

Biblical Eldership part 2 1Peter 1:1-5 bible-sermons.org January 24, 2010

Last week we began taking a look at the way the New Testament church was structured. While the Apostles were living, they were the ultimate authority as they had an eyewitness account of the life of Jesus. But from the very beginning of the church, they appointed elders in each city and each church. (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) Even in Jerusalem, while some of the Apostles were still there, the local elders were included in the major decisions that came before the church. (Acts 15:6) We saw that elder did not necessarily mean an older man, but a man that met strict qualifications. (1Timothy 4:12) Together, the elders oversaw the local church (overseer/bishop), preached and taught the Word (1Timothy 5:17), and looked after the believers (pastor/shepherd). There were no categories of clergy and laity but all were ministers of Christ and some of those ministers were called to be elders.

If that is the clear example of the early church, why do so few follow that pattern today? Let me share with you a couple of the arguments that I have heard. The Moses pattern: In the Old Testament, God raised up one great leader at a time through whom He worked. He put His Spirit upon them and communicated with them in a very clear way. They sometimes had leaders who worked under them to whom they gave instructions. Judges, kings and prophets are examples of the positions filled by these unique individuals.

Why isn't the pastor today in the office of prophet like Moses? Moses is a poor example to prove their point. Those who try to use him as an example forget that God had Moses gather 70 elders upon whom he put the same Spirit he put upon Moses because one man can't do all that needs to be done. (Numbers 11:17) When two men who had not been called showed signs of the Spirit upon them some complained. Moses responded that he wished everyone had the Spirit, which is prophetic what God did at Pentecost. (Numbers 11:29) Last week we saw that every believer is a priest. Every believer can go straight to God. (Hebrews 10:19-22) There is no reason that you should hear from God to any less degree than your pastor, for you have the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Moses declared that one was coming that would be like him, and to that Man we must listen. (Deuteronomy 18:15) This was fulfilled in Jesus. We no longer look to man for revelation but go directly to Jesus' life and His words. One like Moses has come. The Spirit is available to all who receive Him.

The office of the prophet ended with John the Baptist. Listen to the way that Jesus explained it. Luke 16:16-17 (ESV) ¹⁶ "The Law and the Prophets were until John; since then the good news of the kingdom of God is preached, and everyone forces his way into it. There is the gift of prophecy today. The New Testament prophets were different from the Old in that others are to test what they said to discern if it is from God. In the Old Testament, the office of prophet meant he conveyed the unquestionable Word of God to man. If you were in error you were stoned. (Deuteronomy 18:20) Quite a difference from the New Testament gift! Those churches that want to continue the office of prophet need to consider Jesus' words. The Gospel supercedes the need for the office of prophet. We now have the full

Commented [notes1]: Acts 14:23 (NIV)
23 Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust.

Commented [notes2]: Titus 1:5 (NIV)
5 The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you.

Commented [notes3]: Acts 15:6 (NIV)
6 The apostles and elders met to consider this question.

Commented [notes4]: 1 Timothy 4:12 (NIV)
12 Don't let anyone look down on you because you are young, but set an example for the believers in speech, in life, in love, in faith and in purity.

Commented [notes5]: 1 Timothy 5:17 (NIV)
17 The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching.

Commented [notes6]: Numbers 11:17 (NIV)
17 I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit that is on you and put the Spirit on them. They will help you carry the burden of the people so that you will not have to carry it alone.

Commented [notes7]: Numbers 11:29 (NIV)
29 But Moses replied, "Are you jealous for my sake? I wish that all the LORD's people were prophets and that the LORD would put his Spirit on them!"

Commented [notes8]: Hebrews 10:19-22 (NIV)
19 Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the Most Holy Place by the blood of Jesus,
20 by a new and living way opened for us through the curtain, that is, his body,
21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God,
22 let us draw near to God with a sincere heart in full assurance of faith, having our hearts sprinkled to cleanse us from a guilty conscience and having our bodies washed with pure water.

Commented [notes9]: Deuteronomy 18:15 (NIV)
15 The LORD your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among your own brothers. You must listen to him.

