



UNDERSTANDING BIBLICAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP

English	Greek	Definition
Elders	Πρεσβυτέρους (presbuterous)	elder
Pastor	ποιμένας (poimenas)	shepherd
Bishop	ἐπίσκοπον (episkoron)	a superintendent, an overseer
Overseer	ἐπίσκοπον (episkoron)	a superintendent, an overseer
Shepherd	ποιμένας (poimenas)	shepherd

Biblical Usage (non-Apostolic church leadership)

Pastor / Shepherd.....	never
Pastors / Shepherds (pl).....	1 time
Bishop / Overseer.....	3 times (office not person)
Overseers (pl).....	1 time
Elder.....	1 time (referencing rebuke)
Elders (pl).....	16 times (10 in the book of Acts)

Biblical Requirements (1Timothy 3:2-7, Titus 1:6-9)

WELL THOUGHT OF BY OUTSIDERS HOSPITABLE
NOT A DRUNKARD HUSBAND OF ONE WIFE
NOT A RECENT CONVERT
NOT QUARRELSOME RESPECTABLE
UPRIGHT ABLE TO TEACH HOLY
NOT A LOVER OF MONEY NOT ARROGANT
SELF-CONTROLLED NOT VIOLENT BUT GENTLE
MANAGE HIS OWN HOUSEHOLD WELL
ABOVE REPROACH SOBER-MINDED

Important Note: Scripture never refers to any non-apostolic church leader as a Pastor, Elder, Bishop, Overseer or Shepherd. Therefore, to point to any man in Scripture as an example of the “head pastor” is merely assumption.

What Scripture Says...

- Elders (plural) were appointed in every church (singular): Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5
- Elders (with the Apostles) made important decisions for the church: Acts 15:2-23; Acts 16:4
- Individual Apostles address elders of individual churches: Acts 20:17-38; 1 Peter 5:1-4
- Elders and their functions: 1 Timothy 5:17; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-11
- Other references to plurality of Elders: Acts 11:30; Acts 21:18; 1 Timothy 4:14

Couldn't these guys have been pastors?



James The Brother of Our Lord

James, the brother of Christ is often used as an example of a single pastor as he was a prominent figure in the church of Jerusalem, as seen in the following texts: Acts 12:17, Acts 15:13, Acts 21:18 & Galatians 2:9. While he is certainly shown as a prominent figure, this does not offer proof of a pastoral role. The Bible never gives him the title of pastor or bishop or elder. In fact, in Gal. 2:9, Paul equates James with John and Peter. James is noted to have given his opinion as a leader but is not the one who made decisions for the church... that was the Apostles & Elders (Acts 15:22-29). One last note, Paul equates James with the Apostles (not an Elder/Pastor) in Gal. 1:19.



Timothy The Bishop of Ephesus

Timothy is often regarded as the Pastor/Bishop of the church at Ephesus. Scripture does not give him this title nor does that title clearly explain his ministry. We see that Timothy was a fellow missionary/evangelist with Paul (Lystra, Berea, Corinth, Macedonia, Troas). Paul left Timothy in Ephesus, not to be their Pastor, but rather to fight false teaching (1 Tim. 1:3-7). This role was not as an Elder but rather as an authoritative extension of Paul the Apostle's ministry. Paul does not refer to him as an Elder/Pastor but rather urges him to follow the Biblical model of church planting by "entrust[ing what he has learned] to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2).



Epaphras at Colosse

Colossians 4:12 is usually given as the proof text for Epaphras being the pastor at Colosse. The phrases used are "who is one of you, a servant of Christ Jesus" and "struggling on your behalf in his prayers, that you may stand mature and fully assured in all the will of God." This would certainly be the heart of an Elder, however, it does not indicate that he holds that position. One thing to note is that in verse 13, Paul states that Epaphras is doing the same for those in Laodicea and in Hierapolis. When looking at the full context of that passage as well as the two others that mention Epaphras (Col. 1:17 & Philemon 1:23) we see that Epaphras was simply one of Paul's "fellow servants" who traveled with him in his ministry.



Epaphroditus at Philippi

The claim for Epaphroditus is similar to Epaphras which we find mentioned in Philippians 2:25-30. However, a clear reading of this passage shows that there is no mention of him as an Elder/Pastor. It states that he is from the city of Philippi, but more clearly that he was sent to work with Paul and minister to him. Philippians 4:18 makes this even more clear where it states that Paul "received from Epaphroditus the gifts you sent." Scripture makes nothing more of this man than that he was a messenger from the church to Paul. Paul is sending him back in this passage as a testimony of God's grace in healing Epaphroditus of a near-death sickness, nearly giving his life for the Gospel.



