

Over the last three Sundays the elders have presented from the Scriptures a case for Biblical eldership. They showed how the early church was established with elders appointed by the apostles to be overseers of the local church. Each church was autonomous with multiple elders who were equal and accountable to one another. This is referred to as the plurality of elders. **They had to meet the strict guidelines laid down in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to be appointed to that task.** Their leadership was to be that of servant leaders who seek the Lord's heart together and wait until they are led in unity by the Holy Spirit. We see a beautiful example of that in Acts 13<sup>i</sup> when in prayer, fasting, and worship the Spirit told the elders of the church in Antioch to separate Paul and Barnabas for evangelizing to plant new churches. Another example is in Acts 15<sup>ii</sup> when they Apostles and elders of the Jerusalem church decided together that Paul should continue his mission and message to the Gentiles.

**You will find in Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5<sup>iii</sup> that the terms elder, pastor/shepherd, overseer/bishop were all used interchangeably.** These terms describe different aspects of the same role. To find true first century style leadership in a church of the twenty-first century is rare. What happened? It was early in the second century when the title bishop was changed to mean one who oversees a number of churches. As heresies began to abound the need to keep the local churches on course was met by these overseers of regions. That developed into a hierarchy which eventually expressed itself in the individual churches as a single elder/pastor at the head of each church.

Jesus is the indisputable head of the church (Colossians 1:18<sup>iv</sup>). When we try to insert any single man or woman under Him, there is too much power and influence in one single person. It gives the impression that we need someone between us and God. This makes that person a target for Satan and feeds the pride of the leader's old nature. Whether the person is a single pastor in a single church, or the overseer of a district, the headship of Christ is easily usurped by that one person's interpretations and personal opinions. They may be the godliest of persons, but the flesh is still the flesh and none of us is perfect. Satan knows if he can bring down that one person, the effects on the church will be catastrophic, as Luke described last week.

That is why God's plan is for elders to be a team that keep one another accountable. They must humbly listen to the difference of opinions among them and search the Scriptures together to overcome those preconceived ideas and personal preferences and find the leading of the real head of the church, Jesus! They must humbly submit to one another and receive correction from one another (Ephesians 5:21<sup>v</sup>).

A plurality of elders relies on one another's gifts to round out the needs for ministering to the body. One person may be more gifted at counselling while another is better at administration. One might be the main teaching and preaching elder, but others can assist in leading small groups. One may be more knowledgeable in the Word and therefore is referred to as first among equals. We see this in the disciples of Jesus. The list of disciples was in groups of threes with one individual always mentioned first. But

they are still equals and held accountable by the others (Matthew 23:8<sup>vi</sup>). The Apostle Paul rebuked Peter, and Peter received the rebuke (Galatians 2:11-14<sup>vii</sup>).

It's a type of leadership structure almost unheard of in the secular world. That is another reason it is rarely seen in the church today. It is easier to pay one man to do all the work and be responsible for everything. It is easier to make decisions and move quickly. It is easier to assign success or blame on that individual at the top and just replace them if the influential people don't get the results they want. It is man's way of leading. Remember God and Samuel's disappointment in Israel when they demanded to have a king. God told Samuel it was because they had rejected God as king (1 Samuel 8:7<sup>viii</sup>). To some extent that is true in the modern church. Most denominations and many individual churches have elected to disregard God's clear design for church leadership and opt for a king. If that individual is a vessel surrendered to the Holy Spirit and submitted to the Word of God, the church can spiritually prosper. But how much better to follow God's plan of equal and accountable brothers to keep one another in check. Not only are the gifts multiplied, but prejudices and preferences are minimized.

Elder leadership is not infallible. Any time man is involved you have the potential for being misguided. But if we adhere strictly to the Scriptural qualifications, a Biblical eldership team is less likely to have the problems of a single leader. **The bottom line is that God's design is best.** We'll have perfect religious and societal government in heaven. Until then, God has given us in Scripture His plan for the leadership of the local church.