Commented [notes10]: Deuteronomy 18:20 (NIV)
20 But a prophet who presumes to speak in my name anything I have not commanded him to say, or a prophet who speaks in the name of other gods, must be put to death."

revelation of the Gospel and the Spirit of God is available to every believer. (Acts 2:38; Jude 3)

When the Children of Israel first declared they wanted a king, they were rejecting God as their leader. 1 Samuel 8:4-7 (ESV) ⁴ Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah ⁵ and said to him, "Behold, you are old and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint for us a king to judge us like all the nations." ⁶ But the thing displeased Samuel when they said, "Give us a king to judge us." And Samuel prayed to the Lord. ⁷ And the Lord said to Samuel, "Obey the voice of the people in all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.

It is the nature of man to want a hero, someone they can see, a God representative. God told Samuel that when they looked for a man to fit the role, they were ultimately rejecting the leadership of God. No matter how good the man is, all men are sinners. (Romans 3:23) This desire for a hero is from God and is meant to be fulfilled in Jesus. But human nature prefers to walk by sight and not by faith. They couldn't see God, and we can't see Jesus today, so we look for a hero too. There are a few good ones, but they are a far cry from our ultimate hero. Jesus is so awesome that all other good leaders are a mere shadow.

When we get our eyes on men, we take them off of God, and then we are destined for disappointment. How many of us have seen the damage done to a body of believers because the Pastor who was in charge of it all (even if he did have a board of "yes men") succumbed to some temptation? What a difference it would have made if that man surrounded himself with a group of equal and accountable to one another, spiritual men, with whom he prayed regularly! How much easier to get past such a failure if some of those men that filled the role of preaching occasionally stepped right in, and the church didn't miss a beat but kept on with the same vision and leadership!

Israel got their wish, King Saul, and what a disappointment he turned out to be. (1Samuel 15:28) David was much better as he foreshadowed Jesus, but even he left a lot to be desired. (2Samuel 12:9-10) Judges were just as flawed. Remember how Gideon ended up, after such an amazing victory against incredible odds, he made an idol. (Judges 8:27) Sampson ended well, but everything before was pretty abysmal. Are we getting the picture of why God designed a plurality of elders who would be equal in authority and keep one another accountable?

You might then turn to the Apostles as a reason for a single authoritative leader. Yes, they were in the New Testament, but they were unique in that they were chosen by Jesus to convey His life, words, and the witness of His resurrection. (John 6:70) It wasn't long after their deaths that a hierarchy began to develop. Early in the second century we begin to read of bishops (a title that was originally used interchangeably with elder) who were over the local elders. Before long corruption began to invade the leadership of the church. Where there is power held in the hands of one man, the temptation to corruption is overwhelming. Again we see the wisdom of God in having elders keep one another accountable.

Commented [notes11]: Acts 2:38 (NIV)
38 Peter replied, "Repent and be baptized, every one of you, in the name of Jesus Christ for the forgiveness of your sins. And you will receive the gift of the Holy Spirit.

Commented [notes12]: Jude 1:3 (NIV)
3 Dear friends, although I was very eager to write to you about the salvation we share, I felt I had to write and urge you to contend for the faith that was once for all entrusted to the saints.

Commented [notes13]: Romans 3:23 (NIV)
23 for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God,

Commented [notes14]: 1 Samuel 15:28 (NIV)
28 Samuel said to him, "The LORD has torn the kingdom of Israel from you today and has given it to one of your neighbors--to one better than you.

Commented [notes15]: 2 Samuel 12:9-10 (NIV)
9 Why did you despise the word of the LORD by doing what is evil in his eyes? You struck down Uriah the Hittite with the sword and took his wife to be your own. You killed him with the sword of the Ammonites.
10 Now, therefore, the sword will never depart from your house, because you despised me and took the wife of Uriah the Hittite to be your own.'

Commented [notes16]: Judges 8:27 (NIV)
27 Gideon made the gold into an ephod, which he placed in Ophrah, his town. All Israel prostituted themselves by worshiping it there, and it became a snare to Gideon and his family.

Commented [notes17]: John 6:70 (NIV)
70 Then Jesus replied, "Have I not chosen you, the Twelve? Yet one of you is a devil!"

Where did the model of a plurality of elders come from? When I read the passage about the Israelites choosing a king, did you notice the request came from the elders? (1Samuel 8:4; Deuteronomy 27:1) Israel has long had elder leadership, representatives of clans. This proves elders can make mistakes as well, for they are men too. Local synagogues adopted that elder system. The elders were the mature godly men who made the decisions for the local synagogue (before mid first century). All mature men took turns reading the Scripture and even expounding on it.

Commented [notes18]: 4 Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah

Commented [notes19]: Deuteronomy 27:1 (NIV)
1 Moses and the elders of Israel commanded the people: "Keep all these commands that I give you today.

