

The New Testament Elders

by David A. Huston

Note: This article was presented on May 2, 2003 at a symposium on Apostolic beliefs held at the Urshan Graduate School of Theology in Florissant, MO. A response to this paper was presented by Gary D. Erickson and can be found on this website under the title *The New Testament Elders—A Response*.

IN TODAY S'CHURCH-WORLD, the elders of a church are generally a group of laymen who assist the pastor in various practical matters or serve on the church board. Rarely does the work of an elder include pastoral oversight, prayer for the sick, or laboring in the Word. But was the work of elders in the early Church limited to administration and advice? The purpose of this paper is to identify the elders of the New Testament assemblies and examine the nature of their work.

Origins of the Elders

The word translated elder in the New Testament is *presbuteros*, which means an old or aged man; the Old Testament equivalent is *zaqen*.¹ In both testaments, these words are used more narrowly to refer to mature men who provided leadership to the people of God. In the Old Testament we first read of the elders of Israel during the bondage in Egypt. In the burning bush dialogue, the Lord instructed Moses, Go and gather the elders of Israel together (Exodus 3:16). Later, during their wandering in the wilderness, the Lord took of the Spirit that was upon [Moses], and placed the same upon the seventy elders (Numbers 11:25). The purpose of this anointing was that the elders would bear the burden of the people with [Moses] (Number 11:17).

Though the Bible does not spell out in detail how Israel's eldership system originated, it is clear that by the time they entered the Promised Land, the most experienced, most capable, and most respected men shared the responsibilities of leadership among the people. The seventy, who later became known as the Sanhedrin, provided leadership to the Israelite community at large, while each tribe and city also had their own team of respected elder-leaders (Deuteronomy 5:23; 19:12).²

The elders of Israel are mentioned over 50 times in the Old Testament. Although their precise role is not presented in a formal way, it is possible by reviewing the Old Testament to gain an understanding of their general responsibilities. For example, they served as the representatives of the people (Exodus 19:7-8); led the people in repentance (Leviticus 4:13-15); administered justice in accordance with the Scriptures (Deuteronomy 19:11-12); ministered in family situations (Deuteronomy 21:18-21); taught the people God's Word and exhorted them to obey it (Deuteronomy 27:1); and provided the people with discerning leadership and godly counsel (Job 12:20; Ezekiel 7:26).

In the New Testament, the term *presbuteros* is used to refer to two distinctly different groups of elders. The first is the non-Christian Jewish elders who ruled Israel at the time of Jesus. Most New Testament references to these elders refer to the members of the Sanhedrin, the council of seventy established under the Old Testament elder system. These men, in alliance with the chief priests, were responsible for governing the religious matters of the Jews; yet they perpetrated the crucifixion of Jesus and persecuted the apostles and early believers (Matthew 26:3,47,59,27:1,12; Acts 6:12; 23:14). Their poor example of leadership demonstrates clearly that structure alone is not the answer to abusive, authoritarian church leadership. Even though they functioned as a collegial body, their lack of humility and lust for power took them so far away from God that they ultimately destroyed the Presence of God in their midst. Without a humble serving spirit, any group of leaders can quickly degenerate into an arrogant and exclusive club of tyrants wielding unbiblical authority over God's heritage.

The second use of the term *presbuteros* is in reference to the leaders of local assemblies. After the Day of Pentecost, as Jesus was building His Church through the power of His Spirit, the twelve apostles provided both pastoral oversight and practical service to the assembly in Jerusalem. In Acts 6 they turned some of the practical service over to seven men whom many believe serve as the prototype of those who would later be called deacons. At some point the apostles appointed other mature and capable men to serve as elders in the Jerusalem church.³ In Acts 15 we see the first references to the apostles and elders (vv.2, 4, 6, 22, 23).

In Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas were sent out by the assembly at Antioch to plant churches in Asia and Europe. After their church plants reached a certain level of size and maturity, these apostles appointed men called elders to provide continuing leadership. Acts 14:23 says, "So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. The assemblies had been founded by Paul, Barnabas, and their traveling team of church planters (Acts 13:1-5, 13). But once an assembly was mature and ready to be set in order, the responsibility for ongoing pastoral oversight and care was turned over to a team of elders. Every church" (singular) had elders (plural).⁴

Joshua 24:31 indicates that the leadership of the elders of Israel had a direct impact on the people and their service toward God. Likewise, elders today can have a powerful impact on the quality of the spiritual life of God's people.⁵

The Elders of the Church

Who then were the elders of the New Testament assemblies and what was the nature of their ministry? In Acts 20:17, Paul sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. When these men arrived, Paul admonished them saying, "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. The word overseer is the Greek word *episkopos*, which is sometimes translated bishop. In ancient Greece, *episkopos* was a common term similar to our English words supervisor, superintendent, or manager. The literal meaning is one who watches over others. Since the word bishop is actually a transliteration into English of the Greek word *episkopos*, the word overseer is the better choice, since it preserves the meaning of the Greek term. This passage reveals that one of the responsibilities of the elders of Ephesus was to oversee, or watch over, the assembly."⁶

The work of these elder-overseers was to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood (Acts 20:28). This passage links the idea of oversight with the task of shepherding, which makes sense, since the idea behind the word *episkopos* is identical to that of the Hebrew word *ra'ah*, which is translated shepherd. The root concept behind this word is one who watches over. The word shepherd in Acts 20:28 is the verb form of the Greek word translated pastor in Ephesians 4:11 (verb, *poimaino*; noun, *poimen*). In the church of Ephesus, the elder-overseers did the work of pastoring the local flock.