An elder team also encourages one another. The load can be too heavy for one individual. The length of ministry for most seminary graduates is estimated to be ten years or less before they burn out and try another profession. Only a small fraction will retire after a lifetime in ministry. One Southern California survey of 1050 pastors reported that 78% had been forced to resign at least once. I can say the only way I have endured is the help of my fellow elders. Personal conflict and the load of ministry needs becomes too much for any one person.

One of the main problems with a single person at the helm of the church is that it sends the wrong message as to what we really are. The preacher is not the head. Jesus is! Together we make up the body. We are many parts that make up a whole. We need to review 1 Corinthians 12 to be reminded that we are all ministers and **every gift is to build one another up (1 Corinthians 12:7<sup>ix</sup>).** **There is no such thing as clergy and laity in the New Testament.** We all have a part in building up the body, which is first and foremost the congregation one attends, but also of others who are in Christ. We don't come on Sunday morning just to spend our obligated time and go our own way. When we see ourselves as a gathering of individuals with little or no commitment to one another or the congregation as a whole, we might as well listen to our favorite radio or TV preacher. Many have opted to do that. Then you don't have to deal with being shaped by the interaction with others. You won't be disappointed by others or offended by them. But neither will you be built up and encouraged by them, or assisted in your

times of need. It will stunt your spiritual growth. Nor will you have as many opportunities to use your gifts to bless others (Colossians 3:13-16<sup>x</sup>).

Our present culture makes it so easy to forsake your fellow believers because you don't like this or that particular thing or person. You can easily find another church that is to your liking. But here is the problem with that easy come easy go mentality. Where was the commitment to your fellow believers? Did you really love them? Were you willing to put your preferences second to theirs in love (Philippians 2:3-4<sup>xi</sup>)? And if not, it shows a selfish immaturity of my way or the highway. If you want others there for you in your time of need, praying for you and encouraging you, then you should be there for them. **When you commit to a church you are committing to the body of believers that meet together in love, not just a particular preaching elder or his style.** That is why we have snacks on the patio, Ida's dinner six, potlucks, and small groups. We need to get to know and care for one another or we are just playing at being a Biblical church.

Do we want to be a Biblical church or accept what has become the norm? Do we want to take the easy route and just think about our own needs and wants, or will we die to ourselves and serve one another in love (Galatians 5:13<sup>xii</sup>)? The single pastor paid to do it all feeds right in to our individualistic and selfish culture. Your brother or sister in Christ is a part of the body of Christ. If you love Jesus, you will love your brother and sister (1 John 4:20<sup>xiii</sup>). You will want to get to know those who attend regularly like you want to know Jesus. You will want to meet in at least one of the small groups like the Sunday morning study or men's group, or Wednesday evening or women's luncheons. We would like to develop more of those opportunities. You will want to be on the prayer chain. Paul taught the Galatians that they should bear one another's burden and so fulfill the law of Christ (Galatians 6:2<sup>xiv</sup>). Jesus taught us in John 15:12, <sup>12</sup> *"This is my commandment, that you love one another as I have loved you."* How did He love us? He laid down His life for us.

You can come and just listen to the sermon. We'd rather you do that than not come at all, but even better, we want you to know and love one another (John 15:17<sup>xv</sup>). We must find ways to spend some time together to learn of one another's needs and to pray for one another, otherwise we are more like a Bible club than a Biblical church. Learn about the missions we support. Learn about the on-line ministry. Let's be all that God has called us to be in the way He has directed us in Scripture.

The Bible refers to believers as the bride of Christ (John 3:29<sup>xvi</sup>), the temple of God (1 Corinthians 3:16<sup>xvii</sup>), the flock of God, branches of the vine (John 15:5<sup>xviii</sup>), the pillar and support of truth (1 Timothy 3:15<sup>xix</sup>), but the most frequent metaphor is that of a family. **The terms brethren, brother, or sister occur approximately 250 times in the New Testament. Paul also calls us the household of God.** We are to be a close-knit family of brothers and sisters. It is the essence of the community of believers.

