28), as well as to an officer of the church (Phil 1:1) and one who leads the church (1 Tim 3:1-5). The qualifications of the bishop stress strong, unwavering leadership.

**Pastor:
One who shepherds, feeds, guides, and protects.**

The Greek word for pastor (ποιμήν) is used in the NT for one who takes care of the needs of a group. These needs range from leadership and teaching to guidance and protection. It is a term of tender strength. The emphasis is upon the pastor's manner and motives.⁷

The word *pastor* probably best finds its origin in the heart and nature of God himself. It is a term of God's care for his people. The OT figure of the shepherd provides the logical background for using the term to describe the one who leads a church. Shepherds and flocks were also a very observable fact of life in that day and would illustrate well.

Psalm 23 refers to God himself as our Shepherd (pastor). John 10:1-29 gives an expanded description of Jesus Christ as the Good Shepherd (pastor). As the churches developed, the term came to describe their leaders.

In the context of NT churches, there are references to the pastoring, overseeing, providing an example for the church (1 Pet 5:1-5), and protecting against false teaching (Acts 20:28). In Ephesians 4:11, the pastor's shepherding function is linked to teaching Scripture and ministry methods to bring about maturity in believers. The very imagery of an OT shepherd provides rich insights into the functions of such a church leader.

⁷ John White, Jr., "The Biblical Blueprint for Pastors" (photocopied), n.p., n.d.

Reinforcement by Church Historians

Further reinforcement of the fact that *elder*, *bishop*, and *pastor* all refer to the same man or office in the NT can be gained by a brief look at respected church historians and Bible scholars. John MacArthur writes, “Bishops and pastors are not distinct from elders. ... The textual evidence indicates that all three terms refer to the same office. The qualifications for a bishop, listed in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, and those for an elder, in Titus 1:6-9, are unmistakably parallel. In fact, in Titus, Paul uses both terms to refer to the same man (1:5, 7).”⁸

A classic study has been done by Lightfoot in his *Commentary on the Epistle to the Philippians* where he states, “It is a fact now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament, the same officer in the Church is called indifferently ‘bishop’ (ἐπίσκοπος) and ‘elder’ or ‘presbyter’ (πρεσβύτερος).”⁹ He goes on to list at least six very logical, and biblical, reasons why it is so.

Hiscox, in his *New Directory for Baptist Churches*, covering the subject in a chapter on church officers, uses the heading of pastors and then proceeds to begin his description of pastors thus:

In the New Testament the term *episcopos*, which is usually rendered *bishop*, and *presbuteros*, which is rendered *elder*, are used interchangeably, and often applied to the same person. The *episcopos* was an *overseer*, what the term properly denotes; it was the word used chiefly by the Greek Christians as applied to the *pastor*, who had the oversight of the flock, and performed the work of the shepherd in spiritual concerns. The term *presbuteros* or *elder*, was evidently derived from the synagogue, and used chiefly by Jewish Christians, to designate the same person.¹⁰

The chart, “New Testament Terms for Pastoral Office Used Interchangeably,” demonstrates the exegetical strength of using *pastor*, *elder*, and *bishop* synonymously.

⁸ John F. MacArthur, *The Master’s Plan for the Church* (Chicago: Moody 1991), 183.

⁹ Lightfoot, *Saint Paul’s Epistle to the Philippians*, 95.

¹⁰ Edward T. Hiscox, *The New Directory for Baptist Churches* ([Valley Forge]: Judson, 1894; reprint, Grand Rapids: Kregel, 1970), 85.