In his first epistle, Peter also linked the elders with the work of shepherding and oversight. In 1 Peter 5:1-3 he wrote, "The elders who are among you I exhort,...Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. This passage not only links shepherding and oversight with elders, but it also provides insight into the manner in which these tasks were to be done: they were to be done willingly, eagerly, and by being an example.

In the Bible, elders and bishop/overseers are functioning in the same ministry. This can be readily seen in Paul's letter to Titus, where he instructed his protégé, "Appoint elders [*presbuteroi*] in every city as I commanded you;...for a bishop [*episkopos*] must be blameless, as a steward of God (Titus 1:5, 7). In this passage the terms are used interchangeably. There is no difference in function between the two.

The reason two terms are used for one leadership function is to provide different emphases. Whereas the term *elder* with its Hebraic connotations denotes maturity and respectability, the more Hellenistic term *bishop* describes the task of these men: overseeing God's flock. If we were to translate this passage literally, we would see that Paul was instructing Titus to appoint *mature and respectable men* in every city to *oversee* the local assembly.⁷

The fact that the word translated *elders* refers to men who are older or more mature does not necessarily mean they must be older in chronological age, since some men are more mature and spiritually developed in their thirties than others are in their sixties. As used in describing the leaders of an assembly, the word carries the connotation of experience, dignity, influence, and honor. The use of this word is intended to convey the positive attributes of maturity, wisdom, and respectability.

We can see then that the word *elder* denotes the qualities and characteristics of church leaders whereas the term *bishop/overseer* describes their function. The two ideas come together into a single concept when Peter and Paul instruct *elders to shepherd God's people as overseers* (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2).

Due to language differences, the inherent shortcomings of translations, and the evolution of manmade traditions, over the centuries the meaning of some New Testament terms have been distorted. Therefore, in studying the identity and work of New Testament elders, it is vitally important to examine all related terms in the context of their biblical usage. For example, to properly understand the meaning of the word *deacon*, we must recognize that it is not a translation of a Greek word but rather a transliteration—a Greek word converted into an English word. Over the centuries, the terms *deacon*, *bishop*, *pastor*, *elder*, and *apostle* have all taken on meanings that are inconsistent with, and often gross distortions of, their use in the Scriptures.

For example, today elders are commonly thought of as lay-leaders, board members, or men who assist the pastor. But these ideas come from Catholic and Protestant tradition, not the Bible. In the New Testament, the elders were the pastoral leaders of a local assembly. Their task was to shepherd the church as overseers.

Similarly, in today's Christian parlance, a bishop is usually thought of as the senior pastor of a local assembly or the overseer of several assemblies within a region. Again, these traditional concepts have no foundation in the Scripture. From a New Testament perspective, a bishop is an elder and an elder is a bishop. To use these terms in any other way is to employ them outside of their biblical meaning.

The Work of the Elders

If the elders were responsible for overseeing and pastoring the believers, what specific tasks were included in this work? We can learn this by examining the New Testament passages that describe the work of elders. For example, 1 Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. Since Timothy was in Ephesus when he received this letter from Paul, it was the elders of Ephesus, the same group of men Paul addressed in Acts 20, who ruled the assembly and taught the people God's Word. This agrees with 1 Timothy 3:2, which says that a bishop/overseer must be able to teach, and Titus 1:9, which says they must be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict. "

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 says, "And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake. The leadership of the assembly in Thessalonica was handled by a team of men who labored, admonished, and worked among the people.

Hebrews 13:7 says, "Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct. The recipients of the letter to the Hebrews were led by a team of men who spoke the Word of God and modeled the life of faith before them. This is in harmony with Peter's description of the work of elders in 1 Peter 5:1-3.

Hebrews 13:17 says, "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. Again the Bible describes a team of men charged with ruling over and watching over the people. This letter concludes by saying, "Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints" (Hebrews 13:24). James 5:14 says, "Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray.... The phrase 'the elders of the church' tells us that there was one assembly with multiple elders who were responsible for praying for the sick.

From these passages we see that elders provided oversight and pastoral care by ruling (or leading) the assembling, laboring among the people, admonishing the people, speaking the Word of God to the people, watching over the spiritual lives of the people, and praying for those who were sick.

The Principles of *Plurality, Collegiality, and Diversity*

Notice that in every one of the passages above, the words referring to the leaders

are expressed in the plural form (elders, those who labor, those who rule, elders who rule, etc.), while the words *city* and *church* are singular. This reaffirms that each city had one church pastored by a group of men called elders. Nowhere in the entire New Testament do we find a letter addressed to a lone pastor, elder, or bishop.