The early church met in homes (Romans 16:14-15<sup>xx</sup>; 1 Corinthians 16:19<sup>xxi</sup>; Colossians 4:15<sup>xxii</sup>). They shared to meet the needs of one another (Acts 2:44,45<sup>xxiii</sup>; 4:32<sup>xxiv</sup>; 11:29<sup>xxv</sup>). They ate together (Acts 2:46<sup>xxvi</sup>; 1 Corinthians 11:20ff; Jude 12<sup>xxvii</sup>). They

greeted one another with a holy kiss (Romans 16:16<sup>xxviii</sup>; 1 Corinthians 16:20<sup>xxix</sup>; 1 Thessalonians 5:26<sup>xxx</sup>). They showed hospitality (Acts 16:15<sup>xxxi</sup>; Romans 12:13<sup>xxxii</sup>; Hebrews 13:2<sup>xxxiii</sup>). They cared for widows (Acts 6:1-6; 1 Timothy 5:1-16). When necessary they disciplined their members (1 Corinthians 5; 2 Corinthians 2:1-11; 2 Thessalonians 3:6-15). – from Biblical Eldership by Alexander Strauch p. 110

Listen to how Jesus instructed his disciples as to hierarchy: <sup>5</sup> *They* (scribes and Pharisees) *do all their deeds to be seen by others. For they make their phylacteries broad and their fringes long,* <sup>6</sup> *and they love the place of honor at feasts and the best seats in the synagogues* <sup>7</sup> *and greetings in the marketplaces and being called rabbi by others.* <sup>8</sup> *But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.* Matthew 23:5-8 All who are in Christ have the indwelling Spirit. We have a habit of calling the preaching elder “the pastor.” But we must recognize that all elders are pastors, which means shepherds, along with him. Biblically speaking, the preaching pastor and other elders who spend all their time working for the church are equal to all of the other elders. They may be compensated for spending their time preparing to share the Word and teach, and the Word encourages us to liberally compensate those who do so (1 Corinthians 9:14<sup>xxxiv</sup>; 1 Thessalonians 5:17-18<sup>xxxv</sup>), But that does not elevate them above their fellow elders.

We have to keep in mind Jesus’ view of leadership. The greatest among you shall be your servant. Jesus came to serve (Matthew 20:26-28<sup>xxxvi</sup>). We are all brothers and sisters in Christ. Jesus is the Head of this family. Let us be careful in referring to the preaching elder as “the” pastor that we do not have the mindset of most churches that put that person above their fellow elders or think of that calling as somehow all-important. Remember the body image. The speaking elder is like the mouth. Where would a mouth be without the hands, feet, eyes, ears, etc.? We need one another! We are to be interdependent. There will be some who have not been given the title elder and yet serve the congregation as if they were. The title merely helps the congregation identify those the local church recognizes, but God sees each servant’s heart.

When I was first met with the pastoral search committee at Wayside over eighteen years ago, they did not want to have an elder led church. They came back to me about a year later with a slightly different make up and asked if I would reconsider. The church was considering closing and our house church merged into Wayside. I have tried to practice Biblical eldership within the bylaws of this church during these last seventeen years. I did not want to upset things by moving too quickly, and for the most part we have been able to do so. But I believe now is the time to make the corrections to the bylaws to make it truly and elder led church according to the Scriptures. The elders are working on suggested changes and we will be presenting them to you for your input. It will take time, and we covet your prayers.

You are probably wondering what is going to change. In many ways we will continue in a similar manner as we have been trying to operate in this manner already. By the grace of God, we are going to make every effort to let the Holy Spirit transform our thinking to be more Biblical. We are going to see ourselves as a family and be more

aware of our selfishness and need to obey Christ's command to love one another. Loving one another is one of the most repeated commands in the New Testament (1 John 3:11; 1 Peter 1:22; Romans 13:8a; John 13:35). We *can* let the Lord make these changes in us for we have resurrection power living on the inside! Amen? Let's help one another express that in whatever gifts we have been given. Let's encourage one another to get in the Word and find our answers in Scripture. And pray for your elders, especially when they meet to pray and seek God's direction.

