

Part One - 1

Restoring Pastoral Eldership - One

Defending and Defining New Testament, Christian Eldership

BE Presenters: Part One is divided into two separate messages. This is the first.

Introduction

These two messages will define and defend the New Testament, Christian doctrine of Pastoral Eldership. Let's begin with Paul's instruction to Titus concerning elders:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you — if anyone is above reproach.... (Titus 1:5-6).

Paul was interested in the subject of elders. He would have loved to be your speaker at this conference. He can't be here, but he left us a written record of his instructions. That is just as good as having Paul with us. Part of Paul's strategy in dealing with churches is letter writing. He would have to leave, but the letter would remain as a permanent record of his teaching.

Eldership is part of the New Testament instruction for a church. And a church without qualified elders is deficient.

Let's begin, however, with the problem.

A. The Problem: The Loss of the New Testament Teaching on Eldership

First, let me share with you the burden that God placed on the heart of Alex Strauch, author of [Biblical Eldership](#) and [The New Testament Deacon](#), about 40 years ago. Around 1970 Alex became aware of the utter confusion over the doctrine of elders and deacons. He was disturbed by the disregard for the biblical claims regarding these offices. While in seminary, he found that the professor of church polity was unable to support the practice of clerical orders with Scripture. After one class, Alex asked the professor: What about all the Scripture texts on the plurality of elders? The professor said that these texts meant nothing. He accused Alex of proof-texting. But Alex was left with a lingering doubt: What about all the non-existing texts on the Reverend clergymen?

Several years later, as Alex prepared a series of sermons on the doctrine of the Church, he was shocked to find that there were no books on elders from a biblical, expositional point of view and to realize that the books on deacons were nearly worthless. They didn't interact with Scripture or expound Scripture at all. What he did find were some booklets and tracts that explained specific denominational practices. This ignited a fire in Alex's heart to write on this subject from an expositional viewpoint and let the Scriptures do the explaining. He wanted the book to expound every passage on elders, honestly and accurately. He decided he would willingly follow wherever the evidence led.

Now, of course, many churches have some form of eldership. They believe in eldership because it is in the Bible. But they don't have pastoral eldership, or Biblical Eldership. They have eldership, but not authentic New Testament eldership. Their concept of eldership is what we call "board eldership." Elders are temporary advisors, administrators, finance men, policy makers, and fund raisers. The contemporary, church-board concept of eldership is at odds with the New Testament concept of eldership.

Illustration: Ask the average Christian in our mainline evangelical churches who an elder is and what an elder does. Most will respond with descriptions of an elder as a layman, a board member of the church.

In reality, tradition and familiarity govern our concepts of eldership, not the Scripture. And it is difficult to break through tradition.

B. **The Solution: Return to New Testament Teaching—Restoration, Recovery, and Reformation**

What we need is a fresh recovery of the New Testament, Christian teaching on eldership. It should not surprise us that we have to recover a lost doctrine. History (including the entire Old Testament story) shows that every doctrine has been subject to loss and confusion, and has had a need for restoration and clarification. Note Galatians 1:6.

Illustration: For example, it is only in the last hundred years that the doctrine of the Holy Spirit and spiritual gifts, and the idea that every member is gifted to serve have been restored to the church.

Reformation, restoration, and revival are continuous works in the church. Doctrines are lost or distorted and need restoration. Listen to the following quotations regarding the need for continual reformation of church doctrine and life:

"In every generation, we need an enlightened purification of our traditions" (Dr. S. L. Johnson, former professor at Dallas Theological Seminary).

The cry of the 17th century teachers and reformers was: Semper Reformanda: "always being reformed." Churches always need to face reformation and revival.

Listen to this marvelous quote by John Robinson addressed to the Pilgrim Fathers setting out for the new world: "I am absolutely convinced that the Lord has other truths to impart to us through His Holy Word. Personally, I cannot sufficiently deplore the condition of these reformed churches which have acquired a certain degree of religion, but which do not wish to go beyond their reformation. The Lutherans can see only what Luther saw; they would die rather than accept a certain aspect of the truth revealed to Calvin. As for the Calvinists, they cling to the heritage left them by that great man of God, who, nevertheless, did not know everything. It is deplorable poverty, for even if these men in their time were lamps who burned and gave light in the darkness, they had not yet entered into all the counsel of God. If they were living in our day, they would be ready to embrace a light which was more intense than the one which at first enlightened them" (Found in Alfred Kuen, *I Will Build My Church*).