Plurality: The local apostolic assemblies established by Paul and the other apostles were led by teams of men called elders or overseers and service was provided to the people by teams of men called deacons (Philippians 1:1). The common element in both groups, and in all the Scriptures we have looked at thus far, is that leadership in the local assemblies was never entrusted to one man, but was always dispersed to various groups of capable and biblically qualified men.

Are there scriptural principles that support the idea of plurality and teamwork? Yes. Ecclesiastes 4:9 says, *Two are better than one.* Ecclesiastes 4:12 says, *And a threefold cord is not quickly broken.* Psalms 133:1 says, *Behold, how good and how pleasant it is for brethren to dwell together in unity! The word dwell actually means to sit down, suggesting that the brethren this passage has in mind are leaders working together.*⁸ Proverbs 24:6 says that safety is to be found *in a multitude of counselors.* ”

Are there any biblical principles that suggest that *aloneness* is unwise and perhaps even dangerous? Genesis 2:18 says, *It is not good that man should be alone.* Anything that God says is *not good* should be rejected. An example is found in 3 John 9 where the apostle explained, *I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us. He went on to say that this man was speaking against [them] with malicious words. And not content with that, he himself does not receive the brethren, and forbids those who wish to, putting them out of the church (v.10).* From John's perspective, it was not good for Diotrephes to be alone. His love for the preeminence had so corrupted his mind that he had turned against the one who had rested his head on the breast of the Lord Jesus. As Solomon warned, *Woe to him who is alone when he falls, for he has no one to help him up (Ecclesiastes 4:10).* John's counsel was, *Beloved, do not imitate what is evil (v.11).*

In the New Testament, each local assembly consisted of all the believers in a city and each had a team of men appointed as elders who provided the assembly with pastoral oversight. There is no verse in the Bible that indicates there was ever a position in any local church where one person exercised authority over the elders or gave direction through the elders to God's people. This role belongs exclusively to the Lord Jesus. He is the Head of the Church (Colossians 1:18). The responsibilities of pastoral oversight and care are so important to the well-being of the people Jesus died for that He has never been willing to place them entirely in the hands of a lone leader. God's Word does not instruct His people to be submit to their leader, but always to their leaders —plural!

Collegiality: There is no indication in the Scriptures that any one elder ruled over the others. Instead, the elders worked together in a collegial relationship. The word *collegial* means marked by power or authority vested equally in each of a number of colleagues. ⁹This does not mean that all the men who comprise a local eldership must be equal in stature, ability, visibility, gifting, or experience. They are simply equal in bearing the responsibilities associated with providing high quality pastoral oversight and care to the assembly.

Collegiality implies harmony, cooperation, and mutual submission. Elders must work *together* in fulfillment of their common understanding of the Lord's vision for the local assembly they oversee. This does not mean there will never be differences of opinion. The idea is that through prayer and fasting they submit their various ideas to the Head, the Lord Jesus, eventually coming to agreement on all matters concerning the oversight of the assembly. This process is based on the belief that the Lord is able to speak His will into the heart of each elder. This approach provides both the elders and the assembly with a great safeguard against one man mistaking his own ideas or desires for the voice of God and taking the assembly in a direction God has not ordained.

Collegiality mandates that all decisions of the eldership be unanimous. When one elder disagrees with the others, they cannot resort to majority rule. (God does not use democracy as a basis for overseeing His Church. That system came from Athens, not Jerusalem.) The one(s) in disagreement should be regarded by the others as a check from the Lord to withhold action and continue seeking His will. Only by resolutely abiding by the requirement that all decisions be agreed to unanimously can the body operate freely under the living and practical Headship of Jesus.

Diversity: Though an eldership must be collegial, the elders are not clones. They will differ both in personal attributes and in the nature and level of their specific ministries. Some may manifest a greater ability to plan and strategize; others may be more gifted in teaching or evangelism. Such differences SHOULD EXIST in an eldership. Diversity of ministry is needed to represent the Lord more completely in the shepherding function. In addition, some serving as elders may derive their income (or a portion of it) from sources outside the assembly. That fact alone does not mean they exercise any less authority than those who are deriving their income entirely from the assembly.

The Nature of Spiritual Oversight

In several of the passages examined above, the term *rule* or *rule over* is used with reference to those functioning as elder-overseers. In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul wrote that the elders who *rule well* should be counted worthy of double honor. This implies that it is possible to not rule well. In our modern way of thinking, the

idea of church leaders ruling over the people is most often associated with the hierarchical form of church leadership. But this is not what Paul had in mind. In describing the nature of leadership, Paul used the phrase "over you in the Lord" (1 Thessalonians 5:12). This phrase suggests that the biblical concept of rule can only be understood by looking at the ultimate Ruler of the Church, who described Himself as "gentle and lowly in heart" (Matthew 11:29). At the last supper He told His disciples, "If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example..." (John 13:14-15). As the Shepherd of the flock, Jesus declared, "I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep" (John 10:11).

Ruling over a local church must always be understood within the context of Jesus Christ. It is not a heavy-handed style of rule, but a rule based on love, care, gentleness, concern, and compassion. It can be characterized as "gentle strength." Men, in their insecurity, often have a tendency to want to "lord it over people." But Jesus told His disciples explicitly, "It shall not be so among you" (Mark 10:43). And Peter admonished the elders to do their shepherding work, not as "being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock." He then cautioned that the Chief Shepherd would one day appear, implying that He would be looking to see if they had been ruling over His people in accord with His example (1 Peter 5:3-4).