Let me share a few exhortations from the early church. After all, that is the model we are following and endeavoring to be more like. 1 Thessalonians 4:9-10 <sup>9</sup> *Now concerning brotherly love you have no need for anyone to write to you, for you yourselves have been taught by God to love one another,* <sup>10</sup> *for that indeed is what you are doing to all the brothers throughout Macedonia. But we urge you, brothers, to do this more and more,* See the emphasis in these verses on increasing in brotherly love and the family term, "brothers."

Ephesians 4:15-16 <sup>15</sup> *... speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ,* <sup>16</sup> *from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.* We are to all build the church up by loving and ministering to one another.

1 John 3:23 <sup>23</sup> *And this is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son Jesus Christ and love one another, just as he has commanded us.* Right alongside believing in Jesus is the command to love one another.

We will be examining how we can change the bylaws to this end. We will be emphasizing the need to get to know and care for one another in small groups and other ways. We will be encouraging us all to pray and ask the Lord how we can make clear that this is not Pastor Paul's church. It is the church of Jesus Christ, who is the head of the church. I am simply one of the elders – a mouth in the body, but as you have seen over the past weeks, I'm not the only one who can share the Word. We will encourage us all to recognize we are all ministers with a commission to build one another up and make disciples. And the reason we do all this is that we love Jesus. The instruction manual He gave us tells us this is the way. Let's grow in Christ, building up one another in love! Amen?

#### Questions

- 1 How were elders chosen?
- 2 How do we know there were more than one in each church?
- 3 What were other terms used for elders?
- 4 Why is the plurality of elders a safeguard against our old nature?
- 5 Why do people prefer a single leader?
- 6 What are the hallmarks of a Biblical church?
- 7 What is the most common description of the members of a church?
- 8 Who is pastor? 9 What is Christ like leadership?
- 10 How will we change?

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**i Acts 13:1-3 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. <sup>2</sup> While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." <sup>3</sup> Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

**ii Acts 15:22 (ESV)**

<sup>22</sup> Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,

**iii 1 Peter 5:1-2 (ESV)**

<sup>1</sup> So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: <sup>2</sup> shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly;

**iv Colossians 1:18 (ESV)**

<sup>18</sup> And he is the head of the body, the church. He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, that in everything he might be preeminent.

**v Ephesians 5:21 (ESV)**

<sup>21</sup> submitting to one another out of reverence for Christ.

**vi Matthew 23:8 (ESV)**

<sup>8</sup> But you are not to be called rabbi, for you have one teacher, and you are all brothers.

**vii Galatians 2:11-14 (ESV)**

<sup>11</sup> But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned. <sup>12</sup> For before certain men came from James, he was eating with the Gentiles; but when they came he drew back and separated himself, fearing the circumcision party. <sup>13</sup> And the rest of the Jews acted hypocritically along with him, so that even Barnabas was led astray by their hypocrisy. <sup>14</sup> But when I saw that their conduct was not in step with the truth of the gospel, I said to Cephas before them all, "If you, though a Jew, live like a Gentile and not like a Jew, how can you force the Gentiles to live like Jews?"

**viii 1 Samuel 8:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> 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.

**ix 1 Corinthians 12:7 (ESV)**

<sup>7</sup> To each is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

**x Colossians 3:13-16 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> bearing with one another and, if one has a complaint against another, forgiving each other; as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. <sup>14</sup> And above all these put on love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. <sup>15</sup> And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in one body. And be thankful. <sup>16</sup> Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly, teaching and admonishing one another in all wisdom, singing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs, with thankfulness in your hearts to God.

**xi Philippians 2:3-4 (ESV)**

<sup>3</sup> Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility count others more significant than yourselves. <sup>4</sup> Let each of you look not only to his own interests, but also to the interests of others.

**xii Galatians 5:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> For you were called to freedom, brothers. Only do not use your freedom as an opportunity for the flesh, but through love serve one another.