The early church took the example of elders and some of the qualifications that were in use in the synagogue. The wisdom in doing so is the recognition that power in the hands of one person creates problems. Accountability among the elders helps to keep one another pressing toward the goal of Christlikeness. No individual preference dominates. Each person is encouraged to develop their gifts. Collective wisdom is bound to be better than that of the individual. (Proverbs 11:14)

Commented [notes20]: Proverbs 11:14 (NIV)
14 For lack of guidance a nation falls, but many advisers make victory sure.

The danger in the common church government of hiring staff to do the ministry is that the congregation forgets they are ministers! The congregation then sees no need to mature spiritually as the professionals are doing the job. It may be an effective way to add numbers to a church, but is it God's design, and does it result in the building up of the body of Christ? (Ephesians 4:12-13) Willow Creek, the model mega-church, was shocked a few years ago when they took a survey of what their members believed. Don't misunderstand me to be saying I'm condemning all mega-churches. I'm saying there is wisdom in God's original structure of a plurality of elders. Some mega-churches operate with multiple pastors that can function as a plurality of elders though there is definitely a tendency to have one superstar.

Commented [notes21]: Ephesians 4:12-13 (NIV)
12 to prepare God's people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up
13 until we all reach unity in the faith and in the knowledge of the Son of God and become mature, attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ.

"The Romish (Catholic) idea is that Christ is absent from His church, and common ideas of 'shepherding' have little difference from the Romish concept. The Biblical concept is that Christ is present in His church in the authority of His Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. Elders are shepherds over the flock in the presence of Christ, not in his absence.... This does not strip officers in the church of authority. It puts teeth in the authority, for they bear not their own authority but the very authority of Jesus Christ, when they preach the Word and are examples to the flock.... 'Office' and 'Authority' within the church must be thought of in the same way that we think of an officer of the law. A law officer represents the state. The law is the authority, not the law officer. The law officer has no authority, except to tell us what is written in the law books of the state, and to carry us before a judge if he believes we have violated what is written. Justice is served as we are judged by what is written! ... The basic principles to which I refer are: 1. The authority is in Christ; 2. The statement of His will is in the written Word. The ruling of an elder is then his service to the church in teaching and application of the authoritative Word." (Baptist Reformation Review, Summer 1976; vol.5:2)

Any earthly "head" or "senior shepherd" detracts from the focus of the assembly in simple dependence on Christ. The goal is not to meet the needs of people by

causing them to depend on a dynamic human leader. The goal is to point to Christ as the All-Sufficient Savior and Shepherd of His people. We don't want people to identify a church as Pastor Paul's church, and I'm sure Jesus wouldn't be too pleased with it either. It's His bride! (Revelation 21:9)

In our culture, people view the man who has the major teaching responsibility on Sunday morning as the chief leader of the local church, despite what other ministries the other elders may be performing. Titles such as "Assistant Pastor" only contribute to this image. In order to elevate all of the elders to their rightful position as undershepherds, we must make sure they are not ranked under a "chief-shepherd" here on earth, but rather directly under the proper Chief-Shepherd -- Christ. (Hebrews 13:20)

With these clear teachings in the Scriptures, how then did the early church operate? How did the elders come to decisions? We have a few great examples, ones to which we strive. The first is in Acts 13.

The church in Antioch had elders that served in various capacities. Listen to the description and the example they set. ¹ *Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul.* ² *While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."* ³ *Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.* Acts 13:1-3 (ESV) These men (who I believe were elders of the church in Antioch) with different gifts were worshipping together and fasting and they sensed the Holy Spirit directing them to send out Barnabas and Saul on a mission trip. They obeyed. The rest is history.

That is what I would love to see and what I think the Lord longs to see, is the elders worshipping together, fasting if so led, and seeking what God wants to do among us. Wouldn't you be encouraged to know your elders were praying together seeking God's leading for the church? What more could we ask than for them to worship together and in prayer seek God's direction? I hope I don't upset anyone when I say that this description is infinitely better than, "I make motion that we... is there a second?" Robert's Rules of Order are a nice practical way to do business, but isn't seeking the Lord in worship and fasting what you'd rather see when it comes to elders directing the church?