New Testament Terms for Pastoral Office Used Interchangeably

<p>TEXT: Acts 20:17, 28</p> <p>ENGLISH (KJV) The elders (20:17)</p> <p>Overseers (20:28)</p> <p>To feed (20:28)</p>	<p>GREEK πρεσβύτερους</p> <p>ἐπισκόπους</p> <p>ποιμαίνειν</p>	<p>WRITER: Luke</p> <p>DEFINITION IN CONTEXT Rulers, leaders, representatives</p> <p>Bishops, overseers, supervisors</p> <p>To pastor, shepherd, feed, protect, care for</p>
<p>SIGNIFICANCE</p> <p>In Greek, the Lord, through Luke, referred to the offices and ministry of the elder using all three NT names.</p>		
<p>TEXT: Titus 1:5-7</p> <p>ENGLISH (KJV) Elders (1:5)</p> <p>A bishop (1:7)</p>	<p>GREEK πρεσβυτέρους</p> <p>ἐπίσκοπον</p>	<p>WRITER: Paul</p> <p>DEFINITION IN CONTEXT Leaders, rulers</p> <p>Overseer, supervisor</p>
<p>SIGNIFICANCE</p> <p>Paul directed Titus to organize the churches by appointing qualified leaders. The terms <i>bishop</i> and <i>elder</i> are used interchangeably for the same office and with the same qualifications. If a bishop was clergy, so was an elder.</p>		
<p>TEXT: 1 Timothy 3:1-2</p> <p>ENGLISH (KJV) Office of a bishop (3:1)</p> <p>A bishop (3:2)</p> <p>The elders (5:17)</p>	<p>GREEK ἐπισκοπης</p> <p>ἐπίσκοπον</p> <p>πρεσβύτεροι</p>	<p>WRITER: Paul</p> <p>DEFINITION IN CONTEXT Overseership, supervision</p> <p>The overseer, supervisor, director</p> <p>The church officers who take the leadership</p>
<p>SIGNIFICANCE</p> <p>The terms <i>elder</i> and <i>bishop</i> are used by the same writer, to the same recipients, in the same context, of the same office or persons. These church leaders, rulers, overseers were to have certain qualifications, receive certain benefits, and be accorded certain respect in view of their office. If bishops were clergy, so also were elders.</p>		
<p>TEXT: I Timothy 5:17, 19</p> <p>ENGLISH (KJV) An elder (5:19)</p>	<p>GREEK πρεσβυτέρου</p>	<p>WRITER: Paul</p> <p>DEFINITION IN CONTEXT A leader, ruler of the church</p>
<p>SIGNIFICANCE</p> <p>Same as previous</p>		

TEXT: I Peter 5:1-4		WRITER: Peter
ENGLISH (KJV)	GREEK	DEFINITION IN CONTEXT
Elders (5:1)	πρεσβυτέρους	Rulers, leaders, teachers
Feed the flock (5:2)	ποιμάνετε τὸ ποίμνιον	Shepherd (pastor), feed, protect the flock (people of the church)
Taking the oversight (5:2)	ἐπισκοποῦντες	Being a bishop to and directing
Chief Shepherd (5:4)	ἀρχιποίμενος	The leading, first, ruling Pastor (Jesus Christ)
SIGNIFICANCE		
In Greek, the work of the human pastor is referred to by using the words for <i>elder</i> , <i>bishop</i> , and <i>pastor</i> interchangeably. Jesus was referred to as the chief Pastor, implying that the message in the context is to human pastors (clergy) who are also elders and bishops.		

In summary, a look at Scripture shows that the terms all describe the same office/leader. Paul addresses the bishops and deacons of the church of Philippi (Phil 1:1) because the term *bishop* would cover the elder or pastoral office for these Gentile Christians.

In Acts 20:17 and 28, Paul gathers the elders of the Ephesian church to instruct and encourage them to be bishops and pastors to their people. All three Greek words are used here as synonyms of the same group of men.

In 1 Peter 5:1-5, Peter (who calls himself an elder along with those whom he addresses), writing in the Greek language, instructs *elders* to be good *bishops* as they *pastor* their people. The fact that Jesus Christ is referred to as the “chief Shepherd” (pastor) in verse four is a good refutation of the idea that the role and office of pastor has no place leading the NT church. If a “chief Shepherd” is mentioned, there must also have been “undershepherds” (pastors).

