

## 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.

In order to understand the significance of biblical leadership, we must first understand the relationship between the terms "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 local churches and specific leadership principles.<sup>1</sup> In this paper, these leadership principles are defined as the authority, structure, and responsibilities of biblical leadership.<sup>2</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>3</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> 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.

<sup>3</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 5:2-3). The Bible uses several metaphors to describe how shepherds are to shepherd their flock. A shepherd feeds the flock (Ezekiel 34:23), protects the flock (Ezekiel 34:8), cares for the sick (Zechariah 11:16), searches for the lost (Luke 15:4), and lays down his life when needed (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 the congregation:**

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;*” (1 Peter 5:2b).

**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 4:11-12).

**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.*” Attacks can come from within the flock and outside the flock (Acts 20:29-30).

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

Elders are to continually pray 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 qualifications (1 Timothy 3:2-7, 10; Titus 1:6-9). They 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.

## 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). (2) God’s command for elders to “*shepherd the flock among you*” (1 Peter 5:2a). (3) The personal accountability of elders by fellow elders and the congregation they shepherd (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 individuals that once had authority to influence believers in multiple churches were the apostles, prophets, and those under the apostle’s authority (Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Thessalonians 3:2; Titus 3:12). Once the era of the apostles and prophets ended (Ephesians 2:20), this practice ceased.

## 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.

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