Titus at Crete

As with several others, Titus was a fellow servant with Paul, traveling with him and being sent by him to specific places for specific purposes. Scripture clearly places Titus in Jerusalem, Corinth, Philippi, Crete, Nicopolis, Rome & Dalmatia. We see again that Scripture does not give this man the title of Elder/Pastor, but rather he is portrayed as a Missionary/Evangelist with Paul. His time in Crete began as he worked with Paul. Paul left him (Titus 1:5-16) specifically to finish the job of solidifying the foundational teaching and appoint Elders in every town.



Biblical Benefits of Plurality, Equality & Unity

There are many scriptural commands as well as principles that strengthen the Scriptural basis for plurality, equality and unity of Elders as the leaders of the local church. This is not an exhaustive list but will provide a firm starting point to understanding the Scriptural basis & benefits of plurality, equality and unity of Elders.

EQUALITY

Christ spoke against the “leaders among the leaders” concept in Matthew 20:24-28. He reminded his faithful disciples (soon to be Apostles) that there was to be no one seeking to be “in charge” or “over” the others. In fact he compared them to the Gentiles for thinking in such a way. Christ specifically stated, “It shall not be so among you.” If Christ spoke against the natural desire of men to seek and claim leadership over their equals (even his inner circle), why then would we assume the exact opposite would be healthy for His church?

Paul also spoke against this in 1 Corinthians 1:10-17 and 3:1-9. Here we have prominent leaders in the church, including Paul himself, that the church was dividing over who to follow. Keep in mind that these men were all preaching the same Truth! Yet even in the early church we see the tendency to lift up specific men to follow. Paul instead calls them to remember who it is they should follow... Christ. Christ is the head of the church. When we lift up individuals as primary leaders, our natural tendency is to turn our focus from Christ to a man.

John called out a leader specifically in 3 John 1:9-10. Diotrephes was a leader in the church who was seeking to put himself first. He was apparently somewhat successful because he seems to have garnered enough authority to keep out those who sought to live according to the teachings of the Apostles. This is a drastic, but poignant reminder of what can happen to a man with sole authority over the local Church.

Finally, we have a recorded conversation between Paul and the Elders of Ephesus in Acts 20. Here we make note of a particular phrase in verse 30. Paul is warning them to watch over the flock to protect them from wolves and he even warns that wolves will rise from among their ranks and “[speak] twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them”. Not only is Paul warning of heresy, but also of pride as he exhorts them to keep watch even among themselves.

PLURALITY

That last passage (Acts 20:17-30) brings up another excellent principle for plurality of Elders. In verse 28 Paul tells the Elders to “pay careful attention to yourselves.” That word “yourselves” can also be translated “each other” or “one (to) another.” Paul is instructing these men not only to examine themselves but examine each other. There is a level of accountability when there is equality within plurality that you don’t find in a hierarchical structure. Plurality provides a natural opportunity for iron sharpening iron.

Another wonderful example of the benefits of plurality is the variety of spiritual gifts. In 1 Corinthians 12-14, we find that Christ through the Holy Spirit has endowed each believer, including Elders, with specific spiritual gifts to benefit the body. Most Pastors/Elders will admit that they are strong in one or several needed gifts,



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PLURALITY (continued)

yet weak in others. It makes sense that just as Christ has built his church with all the necessary gifts, He does so even within a plurality of Elders.

These varying gifts may manifest themselves in specific endeavours within the body. However, Scripture does not place any gifts above the others except “prophecy” or speaking God’s word (Acts 14). 1 Timothy 3:2 tells us that an Elder must be apt to teach, which is in keeping with the elevation of the prophetic gift. Diverse gifts of the Spirit not only help the body grow as a whole but they help the Elders fulfill all aspects of their role as shepherds and overseers in a way that one man with limited gifts cannot.

UNITY

Perhaps one of the most important principles for Elders in Scripture is the concept of unity. We see this exemplified in Acts 15. The Apostles and Elders heard that Paul was teaching that the law of Moses was not binding to the Gentile believers. Others were teaching the exact opposite. They (Apostles and Elders) were together in their decision about what to communicate and how to communicate it in order to ensure that the Gentile believers knew they were unified in their decision.

This unity does not mean that there were no differences of opinion. Acts 15:6 says that there was much debate. We have specific speakers noted in Peter, Paul and James but they were not the only ones who were given a voice. Just as God has gifted each Elder with necessary spiritual gifts, He has given each Elder a unique perspective and background from which to view the matters of the church.

Despite these varying differences, we see something interesting. The Apostles do not claim authority over the decision making, even though they are there. Instead, we see a decision reached that is delivered as unanimous. We have a hint of this in verse 25 where it states, “having come to one accord.” Now this is specifically about choosing men to go with Paul and Barnabas. However, the sentiment is clear... unity.

How does this happen even in such a large group? The reason is found in verse 28, “for it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us...” When Elders are constantly seeking the will of the Holy Spirit for the body of Christ, He will make it known. That is the key to unity in the body as well as a plurality of Elders.