In 1 Timothy 3:1, 2 and 5:17, 19, the Greek words for *bishop* and *elder* are used of the same men. The same is true in Titus 1:5 and 7. Honest exegesis of the text demands at least that what is said of elders is also said of bishops. Those who say elders comprise a “board of laymen,” to be consistent, must also be willing to refer to them as a board of lay bishops! The case made for lay boards of elders to rule the church is often disingenuous. Most want to agree that the NT teaches that *pastor/elder/bishop* are terms for the same

office, but at the same time hold on to the increasingly “politically correct” concept of a lay elder board for the church. In addition, very little is said of the office of bishop or the possibility of the church’s having a board of bishops. That would not be consistent with the desire of some for elder rule by a committee of laymen.

HOW OLD IS AN ELDER?

In the OT, the “Elders of Israel” and others referred to with this term were generally older, more mature leaders of families, tribes, communities, or religious activities. Often they were governors or local village magistrates (1 Sam 4:3, 2 Kgs 23:1, Judg 21:16, Deut 16:18). John MacArthur describes this connotation of age in his book, *The Master’s Plan for the Church*:

The Greek word for *elder* (*presbuteros*) is used about seventy times in the New Testament. Like *zaqen*, which means “aged” or “bearded,” *sab*, which means “gray-headed,” and our English word *elder* (*presbuteros*) has [*sic*] reference to mature age. For example, in Acts 2:17, Peter quotes Joel 2:28: “Your old men shall dream dreams.” The Hebrew word used for “old men” in Joel is *zaqen*, and the Greek word used in Acts is *presbuteros*. Used in that sense, elder does not constitute an official title; it simply refers to an older man.¹¹

William Kerr comments:

Elder: This term as it relates to both secular and sacred usage comes to the New Testament with a very full development in both the literature of the Bible and that outside the Bible. Its primary emphasis is upon age as signifying wisdom and maturity rather than mere years. So the word is not strictly limited to men who are very old. For in both the secular and sacred literature men who bear this title have been as young as thirty years—perhaps younger (1 Tim 4:12). The prominent characteristic of the word is experience and as a title it encompasses not only the office held but the authority attached to it.

The frequency of its usage among the Hebrew people is seen in the Old Testament material. It is the translation of a word that, while emphasizing age, yet is not simply confined to that as is shown above. It is a title with corresponding authority invested in one who has demonstrated maturity, wisdom and experience rather than just an accumula-

¹¹ MacArthur, *Master’s Plan*, 181.

tion of years. For the requirement of maturity and experience is vitally important when applied to those who hold the title of elder.¹²

Ed Glasscock has composed a persuasive list of reasons why the age of thirty years may be significant in evaluating the minimum age of an elder:

What exactly constituted an “older” man is open to debate, but obviously it was in contrast to a young man. Arndt and Gingrich offer the suggestion of 50 to 56 years of age.⁴ However, an example from the Qumran community sets the age of 30 as the minimum required to serve as an elder in the community.⁵ Since Qumran’s background and roots are thoroughly Jewish and its existence was close to the apostolic period, it is a reliable example of what that culture viewed as the minimum age for leadership.

There is another reason for assuming a minimum age of 30. When Christ was only 12 years old, His knowledge and wisdom shocked and confounded the teachers in the temple (Luke 2:46-47). But having superior knowledge was not the only requirement for Christ’s work. He returned to Nazareth with His parents to wait an additional 18 years, during which time He “kept increasing in wisdom and stature” (Luke 2:52). The word for stature, ἡλικία most naturally means age (cf. NASB marginal note). Arndt and Gingrich define ἡλικία as “age, time of life” or “age generally” and suggest that in Luke 2:52 the word means He was “increasing in years.”⁶ Luke wrote that “when He began His ministry, Jesus Himself was about thirty years of age” (Luke 3:23).⁷ It is likely that His age was given not simply as a matter of historical trivia but because this was the accepted age for beginning a leadership or teaching role. Robertson points out that this was the age

⁴ Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 700.