Though Paul was a powerful apostle and teacher, and though he considered himself the "father" of the church in Corinth, he never asserted his authority over the people on the basis of his being an apostle. Instead he sought to persuade them on the basis of his love and proven concern for them. Modeling his style of rule after the Chief Shepherd, he wrote, "Now I, Paul, myself am pleading with you by the meekness and gentleness of Christ; who in presence am lowly among you, but being absent am bold toward you" (2 Corinthians 10:1). In the New Testament Church, those who are appointed to rule over the assembly are to do so from a position of humility and service, not power and control. Hebrews 13:17 says that those who rule are the ones who "watch out for your souls," a clear reference to the shepherding function, which Jesus said means laying down one's life for the sheep.

When Paul addressed the elders of Ephesus, he instructed them to "shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). In these few words he provided the most compelling reason imaginable why the elders must take their work seriously and perform it with meekness and humility: the people they are shepherding were purchased with God's own blood. The shepherding metaphor blends the ideas of leadership and authority with tenderness, genuine care, hard work, self-sacrifice, and constant watchfulness.

The noun form of *poimaino* is the ordinary Greek word for a shepherd (*poimen*). Whereas the verb form is used three times in the context of Christian leadership

(John 21:16; 1 Peter 5:1-2; and Acts 20:28); the noun form is found only once, where it is usually translated *pástor* (Ephesians 4:11). It is interesting to note that in the New Testament the term *pástor* or *shepherd* is never once used as a title for church leaders. This practice was started by the Reformers. In the Bible, Jesus alone holds the title Shepherd (John 10:11; Hebrews 13:20). In fact in 1 Peter 2:25, He is referred to as *the Shepherd [poimen]* and Overseer [*episkopos*] of your souls. All shepherding and oversight is a function of His ministry operating under His Headship and is to be done in the character and attributes of His Spirit.

Objections to Plural, Collegial Oversight

Many Christians leaders contend that plural pastoral oversight in a local assembly is unscriptural and cannot work. They believe that one man must be the primary preacher, teacher, administrator, and, most important of all, decision-maker. Often this man's name appears in the church bulletin and on the sign in front of the building as if it were somehow his church. Those who think this way would agree with C. Peter Wagner, who writes:

The local church is like a company with one company commander, the pastor, who gets his orders from the Commander-in-Chief [Jesus]. The company commander has lieutenants and sergeants under him for consultation and implementation, but the final responsibility of his decisions is that of the company commander, and he must answer to the Commander-in-Chief...the pastor has the power in a growing church.¹⁰

If the pastor has the power as Wagner asserts, it is interesting that neither Paul nor any other Bible writer ever mentioned it, even once. The truth is, plural pastoral oversight is only unworkable when one of two situations exists: 1) One man, due to fear and/or pride, succumbs to the belief that he is greater, wiser, or more qualified than all others and therefore must be in charge; or 2) The man who presently serves as pastor is unwilling to get off his throne due to the power, recognition, and/or financial benefits that come with it. In other words, he really likes being the monarchial leader and does not want to give up the status, power, and prestige of his title and office.

These are not the only reasons why an eldership cannot or should not be established at a particular assembly; they are simply the only reasons that could ultimately prevent an eldership from working. For example, an eldership cannot function the way God intends when a man such as Diotrephes is in a leadership role. When one man loves having the preeminence among his fellows and has been granted the final authority in matters of leadership, an eldership cannot and will not work. Conversely, when all participating leaders have the attitude of Paul, who considered himself less than the least of all the saints, and

admonished, Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself, an eldership can and will work (Ephesians 3:8; Philippians 2:3).

Other objections to the concept of plural, collegial oversight in a local assembly are:

1. Wasn t Moses a type of the New Testament pastor ?

As the deliverer, law-giver, and leader of the people of God, Moses is a type of Jesus Christ in His function as the Head of His body. In 1 Corinthians 10 Moses and Jesus are presented as parallel figures. Verse 2 says, All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Israel crossing the Red Sea is a well-accepted type of New Testament baptism; yet Paul described it as a baptism into Moses. In 1 Corinthians 1:13 Paul wrote, Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? Under the terms of the New Testament, we are not baptized into the name of an apostle or a pastor, but into the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38). Moses was the head of Israel, the church in the wilderness ;” but Jesus is the Head of His body, Church of the New Testament.

Moses and Jesus are also paralleled in Hebrews 3:1-2, which says, Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. Verse 5-6 says, And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant,...but Christ as a Son over His own house. Moses was a temporary head over the house of God, but Christ is the permanent Head, since it is His house.

