

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

# Biblical Leadership and the Local Church

In order to understand the significance of biblical leadership, we must first understand the relationship between the local church and the body of Christ. Every believer is part of the body of Christ (1 Corinthians 12:27). To provide form to the body of Christ, God created the local church and specific leadership principles. In this paper, these leadership principles are defined as the authority, structure, and responsibilities of biblical leadership.<sup>1</sup>

### The Authority of Biblical Leadership

The authority of biblical leadership is not based upon a person's subjective experience, but upon the authority of God's Word. For this reason, the elders' authority is based upon three biblical mandates:

1. The Holy Spirit has placed elders in their position as overseers of the flock (Acts 20:17, 28).
2. Elders are commanded to “*shepherd the flock of God among them*” (1 Peter 5:2; Acts 20:28).
3. Christ gave elders “*for the equipping of the saints for the work of service*” (Ephesians 4:11-12).<sup>2</sup>

### The Structure of Biblical Leadership

The structure of biblical leadership is set forth in the Word of God and can be described as follows:

- **The plurality of elders with equal standing:**  
Local churches are to be led by a plurality of elders (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17). In each occasion in which 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. These qualifications require that an elder be above reproach, a one-wife husband, and a good manager of his household. They 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, devout, and prudent. They are not to be addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not lovers of money, and not 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). Elders 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 be willing to provide for themselves while continuing to shepherd the flock.

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<sup>1</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.

<sup>2</sup> Elders were given by Christ “*for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:12). Apostles and prophets were provisional, being the foundation of the church (Ephesians 2:20). Evangelists played a limited role in the early church (for further discussion see the paper entitled “Evangelism”). The Greek phrase for “*pastors and teachers*” is literally translated “shepherds-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.

## The Responsibilities of Biblical Leadership

The responsibilities of biblical leadership can be described as follows:

**1. Elders are to shepherd the congregation:**

Elders are commanded to “*shepherd the flock of God among you.*” (1 Peter 5:2).

**2. Elders are to oversee the congregation allotted to their charge:**

Elders are to watch over the flock voluntarily with eagerness. They are not to lord it over those allotted to their charge, but they are to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3).

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

Elders were given by Christ “*for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ*” (Ephesians 4:12). Since elders are to “*shepherd the flock of God among them*” (1 Peter 5:2), and oversee the flock “*allotted to your charge*” (1 Peter 5:2-3), this equipping is limited to the flock in which the Holy Spirit has made them overseers (Acts 20:28).<sup>3</sup>

**4. Elders are to protect the flock:**

In Acts 20:28, elders are commanded to “*Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock.*” Paul then explained that attacks upon a congregation would come from outside and within the local church (Acts 20:29-30).

**5. Elders are to devote themselves to prayer:**

Elders are to continually devote themselves to praying for the congregation (Colossians 1:9-12; 2 Thessalonians 1:11-12).

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

Elders are to identify individuals raised up by the Holy Spirit for eldership (Acts 20:28). The elders are to verify that the individuals possess the character qualifications and abilities required for eldership (1 Timothy 3:2-7, 10; Titus 1:6-9; 1 Peter 5:2-3). Once approved, the existing elders acknowledge the new elders through the laying on of their hands (1 Timothy 5:22).

**7. 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).

**8. Elders are involved with establishing new churches:**

Each local church is to be led by a plurality of elders (Titus 1:5; Acts 20:17). These elders are raised up by the Holy Spirit to shepherd, oversee, and equip the flock (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2-3; Ephesians 4:11). Existing elders recognize individuals raised up by the Holy Spirit (Acts 20:28), verify their character qualifications and abilities (1 Timothy 3:2-7, 10; Titus 1:6-9), and acknowledge the new elders by the laying on of hands (1 Timothy 5:22). When God desires to create another local church, He will use these biblical principles to establish the leadership of a new congregation.

## Conclusion:

God created the local church to provide leadership and structure for the body of Christ. Within the local church, God created specific leadership principles that include authority, structure, and responsibilities. The elders’ authority is limited to the flock over which they have been given charge.

“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> Nowhere in the New Testament do you find elders having the authority to shepherd, oversee, or equip members of other flocks. This practice would invalidate God’s leadership principles involving: (1) The Holy Spirit’s appointment of elders within each local church to shepherd and oversee the flock (Acts 20:28). (2) God’s command for elders to shepherd the flock “*among you*” (1 Peter 5:2). (3) The personal accountability of elders by fellow elders and the congregation (1 Timothy 5:19-20). The only individuals that once had authority to shepherd, oversee, and equip 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, this practice ceased.