Merle d'Aubigne, a famous French historian writes: "As we advance through the centuries, light and life begin to decrease in the Church. Why? Because the torch of the Scripture begins to grow dim and because the deceitful light of human authorities begins to replace it."

"The life of the church depends on one thing: her return to biblical principles" (Otto Riecher).

"The churches established by the apostles remain the valid models for churches of all times and places" (Alfred Kuen, *I Will Build My Church*, Moody Press).

BE PRESENTERS: This is what we are about: reformation and recovery of lost biblical truth. The answer is always the same: return to the source, the fountainhead of all truth and practice, the Bible. We are reformers and revivalists. I hope you see yourself that way.

Alfred Kuen is correct. We must return to the Bible and to the practice of the apostles. Thus, everything said in these next two messages is built upon the Bible as our authority. Biblical eldership cannot be recovered if we do not have absolute confidence that "all Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be competent, equipped of every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16-17).

BE PRESENTERS: Talk for a moment about the authority of Scripture for the believer and the believing community. Explain the importance of 2 Tim. 3:16-17. Everything we need for Christian life and local church is in Scripture. Be careful of getting sidetracked and spending too much time here. This is a whole message in itself. Most of the people you will talk to already believe in the authority of Scripture.

Remember also that not only is the Scripture our authority for defining biblical eldership, but the Scriptures must be correctly interpreted. 2 Timothy 2:15 says, "do your best to present yourself to God as one approved, a worker who has no need to be ashamed, rightly handling the Word of Truth." The Bible is our authority and we will work diligently, with the help of the Holy Spirit, to correctly interpret it. I believe biblical eldership is correctly representing the biblical teaching.

I. The NT Teaches and Models Both Plurality of Elders and the Pastoral Nature of Eldership

A. The Old Testament Witnessed to Government by the Plurality of Elders

Eldership is not something new that was invented in the last few decades. God's people have always had their council of elders: This is witnessed in passages from Exodus 3:16 to the books of James and Revelation. So this is nothing new; indeed, it is the background to the New Testament. One of the most powerful tools we own is our Bible concordance. If you will use your Bible concordance, you will see that eldership is no new topic. The problem is that our modern traditions have blinded our eyes to what the Scripture says.

B. Jesus Christ Established Plurality of Leadership for His Church

It is a very interesting fact that Jesus Christ did not appoint one man to be the head of the Church or a church. Our Lord appointed twelve apostles, not one apostle with eleven advisers. In point of fact, Jesus Christ never trained any man alone or appointed one man head of His Church. He dedicated Himself to training a team of men who would eventually have to work together as a leadership body.

But this is not the end of the story. He appointed twelve as a counsel to be the first leadership body of his church, yet within the apostolic team, Peter, James, and John stand out among their colleagues as exceptional leaders, and especially Peter as the chief speaker of the apostolic body. Peter, James, and John were first among equals.

We call this teaching first among equals; this is our way of explaining what our Lord did. Peter was not the head apostle but he was a leader among the apostles and there is a big difference. Jesus had to remind them many times that they are brethren and they are not clergy. They were not to fight over preeminent positions or rank themselves. They were to serve one another as brethren. Yet, this did not eliminate distinction and giftedness and abilities. They were not 12 equal looking long stemmed roses. They were a bouquet. Each was different.

So Jesus Christ our Lord gave the church its first leadership body a counsel of twelve men. This is what we observe in the Book of Acts. The first leadership body was the twelve apostles.

C. The New Testament Established Pastoral Eldership by the Plurality of Elders

In its major features, pastoral oversight for the local church by the plurality of elders is plainly and amply set forth by the New Testament writers. There is a consistent pattern of eldership in the New Testament.

In fact, the New Testament offers more instruction regarding elders than it does regarding such important church subjects such as the Lord's Supper, the Lord's Day, baptism, and spiritual gifts.

1. Examples of Eldership

Consider the consistent example of plural leadership by elders that existed among the first Christian churches. These local churches were spread over a wide geographical and culturally diverse area from Jerusalem to Rome.

- Elders are found in churches of Judea & surrounding area (Acts 11:30; James 5:14, 15).
- Elders governed the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15, 21).
- Among the Pauline churches, leadership by the plurality of elders was established in the churches in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:20-23); in the church in Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 3:1-7; 5:17-25); in the church in Philippi (Phil. 1:1); and in the churches on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5).
- According to the well-traveled letter of 1 Peter, elders existed in churches throughout Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1).
- There are strong indications that elders existed in churches in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:12) and Rome (Heb. 13:17).

