

## Seeking to Apply God's Word to Our Lives

# Biblical Leadership and the Local Church

Note: Please read "The Authority and Sufficiency of God's Word" before reading this paper.

Biblical leadership is based upon the authority and sufficiency of God's Word. This paper seeks to explain biblical leadership in regards to its foundation, structure, responsibilities, and scope.

## The Foundation of Biblical Leadership

Biblical leadership is founded upon God having created a specific form of leadership for the local church:

### 1. God created the elder form of leadership:

Every believer is part of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). To provide form to the body of Christ, God created one institution called the local church (1 Corinthians 1:2; Galatians 1:2)<sup>1</sup> with an elder form of leadership (Titus 1:5; Philippians 1:1).<sup>2</sup>

### 2. The Holy Spirit appoints elders within each local church:

In Acts 20:28, Paul says to the elders in Ephesus, *"Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood."*

## The Structure of Biblical Leadership

The structure of biblical leadership is set forth in the Word of God and includes the following:

### • The plurality of elders with equal standing:

Local churches are to be led by a plurality of elders (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17). When an Apostle gave instructions to the leadership of a local church, all the elders were addressed equally (Acts 20:17-35; Philippians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:1-3). Therefore, elders are to have equal influence without rank.

### • The qualifications of elders:

The qualifications for elders are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. They require that an elder be above reproach, a one-wife husband, and a good manager of his household. Elders are to have faithful children who are under control and not accused of dissipation or rebellion. Elders are to be temperate, gentle, peaceable, sensible, respectable, and hospitable. They are to be just, prudent and devout. They are not to be addicted to wine, pugnacious, lovers of money, or a new convert. Elders are to be able to teach, to exhort in sound doctrine, and refute those who contradict.

### • The accountability of elders:

Elders are held accountable by fellow elders, the congregation, and Jesus Christ (1 Timothy 5:19-20; Hebrews 13:17). If an elder chooses to remain in sin after being confronted by two or three witnesses, he is to be rebuked in the presence of the congregation (1 Timothy 5:19-20).

### • The financial support for elders:

The congregation is to financially support their elders (1 Timothy 5:18). Elder who rule well are to be considered worthy of double support (1 Timothy 5:17). If the congregation is unable to support their elders, the elders must provide support for themselves (Acts 20:33-35).

## The Responsibilities of Biblical Leadership

The responsibilities of biblical leadership are assigned exclusively to elders within each local church:

### 1. Elders are to shepherd their congregation:

Only elders within each local church have been appointed to shepherd their congregation (1 Peter 5:2-3; Acts 20:28). The Bible uses several metaphors to describe how elders are to spiritually shepherd their flock. A shepherd feeds the flock (Ezekiel 34:2), cares for the sick (Ezekiel 34:4),

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<sup>1</sup> The local church is composed of only believers in Christ. In Ephesians 1:22-23, Paul writes, *"<sup>22</sup> And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, <sup>23</sup> which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all."* Local churches often have non-believers attending (children and adults), but they are not part of *"the church, which is His body."*

<sup>2</sup> There are several New Testament words used to denote biblical leadership. These terms are elder, overseer, and shepherd. The terms elder (*presbuteros*) and overseer (*episkopos*) are used interchangeably (Titus 1:5-7). The term shepherd is used to describe the elders' responsibility to shepherd (*poimaino*) their flock (Acts 20:28). All three terms, in noun or verb forms, are used to describe local church leadership in 1 Peter 5:1-2. For the remainder of this paper we will use the term "elder" or "elders" when referring to church leadership.

protects the flock (Ezekiel 34:8), and lays down his life for the flock (John 10:11). Jesus Christ is the “*Chief Shepherd*” over the elders who shepherd the flock among them (1 Peter 5:2-4).

**2. Elders are to oversee their congregation**

Only elders within each local church have been made overseers by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). In 1 Peter 5:2-3, the apostle writes that elders are to be, “*exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.*”

**3. Elders are to equip their congregation for the work of service:**

Only elders within each local church are given by Christ “*for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:11-12).<sup>3</sup> Elders are to enlist faithful men to assist in these teaching responsibilities (2 Timothy 2:2).

**4. Elders are to protect their congregation:**

Only elders within each local church are commanded to, “*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock*” (Acts 20:28). Attacks come from within and outside the congregation (Acts 20:29-30).

**5. Elders are to identify future leaders raised up by the Holy Spirit:**

Future elders are raised up by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28). Existing elders are to verify that the individual possesses the character qualifications and abilities required for eldership (1 Timothy 3:2-7; Titus 1:6-9). Once verified, the existing elders acknowledge the new elder through the laying on of their hands (1 Timothy 5:22).

**6. Elders are to remain committed to their flock:**

In John 10:11-13, Jesus describes the two types of individuals involved with caring for the flock of God, the hired hand and the good shepherd. When difficult times come, the hired hand flees because he is “*not concerned for the sheep*” (John 10:12-13). In contrast, the good shepherd “*lays down his life for the sheep*” (John 10:11). Elders are to “*shepherd the flock of God among you,*” continually exercising oversight (1 Peter 5:2).

### **The Scope of Biblical Leadership:**

The cultural practice of elders influencing other congregations contradicts God’s leadership principles involving: (1) The Holy Spirit’s appointment of elders within each local church to shepherd, oversee, and equip (Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11-12). (2) The elder’s responsibility to “*shepherd the flock among you,*” and be example to those “*allotted to your charge*” (1 Peter 5:2-3). (3) The personal accountability of elders to their fellow elders and congregation (1 Timothy 5:19-20). (4) Elders keeping watch over the souls of their congregation as those who will give an account to God (Hebrews 13:17). The only other individuals that once had authority to influence believers in multiple churches were the apostles, prophets, evangelists, and those under the apostle’s authority (Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; Titus 3:12). Once the era of the apostles, prophets, and evangelists ended (Ephesians 2:20), this practice ceased.

### **Conclusion:**

Biblical leadership is founded upon God having created the elder form of leadership, and the Holy Spirit’s appointment of elders within each local church. The structure of biblical leadership includes a plurality of elders with equal standing, qualifications, accountability, and financial support. The responsibilities of biblical leadership are exclusive. They include shepherding, overseeing, equipping, and protecting their congregation. The scope of biblical leadership prohibits elders from one church influencing the congregations of other local churches.

“Seeking to Apply God’s Word to Our Lives” papers represent an overview of various Bible doctrines. Each paper contains biblical truths that often set TVBC apart from other churches and religious organizations. We invite the congregation’s biblically based feedback as we seek to accurately handle the Word of God.

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<sup>3</sup> God appointed only four groups of men for the equipping of the body of Christ. Ephesians 4:11-12 reads, “*And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.*” Apostles and prophets were provisional, being the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Evangelists played a limited role in the early church (see the paper entitled “Evangelism”). The Greek phrase for “*pastors and teachers*” is literally translated “*shepherd-teachers.*” Since only elders are instructed to “*shepherd*” a congregation (1 Peter 5:1-2; Acts 20:28) and one of the qualifications for elders is that they are “*able to teach*” (1 Timothy 3:2), “*pastors and teachers*” denotes elders. Amongst these four groups of men, only elders within each local church exist today.