In the polity of Israel, there was one leader, Moses, and one high priest, Aaron. Both men were types of Jesus Christ. Under Aaron there was a whole company of priests which served as a type of the entire Church as God s’ holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). Under Moses there were seventy elders who assisted him in leading the assembly. In Numbers 11 God instructed Moses to gather the seventy elders together, telling him, I’ll take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone. In the New Testament, the elders of an assembly are anointed by the same Spirit that was upon Jesus to carry the burden of caring for His people. The number 70 represents completeness, implying that the number of elders in any assembly depends largely on how many elders are needed to complete the work (and of course how many qualified men are available).¹¹

2. Wasn t James the highest official of the Jerusalem church?

To be sure, James was a leading figure in the Jerusalem church. Being a wise and mature man who was known to be the half-brother of Jesus, he was obviously highly regarded. But there is not a single verse of Scripture declaring that James

had positional authority over any of the apostles or elders of Jerusalem. Let us look at what the Bible actually says.

Galatians 1:19 says that James was an apostle. In Galatians 2:9, Paul wrote that James, Cephas, and John seemed to be pillars. A pillar holds up a house; it does not control or dominate it. Moreover, James is described in exactly the same terms as Peter and John without any suggestion that he exercised authority over them.

After Peter was miraculously delivered from prison in Acts 12, he told his comrades, Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren (Acts 12:17). Even though James is singled out, to presume that this means he held a position of authority over the rest of the brethren is adding to this verse what is not there.

In Acts 15, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders (v.4). During the ensuing discussion about the Gentile converts, after Paul and Barnabas had given their report, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, listen to me.... Again, there is no indication that James had some sort of positional authority over these men, simply that he was an articulate and influential man. After making his suggestion as to what needed to be done, the Bible says, Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas (v.22). James did not issue a command as to what to do. He made a suggestion that the others agreed with. The letter they composed began, The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles... (v.23). It included these words, It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, and, For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us (v.28). The letter was not signed by James but was sent in the name of the entire Jerusalem assembly.

On another occasion when Paul returned from one of his missions, the Bible says, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present (Acts 21:18). The implication is that James was a leading figure, an apostle. But there is no information in this verse that tells us he exercised authority over either the other apostles or the elders. This is all we know of James from the Scriptures. The popular proposition that he was the head of the Jerusalem church is a tradition that has no scriptural basis. (For a more detailed response to this objection, see our paper titled *Does Acts 15 Establish a Centralized Hierarchy Over Local Assemblies?*)

3. Wasn't Timothy the sole pastor in Ephesus?

Timothy was a member of an apostolic team of church planters who accompanied Paul on many of his missionary journeys (Acts 16:1-4; 18:5; 20:4). In certain circumstances, it was Paul's practice to leave members of his team at various assemblies to provide on-going oversight until such time as elders could be

appointed and become fully functional. This was the situation when Paul wrote his letters to Timothy and Titus. Although these men temporarily exercised certain apostolic authority as extensions of the founding apostolic-prophetic team, they were not the pastors, elders, or bishops of any particular assembly. This is why Paul rehearsed the qualities required for those who would be appointed as elders in his letters to both of these men. Their assignment was to identify and appoint elders so they could move on or rejoin Paul. The specific assignment given to Timothy by Paul was: Remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine (1 Timothy 1:3). The word charge means to convey a message (*Strong's* #G3853). There is nothing in this word to suggest that Timothy was wielding any sort of positional authority in the Ephesian assembly. His authority was limited to his temporary purpose.

4. Aren't the angels of the churches in Revelation pastors?

The salutation of the book of Revelation begins with these words: John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne... (1:4). This book was being sent to all the believers in all seven of the Asian churches and is said to be from both God and the seven Spirits who are before His throne. These seven spirits are seven angels, because angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation (Hebrews 1:14). In Revelation 4:5 John says that seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. In Revelation 8:2 John says, And I saw the seven angels who stand before God....

The reference to lamps of fire suggests that these angels were agents of divine revelation, charged with imparting the revelation of Jesus Christ to the churches of Asia. In Chapters 2 and 3, each angel is given an instruction. For example, Revelation 2:1 says, To the angel of the church of Ephesus write.... This is not a salutation to a person in Ephesus, but an instruction from the Lord Jesus to John to write down something for the angel. The phrase the angel of the church cannot refer to a single leader/pastor of the Ephesian church because Acts 20:17 says that Paul sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. The church in Ephesus was led by a group of men, not a single leader/pastor. In fact, the Lord commended this assembly because they hated the deeds of the Nicolaitans, who were leaders who sought to dominate the people of God.¹² There is no biblical basis for concluding that the angels of the seven churches of Asia are anything other than angels. (For a more detailed response to this objection, see our paper titled *The Angels of the Seven Churches*.)

5. I don't think a biblical eldership can work.

To attempt to establish a biblical doctrine based on a human perception of whether or not it will work is a prescription for error. The job of the student of the

Word is not to determine what will or will not work, but to determine what God has instructed us to do. In his rational mind, Moses may not have believed that stretching forth his rod would cause the Red Sea to open up. But his responsibility was not to pass judgment on God's Word; it was to obey it. Based on observation it would be easy to conclude that marriage doesn't work. But that observation alone is not sufficient to abandon marriage as a biblical principle. Those who have dismissed the concept of plural pastoral oversight on the basis that it cannot work should ask themselves *why* it cannot work. Why shouldn't five or six humble, godly men be able to seek the Lord together and come to a mutual agreement? Why shouldn't they be able to say, 'It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us...?'