2. Instruction About Elders

Not only does the New Testament provide examples of elder-led churches, it includes explicit instructions to churches about how to call on, support, protect, discipline, restore, select, and call the elders. The apostles intended these instructions to be obeyed, and they should be regarded as normative teaching for all Christian churches at all times.

- James instructs those who are sick to call for the elders of the church (James 5:14).
- Paul instructs the Ephesian church to financially support elders who labor “at preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17-18).
- Paul instructs the local church about protecting elders from false accusation, disciplining elders who sin, and restoring fallen elders (1 Tim. 5:19-22).
- Paul instructs the church regarding the proper qualifications for eldership (1 Tim. 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).
- To the church in Ephesus, Paul states that anyone who desires to be an elder desires a “fine work” (1 Tim. 3:1).
- Paul instructs the church to examine the qualifications of prospective elders (1 Tim. 3:10; 5:24, 25).
- Peter instructs the young men of the church to submit to church elders (1 Peter 5:5).
- Paul teaches that elders are the household stewards, leaders, instructors, and teachers of the local church (Titus 1:7, 9; 1 Thess. 5:12).

3. Instruction and Exhortation to Elders

Besides giving instruction to churches about elders, Paul, Peter, and James directly instruct elders to pastor and oversee the local church: The passages are Acts 20:28 & 1 Peter 5:1-2.

BE PRESENTERS: Read both of these passages slowly with brief comments to the audience. They are the two pillar passages. Comment on the word elders in the plural and the terms overseer and shepherd.

- James tells elders to pray for the sick, anoint them with oil in the name of the Lord (James 5:14).
- Peter directly charges elders to willingly pastor, oversee the local congregation (1 Peter 5:1, 2).
- Peter warns elders not to be too domineering (1 Peter 5:3).
- Peter promises elders that when the Lord returns they will receive “the unfading crown of glory” (1 Peter 5:4).
- Peter exhorts elders to be clothed in humility (1 Peter 5:5).
- Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit placed them in the church to be overseers and pastor the church of God (Acts 20:28).
- Paul exhorts elders to guard the church from false teachers (Acts 20:28) and to be alert to the constant threat of false doctrine (Acts 20:31).
- Paul reminds elders to work hard, help the needy, and be generous like the Lord Jesus Christ (Acts 20:35).

4. Deficiency of A Church without Eldership

One more important point: Paul viewed a local church without qualified, recognized elders as deficient (Titus 1:5).

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order [to set right] what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you (Titus 1:5 NASB).

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remains into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.... (Titus 1:5 ESV).

Paul viewed a church without qualified, publicly recognized elders as lacking something important. At the beginning of Paul's church planting ministry, He and Barnabas appointed elders for their newly planted churches Acts 14:23:

When they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Now at the end of his ministry he is still concerned about the public appointment of elders. Here Paul writes, "set in order," that means, "set right what is lacking and appoint elders in every city as I directed you."

Right order in the church requires the appointment of biblically qualified elders. I. Howard Marshall makes this comment on the term "set in order" or "to set right:"

The term may thus express...the idea of authority to act (to make appropriate and needed reforms) such as might be given to lawmakers or by an apostle to his delegate (The Pastoral Apostils, p. 151).

A properly constituted local church has qualified functioning local elders, or it is deficient. Things need to be set right in the church. Here we see that Paul considered elders important to the spiritual welfare of the local assembly. I hope you do too. If your assembly doesn't have elders, you need to set things right.

In summary, a church needs elders because the Bible says so. No more needs to be said. In the next message, I will define pastoral eldership, but let me first make one more point about the importance of eldership.

5. Eldership Promotes the True Nature of the Church

The local church's structure of government makes a profound statement about the nature of the local church and its philosophy of ministry. The local church is not an undefined mass of people; it is a particular group of people that has a unique character, mission, and purpose. I am convinced that the elder structure of government best harmonizes with and promotes the true nature of the local church as revealed in the New Testament. We will consider four ways in which the elder structure of government complements the nature and theology of the local church.

a) The Church Is a Close-knit Family of Brothers and Sisters

Of the different New Testament terms used to describe the nature of the church--the body, the bride, the temple, the flock--the one most frequently used is the family, particularly the fraternal aspect of the family--brothers and sisters. The local Christian church, then, is to be a close-knit family of brothers and sisters.