⁵ Merrill C. Tenney, *New Testament Survey* (Grand Rapids: Wm B. Eerdmans, 1985), 121.

⁶ Arndt and Gingrich, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*, 345.

⁷ Meyer argued that He was probably 31 or 32 (Heinrich A.W. Meyer, *Meyer’s Commentary on the New Testament*, 22 vols. [reprint, Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 1983], 2:300).

¹² William R. Kerr, “Course Notes” (Oregon, 1977, photocopied), 5.

when Levites entered full service.⁸ Tenny gives further support for this 30 year limit, pointing out that due to the age requirement of the Sanhedrin, if Paul literally cast a vote for the death of Christians, he would have been at least 30 years of age.⁹

⁸ A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament*, 5 vols. (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1930), 2:45.

⁹ Tenney, *New Testament Survey*, 249.¹³

As the list of qualifications for an elder are examined in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-10, there is an emphasis upon wisdom, self-control, and a track record that earns respect. The emphasis on a successful marriage and family would seem to support the need for the elder candidate to have wisely lived a segment of life. While these spiritual characteristics and successful life experiences are not age specific, a case could be made for wondering if most twenty-two-year-olds fresh from college graduation are what the NT has in mind for an elder/bishop/pastor. Contemporary practice of preparing and calling a man for pastoral ministry may need to be evaluated.

WHAT DO ELDERS DO?

Many books, manuals, and courses are available describing the role, functions, and leadership of pastors. If one accepts the biblical evidence that *pastor*, *elder*, and *bishop* are terms for the same office, then what elders do is what pastors and bishops do. While this forum is too limited in time and space to address the functions of elders, understanding the “who” of being an elder will clarify much of the job description.

Some have agreed to the premise that *elder/bishop/pastor* are terms for the same office, but then turn to 1 Timothy 5:17 to try to divide the office of elder into two roles. The passage states, “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor; especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (NIV). In the two-role scenario, 1 Timothy 5:17 allows for teaching elders and ruling elders. Normally a salaried, seminary-trained, ordained, called man will be the “teaching elder” who preaches,

¹³ This passage, including the footnotes, is quoted from Ed Glasscock, “The Biblical Concept of Elder,” *BSac* 144 (1987): 67.

and the laymen elected to the “elder board” by the congregation will be the “ruling elders” and direct the church.

This is by no means a slam-dunk. The exegetical stretches needed to prove this use of 1 Timothy 5:17 are significant. Rodney Decker answers it this way:

One major passage proposed as a basis for elder rule is 1 Tim 5:17. This verse does not contradict the principle of congregational government. It teaches that every leader should both rule and teach, and emphasizes the elder’s duty to study diligently in order to teach. As Kent says, “This verse does not give sufficient warrant for the Reformed view of two classes of elders, those who ruled and those who taught. Every elder engaged in teaching (3:2). However, some would do so with more energy and excellence than others.”⁷⁵ There are no ruling elders distinct from teaching elders in the biblical sense, though unfortunately this has been assumed in many churches.⁷⁶ The terms “teaching elder” and “ruling elder” do not appear historically until Calvin. 1 Tim 5:17 refers to elders who are ruling well—not to a class of “ruling elders.” The noun is οἱ πρεσβύτεροι, modified by the participle προεστωτες, which is further qualified by the adjective καλως. It is thus the “well-ruling elders,” not the “good, ruling-elders.” To create two classes of elders also ignores the force of the superlative adverb μάλιστα. Paul contends that an elder who rules well is worthy of double honor. This is “especially” (μάλιστα) true, he says, of those elders who not only rule well, but also labor in the word and doctrine. He is not referring to two separate classes of elders, but rather indicating in a comparative manner how worthy they really are.