**xiii 1 John 4:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> If anyone says, "I love God," and hates his brother, he is a liar; for he who does not love his brother whom he has seen cannot love God whom he has not seen.

**xiv Galatians 6:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Bear one another's burdens, and so fulfill the law of Christ.

**xv John 15:17 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> These things I command you, so that you will love one another.

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<sup>xvi</sup> **John 3:29 (ESV)**

<sup>29</sup> The one who has the bride is the bridegroom. The friend of the bridegroom, who stands and hears him, rejoices greatly at the bridegroom's voice. Therefore this joy of mine is now complete.

<sup>xvii</sup> **1 Corinthians 3:16 (ESV)**

<sup>16</sup> Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you?

<sup>xviii</sup> **John 15:5 (ESV)**

<sup>5</sup> I am the vine; you are the branches. Whoever abides in me and I in him, he it is that bears much fruit, for apart from me you can do nothing.

<sup>xix</sup> **1 Timothy 3:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.

<sup>xx</sup> **Romans 16:14-15 (ESV)**

<sup>14</sup> Greet Asyncritus, Phlegon, Hermes, Patrobas, Hermas, and the brothers who are with them.

<sup>15</sup> Greet Philologus, Julia, Nereus and his sister, and Olympas, and all the saints who are with them.

<sup>xxi</sup> **1 Corinthians 16:19 (ESV)**

<sup>19</sup> The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.

<sup>xxii</sup> **Colossians 4:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> Give my greetings to the brothers at Laodicea, and to Nympha and the church in her house.

<sup>xxiii</sup> **Acts 2:44-45 (ESV)**

<sup>44</sup> And all who believed were together and had all things in common. <sup>45</sup> And they were selling their possessions and belongings and distributing the proceeds to all, as any had need.

<sup>xxiv</sup> **Acts 4:32 (ESV)**

<sup>32</sup> Now the full number of those who believed were of one heart and soul, and no one said that any of the things that belonged to him was his own, but they had everything in common.

<sup>xxv</sup> **Acts 11:29 (ESV)** <sup>29</sup> So the disciples determined, every one according to his ability, to send relief to the brothers living in Judea.

<sup>xxvi</sup> **Acts 2:46 (ESV)** <sup>46</sup> And day by day, attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they received their food with glad and generous hearts,

<sup>xxvii</sup> **Jude 1:12 (ESV)**

<sup>12</sup> These are hidden reefs at your love feasts, as they feast with you without fear, shepherds feeding themselves; waterless clouds, swept along by winds; fruitless trees in late autumn, twice dead, uprooted;

<sup>xxviii</sup> **Romans 16:16 (ESV)** <sup>16</sup> Greet one another with a holy kiss. All the churches of Christ greet you.

<sup>xxix</sup> **1 Corinthians 16:20 (ESV)**

<sup>20</sup> All the brothers send you greetings. Greet one another with a holy kiss.

<sup>xxx</sup> **1 Thessalonians 5:26 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> Greet all the brothers with a holy kiss.

<sup>xxxi</sup> **Acts 16:15 (ESV)**

<sup>15</sup> And after she was baptized, and her household as well, she urged us, saying, "If you have judged me to be faithful to the Lord, come to my house and stay." And she prevailed upon us.

<sup>xxxii</sup> **Romans 12:13 (ESV)**

<sup>13</sup> Contribute to the needs of the saints and seek to show hospitality.

<sup>xxxiii</sup> **Hebrews 13:2 (ESV)**

<sup>2</sup> Do not neglect to show hospitality to strangers, for thereby some have entertained angels unawares.

<sup>xxxiv</sup> **1 Corinthians 9:14 (ESV)** <sup>14</sup> In the same way, the Lord commanded that those who proclaim the gospel should get their living by the gospel.

<sup>xxxv</sup> **1 Timothy 5:17-18 (ESV)**

<sup>17</sup> Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. <sup>18</sup> For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer deserves his wages."

<sup>xxxvi</sup> **Matthew 20:26-28 (ESV)**

<sup>26</sup> It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant,

<sup>27</sup> and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, <sup>28</sup> even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."