6. Won't a biblical eldership weaken pastoral authority?

We should note that in the New Testament, authority is not connected to a title, position, or office, which are fixtures of the world's system. Unlike worldly authority, pastoral authority comes from God and exists whether anyone recognizes it and submits to it or not. In the apostolic church, authority is connected to the work that needs to be done and to the character and gifts of those doing the work. Hence, just as a shepherd has authority to lead and care for his sheep, those charged with shepherding a local assembly have authority to lead and care for the people. This is not because they hold an office and carry a title, but because they have the gifts and responsibility to shepherd the flock. When pastoral authority is invested in several men rather than one, it is not weakened but expanded, accruing many advantages to both the men serving as elders and the assembly as a whole.

7. Isn't an eldership just another form of hierarchy?

A hierarchy is a pyramidal system of oversight where the final authority rests in the hands of a single individual who occupies a place of prominence in the assembly. In a true biblical eldership, the one with final authority and the only one in the place of prominence is Jesus Christ. This is not just a theological concept but an operational reality. In an eldership, the elder-overseers are not the final authority, but are seekers together of the will of Him who has the final authority. By functioning as a collegial group, they are able to confirm to one another the will of God and protect the assembly from human error.

Advantages of Plural, Collegial Oversight

There are at least five significant advantages that a plural, collegial eldership brings to a local assembly:

1. Accountability

Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety (Proverbs 11:14).

No one, regardless of his level of spiritual maturity, can fully trust his own heart or judgment. We all need someone to watch over both our personal lives and the quality and priorities of our ministries. Those who shepherd others are not exempt from the need to be shepherded, and no one can be truly shepherded from a different assembly or a remote location. We only have to look at the number of men who have fallen into sin to know that this is true.

When leaders work together in accountable submission to one another, in an atmosphere where openness and honesty are cultivated and highly valued, any differences in doctrine, vision, or implementation that arise which could cause division will be faced and dealt with immediately. An inherent part of accountability is confrontation. Proverbs 27:5 says, "Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed." It is dangerous for any man to take on oversight responsibilities if he is not in open and honest relationship with brothers who love Him enough to tell him when he is wrong. God intended that Jonathan walk in covenant with David so that later he could sit beside him on the throne and speak into David's life to help keep him from error (1 Samuel 23:17). Jonathan's failure may have left open the door for David's subsequent failures as king.

A plural, collegial eldership brings up-close accountability to each man serving as an elder. This safeguard is a tremendous advantage for any local assembly and for the men serving in oversight.

2. Diversity

There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

No single individual can reveal Jesus Christ in the full array of His ministry. Jesus is the only man who operated in all the gifts of the Spirit and functioned in all the gifts of grace. Each of these gifts should be recognized and received as expressions of His ministry. For example, the labor of caring pastors expresses the Lord Jesus as the Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep. The ministry of anointed teachers expresses the Lord Jesus as the teacher come from God. The work of apostles expresses the work of Jesus as the Apostle and High Priest of our confession. This principle holds true for all other ministries in the local assembly, for all genuine ministry is ultimately the ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is the diversity of ministries in an eldership of gifted men that most fully

expresses the complete and perfect ministry of the Lord Jesus as Head of the Church. The result is a higher quality of oversight and a better ability to bring the believers to maturity and equip them for ministry, that the body of Christ may be edified. This is a wonderful advantage for any local assembly.

3. Character Development

“As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend”
(Proverbs 27:17).

Participation in a plural, collegial eldership requires a much higher degree of Christian character than serving as a solo leader. A single leader can hide his character flaws for a long time, but not so in a closely-connected team of elders. Over the course of time, many opportunities will arise for the Lord to work on the flaws in the hearts of those who walk in the bond of collegiality. In fact, an eldership simply cannot work without a deep bond of trust and commitment between the men involved.

Since all decisions must be arrived at through unanimous agreement under the Headship of Jesus, each elder must be willing to admit his errors and yield his personal opinions, preferences, and agendas to the prevailing wisdom of the group. This requires genuine humility. Decisions of the eldership ought to be confidently presented to the congregation in the spirit of the early Church, which wrote: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us...” (Acts 15:28).

This is not to say that an elder must always yield to the opinion of the majority. If he strongly believes his judgment best reflects the mind of the Lord, his dissent may be God’s way of keeping the elders from making a wrong decision. An elder must have the character to hold to his belief, not out of a stubborn refusal to yield, but out of integrity of heart. Elders are never expected to go along with the group solely for the sake of unity if it means compromising their own beliefs. This is a prescription for ultimate collapse.

More than any other character trait, humility will be required of those serving as elders. After God worked on Moses for forty years in the desert, he was declared to be the meekest, most humble man on earth. This humility was reflected in Moses’ statement, “But You have not let me know whom You will send with me” (Exodus 33:12). Apparently he had learned that he could not walk in leadership alone. He saw his need for other men to help him.

The ministry of an elder is a call to servanthood (Matthew 20:25-28). The issue is not how much authority an elder has, but how well others submit to it. The hierarchical pattern of church leadership is lording over rather than serving. This promotes a prideful attitude. The congregational pattern places the leader under the authority of the body rather than the Head. This tends to promote a timid and

obsequious attitude. Only a plural, collegial eldership encourages humility and servanthood while simultaneously preserving the Headship of Jesus in the local assembly. This is an important gift for a local assembly.