⁷⁵ Homer A. Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody, 1958) 181-82.

⁷⁶ Contra Glasscock (“The Biblical Concept of Elder,” *BSac* 144/573 [1987] 77): “All elders are to be ‘able to teach’ . . . , but [1 Tim] seems to imply a more formal type of public exhortation not expected of all the elders.” There is considerable diversity even among those who contend for a distinction. For representative positions, note the following: Bornkamm, TDNT, 6.667; Patrick Fairbairn, *Commentary on the Pastoral Epistles* (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1874; reprint, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1956) 213; and William Hendrickson, *Exposition of the Pastoral Epistles* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1957) 179.¹⁴

¹⁴ The passage, including the footnotes, is quoted from Rodney J. Decker, “Polity and the Elder Issue,” *Grace Theological Journal* 9.2 (1988): 257-77.

Elders/bishops/pastors are to minister to the congregation in a manner and function consistent with the meaning of their three biblical titles. A summary description would be “providing loving leadership” (John 10:1-16) that includes protecting, directing, teaching, and mobilizing them to achieve God’s goals in personal life or the church. People in the congregation should in turn relate to their elders/bishops/pastors in attitudes and actions consistent with Hebrews 13:7, 17 (remember, follow their faith, heed their example, obey them as they rule, submit).

HOW MANY ELDERS SHOULD A CHURCH HAVE?

Again, it can be correctly stated that this well-researched question could fill several documents of this size. Among writers concerning the office elder/bishop/pastor, there is general agreement that the terms are used in the plural in the NT. Numerous examples of multiple elders and teams of elders can be documented in the text. A sample list of these references could include the following:

- ▶ When a person was sick and had spiritual needs, he was to call for the elders (plural) in James 5:14. The pastors would come as a team and minister.

- ▶ Paul addresses the bishops (plural) and deacons of the church of Philippi (Phil 1:1).

- ▶ In 1 Timothy 5:17, elders were discussed in a plurality. Some deserved “merit pay” for a job well done beyond the call of duty.

- ▶ Titus was to appoint elders/bishops (plural) in the churches of his influence and responsibility (Titus 1:5).

- ▶ Timothy himself was appointed or charged by a team of elders (1 Tim 4:14).

- ▶ In the book of Acts, the writer, Luke, records a plurality of elders at Jerusalem (Acts 16:4) and in Ephesus (Acts 20:17).

- ▶ Acts 14:23 states, “And when they had ordained them elders in every church” Paul and Barnabas were traveling through cities where they had previously preached the gospel and started churches. They ordained elders for leadership in each.

What is not so clear is whether it is normative and required that a church have multiple (more than one) elder/bishop/pastor. One way to explain what was described in the early days of the NT church is to examine the reality and implications of the “house

church.” A treatment of this factor is provided in a companion study, “The Elder Issue,” by this author.¹⁵

Since there were no large buildings available to handle the estimated 100,000 Christians in Jerusalem, an obvious answer is the “house-to-house” pattern of Acts 2:41-47. Thus, when Paul called together the elders of the church of Ephesus in Acts 20:17-38, he gathered the individual pastors of each of the house churches of the “church of Ephesus.” There were no denominational distinctions in the early church, and the “messengers/angels” of the churches (Revelation 1-3) who came together represented the various cell groups of the larger church of the city. Implications point to this multiple church staff meeting as not being unusual. Theologian Augustus Strong summarizes it well:

In certain of the New Testament churches there appears to have been a plurality of elders (Acts 20:17; Phil 1:1; Titus 1:5). There is, however, no evidence that the number of leaders was uniform, or that the plurality which frequently existed was due to any other cause than the size of the churches for which these elders cared. The N.T. example, while it permits the multiplication of assistant pastors according to need, does not require a plural eldership in every case There are indications, moreover, that, at least in certain churches, the pastor was one, while the deacons were more than one, in number.¹⁶

WHO CAN BE AN ELDER?