Let's look at another example. Acts 15:1-35 is an account of a dispute that arose in the church. Some thought the Gentile converts should be told to obey the Laws of Moses. Others thought they did not need to obey anything other than the moral laws. So Paul went to Jerusalem to meet with the Apostles and Elders. The matter was decided by discussion, testimony, and Scripture. They could say that the final decision seemed good to all and to be the leading of the Holy Spirit. James, the brother of Jesus, was in charge of order and gave the summation. (Acts 15:13) This tells us someone took charge, and yet everyone was heard and no one person dominated or had their way. James was in a role referred to as "first among equals". (Acts 15:22)

Commented [notes22]: Revelation 21:9 (NIV)
9 One of the seven angels who had the seven bowls full of the seven last plagues came and said to me, "Come, I will show you the bride, the wife of the Lamb."

Commented [notes23]: Hebrews 13:20 (NIV)
20 May the God of peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep,

Commented [notes24]: Acts 15:13 (NIV)
13 When they finished, James spoke up: "Brothers, listen to me.

Commented [notes25]: Acts 15:22 (NIV)
22 Then the apostles and elders, with the whole church, decided to choose some of their own men and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They chose Judas (called Barsabbas) and Silas, two men who were leaders among the brothers.

The day-to-day affairs of the local church were up to its own elders. 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of elders that rule well. ¹⁷ *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.* The elders ruled the church by serving the believers and fed the people the Word of God. Those who worked hard at preaching and teaching were given an income so that they could devote their fulltime to that calling. That is the implication of double honor as seen in the verse that follows it. (See the next verse.)

Commented [notes26]: 1 Timothy 5:18 (ESV)
18 For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

Hebrews 13:17 tells us that submission to elders' authority was advantageous. ¹⁷ *Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.* These men of God, recognized by the flock as the spiritual overseers, were watching over the souls of the flock. They were a part of the body, with a ministry equally important as anyone's. The author of Hebrews was warning the flock that it would not be advantageous for them if the shepherds had to report to Jesus that you were rebellious and stubborn. The shepherds want to joyfully tell the Lord how you grew in Christ not sadly report how you stewed in Christ.

Acts 20:17f is Paul's parting address to the Ephesian elders. In it he describes some of the responsibilities of these elders. They are called on to keep watch like a shepherd, especially for wolves. (Acts 20:28-30) In 1 Peter 5:1-5 Peter writes to fellow elders to be shepherds serving the flock with willingness, not motivated by financial gain but with an eagerness to serve. He warns not to "lord it over others" but instead to teach by example. Another translation says not to be a "tyrant". So these elders were expected to be like Christ the Chief Shepherd. Their job is to guide the sheep to green pastures and still water, to care for the injured sheep, to protect from dangers like false teachers. They lead by walking out in front as an example of where to go. The sheep follow because they trust the shepherds to lead them. True shepherds demonstrate a love for the sheep that comes from Jesus, though that is not always expressed in pleasing the sheep.

Commented [notes27]: Acts 20:28-30 (NIV)
28 Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood.
29 I know that after I leave, savage wolves will come in among you and will not spare the flock.
30 Even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them.

I hope that by spending this time on the Scriptural teaching of this topic we do not come to a fanatical stance that all Pastor led churches are out of God's will, or that any without elders have missed God's best. Instead, my hope is that we take an honest look at the early church form and see God's lessons in it. We may not all agree on exactly how these Scriptures should play out, but may we never be guilty of elevating a man as the head of the church, which is idolatry. (1 John 5:21) We should always look to Christ as the head of our local church and of our lives as individuals. We are each responsible for our own spiritual growth. (Romans 14:12) We are all ministers. Some ministers are called to be elders. A group of elders can help equip us and point us to the Word, and they will give an account to God of how we grew, but they can never take the place of a personal walk with the living Lord Jesus.

Commented [notes28]: 1 Peter 1:1-5 (NIV)
1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, To God's elect, strangers in the world, scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia,
2 who have been chosen according to the foreknowledge of God the Father, through the sanctifying work of the Spirit, for obedience to Jesus Christ and sprinkling by his blood: Grace and peace be yours in abundance.
3 Praise be to the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ! In his great mercy he has given us new birth into a living hope through the resurrection of Jesus Christ from the dead,
4 and into an inheritance that can never perish, spoil or fade—kept in heaven for you,
5 who through faith are shielded by God's power until the coming of the salvation that is ready to be revealed in the last time.

Commented [notes29]: 1 John 5:21 (NIV)
21 Dear children, keep yourselves from idols.

Commented [notes30]: Romans 14:12 (NIV)
12 So then, each of us will give an account of himself to God.