4. Proper Focus

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us? (Malachi 2:10).

When one man is at the head of a local assembly, there is a strong, nearly unavoidable, tendency for some to focus on him as the head of the church rather than Jesus. With a plural, collegial eldership, this tendency is greatly reduced. The Lord's leadership pattern prevents any one individual from becoming the dominant authority figure. This is extremely important in a world where many people are looking for a strong father figure. Jesus wants to personally fill this need; he does not want it filled by an isolated single leader.

This is not to say that it is always wrong for leaders to serve as father figures, but it must be kept in proper perspective. The church is told to look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, not to the pastor. Diffusing the paternal image among a group of men helps avoid the trap of making one man "Daddy" to the rest of the assembly, a common pride-inducing phenomenon.¹³ As Jesus cautioned, "Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven" (Matthew 23:9). Avoiding the Daddy-trap is a significant advantage for any local assembly.

5. Ministry Development and Continuity

And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2).

God's plan is that the local assembly serve as the seminary for preparing leaders. As the specific nature of a man's gifting becomes apparent, the elders should be there to encourage development of his gifts. This is how all of the gifts of grace can be expected to emerge over time. Those who demonstrate a clear gifting in oversight and meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 may be brought into the eldership. This will bring strength and continuity to the oversight ministry of the church, which is a great advantage for any local assembly.

By following these principles, an assembly is able to function as a dynamic spiritual organism and avoid digressing into stagnant organization. In a mature assembly there should be a continual flow of men into the ministry of deacons, some of whom will eventually serve as elders. Some elders may then develop into apostolic church-planting ministries.

There is no positional limitation on the number of ministries in a local church.

Growth is horizontal in numbers, not vertical through levels of authority. Ministry growth is limited only by the need to meet scriptural ministerial qualifications, not by vacancies or job opportunities. This idea points to a related advantage of a plural eldership: there is never a need to look for a new leader outside the local assembly. Under the traditional patterns, if the single leader falls into sin, resigns, retires, or dies, the local church must either search out or be assigned a new leader. Often a man comes in who is virtually unknown to the congregation and who is unfamiliar with the specific needs of the people and the overall spirit and ministry of the church. In this kind of situation, much time is often wasted while the new leader gets situated. And it is not uncommon for the members of an assembly to be very disappointed six months after the new leader takes over.

Furthermore, no assembly in the Bible ever chose by election its own leader or governing body. The Holy Spirit equipped certain men to serve as overseers and the apostles appointed them as elders. In the Bible, the selection and appointment of shepherds is never entrusted to an election of the sheep.

The Apostolic Elder-Overseers

If anyone knew how the Lord Jesus wanted the local assemblies of His body structured, it was Paul, the skilled architect (1 Corinthians 3:10). This man knew how to lay out the plans for a local assembly and raise it up in accord with those plans. Yet nowhere in the New Testament do we read of Paul assigning the ongoing pastoral leadership of an assembly to just one person.

In the salutation of his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons (v.1.1). He did not mention a pastor, a bishop, or any other single leader of that local assembly. What he did mention was two groups: the bishops and deacons. The NIV translates Paul's salutation: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. "

The words bishops (*ἐπίσκοποι*) and deacons (*διακονοί*) are both plural. There was one church in Philippi but more than one bishop and more than one deacon. The Bible does not tell us how many there were; only that there were more than one. Notice also that the bishops and deacons are described as being with the saints. According to *Strong's Dictionary*, the Greek word denotes union, togetherness, companionship, and resemblance (*sun*, 4862). The indication is that among the local body of believers (all the saints), there were some who were functioning as bishops (elder-overseers) and some who were functioning as deacons.¹⁴

Under the New Testament form of church structure, there is one body with no divisions (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). This includes no division between a so-called

clergy and laity. This does not mean there are no distinctions. But the distinctions are based entirely on function, not position or stature. As Paul wrote, "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function" (Romans 12:4). Nevertheless, in the body of Christ no one is positionally over anyone else. We are all brothers under one Master; we are all one in Christ Jesus (Matthew 23:8-19, Galatians 3:28).

The distinction of function means that there are some who are appointed to oversee (but not lord over) the assembly and others who are appointed to provide a wide range of service to the assembly. These are the elder-overseers and the deacons. But while these men are expected to discharge their duties with courage, strength, and diligence, in the end there is only one who is to be recognized and yielded to as the Head of the assembly, and that is Jesus Christ—that in all things He may have the preeminence (Colossians 1:18).

The New Testament elders were the pastoral overseers of the local assemblies, who exercised appropriate pastoral authority as a collegial group. Though some may disagree with this doctrine, none cannot refute it from the Scriptures. There is not a single biblical reference that contradicts the doctrine that the original New Testament assemblies were pastored by teams of mature, gifted, and biblically qualified men.