The spiritual and behavioral qualifications for an elder/pastor/bishop are spelled out already in 1 Timothy 3:1-6 and Titus 1:5-9 (see “Fleece or Feed” by this author for a detailed exposition of the character qualities).¹⁷ Without maturity in these character qualities, a man should not be set apart to be an elder. First Timothy 3:1-6 says:

¹⁵ Howard L. Bixby, “The Elder Issue” (Cherry Hill, NJ: Association of Baptists for World Evangelism, 1983), 33.

¹⁶ Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology* (Fleming H. Revell, 1960), 915-16.

¹⁷ Howard L. Bixby, “Fleece or Feed” (Cherry Hill, NJ: Association of Baptists for World Evangelism, 1985), 34-38.

This is a true saying, if a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work. A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy of filthy lucre, but patient, not a brawler, not covetous; one that ruleth well his own house, having his children in subjection with all gravity (for if a man know not how to rule his own house, how shall he take care of the church of God?); not a novice, lest being lifted up with pride he fall into the condemnation of the devil.

Titus 1:5-9 says,

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee, if any be blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of profligacy, or unruly. For a bishop must be blameless, as the steward of God, not self-willed, not soon angry, not given to wine, not violent, not given to filthy lucre, but a lover of hospitality, a lover of good men, sober-minded, just, holy, temperate, holding fast the faithful word as he hath been taught, that he may be able by sound doctrine both to exhort and to confute the opposers.

The elder/bishop/pastor must also be called of God to the office, privilege, and responsibility. This involves (1) a discernable subjective burden from God; (2) being biblically qualified; (3) a recognition of the call to ministry by his local church; (4) demonstration of the spiritual gifts and fruits of ministry needed; and (5) being separated, dedicated and sent by his church (see “Fleece or Feed” by this author for a more detailed treatment of the “call”).¹⁸

In the early transitioning church, the apostles and their helpers appointed elders in the newly planted churches (Acts 14:23-24; Titus 1:5). As the church developed, the process was broadened to involve others. Instructions and warnings such as 1 Timothy 3:10 instructs that deacon candidates “first be tested.” The context includes elder/bishop. First Timothy 5:17-25 provides additional instructions to churches on relating to their pastors/elders and warns of “laying hands suddenly on no man,” the inference being that the people are involved in selecting and appointing pastors/elders to lead their congregations. Acts 6:1-6 is viewed by some as being a case of a congregation’s selecting the first deacons (church officers). Whether this was done by the apostles or people,

¹⁸ Ibid., 39-45.

is open to debate. At least in the United States culture, the congregation is not only involved in discerning the qualifications and call of a man to be an elder/bishop/pastor, but also see voting as a means of expressing God’s guidance. Whether totally correct or not, a potential pastor/elder in American Bible-preaching churches will normally be examined, prayed for, voted upon, and “called” by a congregation.

The following chart, “The Contemporary Practice of Becoming an Elder,” attempts to clarify the apparent huge disparity between what is involved in becoming a pastor/elder/bishop and a “lay elder” board member today in the churches. One must ask why? There is something very wrong (or at least very unwise) when the standard and practice for achieving the role of elder is so different for the two groups of men.

The Contemporary Practice of Becoming an Elder

	Pastor/Elder/Bishop	“Lay Elders”
Education Required	4-7 years of Bible college/seminary Academic training in the exposition of Scripture, leadership, and methodology	No required academic program with accountability Sometimes a seminar or orientation may be provided
Public Examination of Doctrinal, Life Practice, and Ministry Philosophy	An ordination, examination by a council of pastors, and an official service is required. This results in a certificate and recognition by both the church and government to marry, perform funerals, the ordinances, and other religious functions. The man is commissioned to ministry leadership.	No public doctrinal practice or philosophy examination for which study and preparation are required No recognition by other churches or government entities There may be a service of dedication by the individual church.
Search/Call	An extensive search by the congregation and its sub-committees—“pulpit committee” (6-24 months of prayer, interviews, and references)	Nomination by a board or individuals from the congregation