BE PRESENTERS: At this point, read 1 Timothy 3:15 to the audience.

In complete obedience to Christ's teaching on humility and brotherhood, the first Christians resisted special titles, sacred clothing, chief seats, and lordly terminology to highlight their community leaders.

They also chose an appropriate leadership structure for their local congregations: leadership by a council of elders. The first Christians found within their biblical heritage a structure of government that was compatible with their new, spiritual family and their theological beliefs. Israel was a great family, composed of many individual families.

The elder structure of government suits an extended family organization like the local church. It allows any brother in the community who desires it and qualifies for it to share fully in the leadership of the community.

b) The Church Is a Humble-Servant Community

I am convinced that one reason the apostles chose the elder system of government was because it enhanced the loving, humble-servant character of the Christian family.

The New Testament offers a consistent example of shared leadership as the ideal structure of leadership in a congregation where love, humility, and servanthood are paramount. When it functions properly, shared leadership requires a greater exercise of humble servanthood than does unitary leadership. In order for an eldership to operate effectively, the elders must show mutual regard for one another, submit themselves one to another, patiently wait upon one another, genuinely consider one another's interests and perspectives, and defer to one another. Eldership, then, enhances brotherly love, humility, mutuality, patience, and loving interdependence—qualities that are to mark the servant church.

c) The Church Is Under Christ's Headship

Most importantly, biblical eldership guards and promotes the preeminence and position of Christ over the local church. Jesus left His disciples with the precious promise that "where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst" (Matt. 18:20). Because the apostles knew that Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, was uniquely present with them as Ruler, Head, Lord, Pastor, Master, Overseer, High Priest, and King, they were guided to a form of government that

reflected this distinctive, fundamental, Christian truth. This truth was not a theoretical idea to the early Christians--it was reality.

So, during the first century no Christian would have dared to take the position or title of sole ruler, overseer, or pastor of the church. We Christians today, however, are so accustomed to speaking of "the pastor" that we do not stop to realize that the New Testament does not.

To symbolize the reality of Christ's leadership and presence over the local church and its leaders, one church places an empty chair at the table next to the chairman during all elders' meetings. This is a visual reminder to the elders of Christ's presence and lordship, of their position as His undershepherds, and of their dependence on Him through prayer and the Word.

d) Eldership Promotes the Protection and Sanctification of Spiritual Leaders

We come now to two extremely significant reasons for and benefits of pastoral leadership by a council of qualified elders. First, the shared leadership structure of eldership provides necessary accountability protection from the particular sins that plague spiritual leaders. In turn, this protects the spiritual character of the local church and the testimony of the Lord's name.

Second, the eldership structure provides peer relationships to help balance elders' weaknesses and correct their character, an essential component in the sanctification process of spiritual leaders.

1) Leadership Accountability

English historian Lord Acton said, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." Because of our biblical beliefs in the dreadful realities of sin, the curse, Satan, and human depravity, we should understand well why people in positions of power are easily corrupted. In fact, the better we understand the exceeding sinfulness and deceitfulness of sin, the stronger our commitment to accountability will be. The collective leadership of a biblical eldership provides a formal structure for genuine accountability.

Shared, brotherly leadership provides needed restraint concerning such sins as pride, greed, and "playing god."

It was never our Lord's will for one individual to control the local church. The concept of the pastor as the lonely, trained professional--the sacred person presiding over the church who can never really become a part of the congregation--is utterly unscriptural. Not only is this concept unscriptural, it is psychologically and spiritually unhealthy.

2) Peer Relationships

Men who have served as elders attest that they deeply enjoy the fellowship of sharing the pastoral leadership of a church with a team of dedicated pastor

elders. As partners in the work of shepherding God's precious, blood-bought people, elders sharpen, balance, comfort, protect, and strengthen one another through nearly every conceivable life situation. I do not hesitate to say that the relationship with my fellow elders has been the most important tool God has used, outside of my marriage relationship, for the spiritual development of my Christian character, leadership abilities, and teaching ministry. The eldership has played a major role in the sanctification process of my Christian life.

I believe that traditional, single-church pastors would improve their character and ministry if they had genuine peers to whom they were regularly accountable and with whom they worked jointly.