Endnotes:

1. Definitions of *presbyteros* and *zaqen* from Strong's Dictionary.
2. During their wandering in the wilderness and conquest of the Promised Land, Israel was led first by Moses and then by Joshua. The seventy elders and the other groups of elders served under the general direction and oversight of these men. Some have suggested that this pattern demonstrates that New Testament elders are to function under the authority of a single pastor. But I would submit that Moses, Joshua, and every other single leader of Israel served as a type of Jesus Christ in His various ministries as the Head of the Church. Like Moses, Jesus delivers us from bondage. Like Joshua, He leads us in triumph over our adversaries. Like David, He rules us as a benevolent King. Like Solomon, He teaches us the wisdom of God. The fact that Israel was led as a nation by single leaders only serves to emphasize the necessity of acknowledging Jesus as the ultimate authority and leader of every local assembly.
3. David K. Bernard, *A History of Christian Doctrine*, Vol. 1 (Hazelwood, MO: Word Aflame Press, 1995), p. 185; Alexander Strauch, *The New Testament Deacon* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publications, 1992), p. 44-45.
4. The Divine arrangement seen throughout the N.T. was for a plurality of [elders] to be appointed in each church (W.E. Vine).

5. I am not suggesting that the apostles replicated Israel's system of leadership in every detail in the local assemblies they planted. For example, in the Jewish synagogue system, each assembly had a single leader called the ruler of the synagogue, *archisynagogos* (Luke 8:49; 13:14; Acts 18:8,17). In the Church, the ruler of each assembly was Jesus Christ. Israel's elder system predated the synagogue system by many centuries. The primary similarity between the Old Testament system and the New Testament system is limited to the basic principle of leadership resting in the hands of a collegial group of mature, capable, and respected men.
6. In the Christian churches, those who, being raised up and qualified by the work of the Holy Spirit, were appointed to have the spiritual care of, and to exercise authority over, the churches. To these the terms bishops, *episkopoi*, or overseers, is applied (W.E. Vine).
7. The latter [*episkopoi*] indicating the nature of their work, *presbuteroi* their maturity of spiritual experience (W.E. Vine).
8. *Strong's* #3427. *yashab*, a prim. root; prop. to sit down (spec. as judge...). The elders of Israel are often pictured in the Old Testament as being together at the gate of the city. Rule was generally administered from a sitting position (Deuteronomy 22:15; Ruth 4:1-11; Lamentation 5:14). The twenty-four elders of Revelation are also pictured as being seated together (Revelation 4:4; 11:16).
9. *Webster's New World Dictionary*, Third College Edition. (Note: This dictionary offers the following as its first definition for the word "college": "An association of individuals having certain powers and duties, and engaged in some common pursuit. This is an excellent description of a collegial eldership.
10. C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), p.65.
11. In Hebrew, the number *sheba* (seven) comes from the root *shaba*, which means to be complete (*Strong's* #H7650). The root meaning of the number *eser* (ten) is an accumulation (*Strong's* #H6235). Seven tens (seventy) suggests the idea of a full or complete accumulation. In the Bible, seventy days completed the official period of mourning (Genesis 50:3); seventy years is presented as a complete lifetime (Psalms 90:10); seventy years completed Israel's captivity in Babylon (Jeremiah 25:11-12); seventy weeks were determined to complete God's plan for Israel (Daniel 9:24).
12. John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), p. 58.; Chris Foster, *Biblical Authority* (article in *The Apostolic Writers Digest*, November 1999); Jack DeHart, *So You Want to Serve* (Hazelwood, MO: General Home Missions Division, 1990), p. 34.
13. In 1 Corinthians 4:15 Paul wrote, "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Paul was not setting himself up as a daddy figure in this passage, but was rather reminding the people who had brought them the gospel, who had founded their assembly, and most importantly, who among their many instructors actually loved them like a father loves his own children.

14. When Polycarp wrote to the believers in Philippi around the middle of second century, he specified only two types of leaders: the deacons (*diakonoi*) and the elders (*presbuteroi*). He did not use the term bishops or overseers (*episkopoi*) as found in the salutation of Paul's epistle. This does not indicate that the Philippians had changed from bishop-leadership to elder-leadership, but that for all practical purposes, the terms bishop and elder were considered synonymous for the first 100 years of the Church. The writings of Ignatius are the earliest to make a distinction between bishops and elders (*Letter to the Trallians*, 3:1).

Note to the reader:

If you would like to comment on the contents of this paper, please contact us through our website at www.GloriousChurch.com. We welcome and appreciate all honest comments, questions, and criticisms.

Copyright © 2003 David Huston

ALL RIGHTS RESERVED. No part of this article may be reproduced or transmitted in any form or by any means, electronic or mechanical, including photocopying, recording, or by any information storage and retrieval system, without permission in writing from the publisher or author; **EXCEPT THAT PERMISSION IS GRANTED** to reprint all or part of this document for personal study and research provided that reprints are not offered for sale.

All Scripture references are from the New King James Version of the Bible, copyright 1990 by Thomas Nelson Inc., Nashville, TN, unless otherwise indicated.

Published by

Rosh Pinnah Publications

PO Box 337, Carlisle, PA 17013 717-249-2059

www.RoshPinnah.com RoshPinnah@aol.com

Rosh Pinnah means Chief Cornerstone in Hebrew.