Commitment of People in Selection	Votes by search committee, board, and entire membership	A congregational vote for “elders” is taken along with the other church officers
Corporate Status	He is employed by the church and paid to lead in accomplishing God’s mission and goals for the congregation	A “volunteer” who donates time for his functions and does not have production accountability

IMPLICATIONS

1. Order in the Church

The opening case study of a lay elder board points out one of the dangers of ascribing to uncalled and unprepared men the role of ruling the church through an oversight board populated by laymen. The biblical definitions of the words *elder*, *bishop*, and *pastor* preclude this from being the correct form of church government.

2. Consistency

If a man is to be called an elder, he should be as prepared and qualified as the pastor of the church. If a church chooses to have a board of elders, they should also understand it to be a board of bishops or board of pastors.

3. Source of Income

In determining whether or not a man is a biblical elder, the source or amount of income he receives should not be a factor. Situations and circumstances will determine this as it did in the first century. A church could have a team of five pastors/elders who are employed in secular work, but who all serve as pastors of the church bivocationally. Church planters do this frequently. The real issue is whether they are qualified, prepared, set apart by God, and called by the church.

4. Responsibility

While all believers have a responsibility to exercise their gifts in the body of Christ and to serve God, it is the pastor/elder/bishop that God holds responsible for the care and growth of the church into the spotless bride of Christ. From the meaning of his titles and the shepherd image, the qualification of 1 Timothy 3:4-5, “take care of the church of God,” to the admonitions that reflect the pastor’s responsibilities in Hebrews 13:7, 17, the pastor is responsible. It is summed up in 1 Peter 5:4, “When the chief Shepherd shall appear, you shall receive a crown of glory that does not fade away.” The congregation must allow pastors to lead since pastors will be judged for how they lead.

5. Requirements

Whatever a church, denomination, or fellowship requires of a man to be on a church pastoral staff (senior pastor or associate) should be required of anyone referred to as an elder. Whether they are paid full time by the church or earn a living in the secular world, the requirements for the title “elder” should be the same. Are years of theological study required? Is the call of God to be a pastor necessary? Are examination and ordination by a church council of pastors and lay leaders essential and expected? If so, **all elders** must fulfill these requirements. Otherwise, not all are scripturally allowed to secure the office.

6. Qualifications

An elder on a church’s elder board must be prepared and qualified to be the pastor of another church if called upon to do so. The fact that a businessman/elder is busy earning money in a secular career should not exempt him from earning the same credentials, degrees, experiences, and reputation as his pastor. Otherwise, he should not accept the title “elder.”

7. Difference

It is not unbiblical to recognize a difference between sacrificial, talented, godly men of the church and a pastor. While it is perhaps currently politically incorrect to differentiate between clergy and laity, the Bible seems to indicate that there is a differ-

ence. This would not be out of character for God when one compares the Levites of the OT and the apostles of the Gospels. They were set apart and called differently than other men.

8. Multiple Input

There is a valid concern that when a church is led by a single elder/pastor/bishop, it is possible for his decisions not to benefit from the wisdom of additional input. The concept of counsel and iron sharpening iron is important. Creating an unbiblical lay elder office to prevent “bad pastoring” is unwise, however, just as it would be unwise to instruct an intelligent godly woman to assume headship of the home when her husband turns out not to be a good leader. There are numerous ways for a pastor/elder to secure godly, experienced counsel and input from lay people of the church. Churches should work toward that solution.

WHO IS AN ELDER?

An elder is a bishop and a pastor who is called of God and affirmed by a church to lead, shepherd, and teach the church; to prepare it as the bride of Christ; and to present it growing, maturing, and set apart for the chief Shepherd who shall judge and reward him.