

Church Leadership

Intro:

Having spent a significant amount of time on the regenerate and new covenantal nature of Christ's church, we now move on to the structure of that church, especially with regards to what the Bible teaches about the leadership of local churches.

Though we will endeavor to unpack this at length, we might say that, simply stated, **the NT clearly teaches that each local church is to be led by a plurality of qualified elders and deacons.**

What about apostles, prophets, and evangelists?

There are some current traditions within evangelicalism that believe that these original offices are still in operation today. For example, many charismatic churches make much of and strongly emphasize what is called the "fourfold ministry" of Ephesians 4. Accordingly, or so they assert, churches are unhealthy – even unbiblical – if they do not have active apostles and prophets "operating" in the sphere of their "prophetic ministry."

At first glance, their argument is fair, and many whom I have come across are sincerely just trying to follow what the Bible seems to clearly say.

But as I have often said to others, sometimes what the Bible "says" is not always what the Bible "means." This is why we must always stress the importance of cultivating a good, biblical *hermeneutic* – that is, a system of interpretation that helps us understand what the original authors of the Bible were seeking to convey and teach.

So let's look at the data:

Ephesians 4:11-15 – "And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelist, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the

stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

Here, Paul is building upon his argument of the necessity of all the parts of Christ’s body – here exemplified by the local church in Ephesus – working together in order for the inward edification (4:16) and outward expansion of Christ’s kingdom to the ends of the earth (cf. 1:22-23),¹ to the praise and glory of God the Father (3:21).

The emphasis in these giftings within the church is clear: these four offices have to do with the ministry of the Word of God.

Though it seems simplest to just assume that all four offices are still operating today, this seems to contravene Paul’s earlier teaching in 2:20-21, where he says that “the household of God” has been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

- The tense of the participle “having been built” is important to note. Though the aorist often just denotes an action, there are times in the NT where the aorist functions as a “once-for-all” aorist, which the context seems to favor here.
 - Put simply, when one is converted through faith in the apostolic gospel (cf. 1:13), they are “added” to the already-laid foundation. That is, just as the cornerstone – Christ’s once-for-all death and resurrection – no longer needs to be laid, neither does the foundation that the apostles and prophets – the apostolic gospel revealed exclusively to them and recorded for us in the NT – need to be laid again.
 - ➔ Just as any civil engineer knows, one foundation is enough. In fact, to attempt to lay another foundation in the same “house” is dangerous.

¹¹ There is an important corollary between 4:10 and 1:23 which helps us better understand the necessity of Christ “filling” His church with teachers of the Word and these “word-filled” churches then multiplying and “filling” the world with Christ’s resurrection/reigning presence.

However, though Paul is clearly teaching that foundation of Christ's new covenant house – the church – has been laid once-for-all, the NT nevertheless teaches that there is still *ongoing* construction *upon* that foundation and *within* that house.

- This is the purpose for, and the ongoing, essential ministry of, these new covenant gifts: the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.
 - This new covenant revelation, which has been given by Christ to His *universal* church through the apostles and prophets, must nevertheless be spread and taught to His *local* churches.

Thus, with the completion of the NT canon, further revelation from prophets and apostles is no longer necessary. In fact, it's dangerous, as we see in the whole Corinthian debacle.

This is why, after Paul, there are no more mentions of “new apostles” in the NT:

- In 1 Corinthians 15:8-9, Paul says that he is not only the “least” of the apostles, he is also the “last” of the apostles.²

This is also why, after Acts 9, there are no more records in Scripture of the church needing to anoint and appoint more apostles:

- In Acts 1, Matthias is appointed an apostle to fill the void left by Judas. The number 12 is important here, as these apostles become the “new Israel” whom the Lord will use to spread His glory to the ends of the earth (cf. Exo. 19:6).
- After the death of the apostle James in Acts 12, there is no mention of appointing another apostle.

² The argument could be made that “last of all” refers to Paul's final point of his argument, the way a lawyer would conclude with his final remarks or evidence before the jury. Though possible, it seems unlikely in the context. In v.5, Paul is talking specifically about *apostles*. Then, in v.7, he clearly says that the resurrected Christ “appeared to James, then to all the apostles.” Paul is defending his *apostolic* ministry in Corinth, for his opponents, claiming to be “super-apostles,” were seeking to undermine Paul's gospel by undermining his apostleship. Paul simply says that they are neither super nor apostles, for not only is their gospel cross-less, but that he is the last of the apostles, which means that, despite all their claims, they are not – cannot be – apostles.

- In fact, by the time we get to Acts 15, we already see the massive structural change taking place, as the elders of the Jerusalem church are as authoritative as the apostles when it comes to the decisions being made concerning the church and how Gentiles were to fit into it.
- Most importantly, we see in Paul’s letters, there is no mention of greeting other apostles within each local church, but rather “the elders and deacons” (e.g. Philippians 1:1).
- Moreover, in the NT letters, there are no instructions for, or with regard to, apostles or prophets; but there are plenty of instructions for, say, pastors of the local churches:
 - The qualifications for local church leadership are not given to apostles or prophets, but elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-16, Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5).
 - Timothy is to not do the work of an apostle or prophet, but that of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).³
 - Members of the church are told not to submit to the apostles of local churches, but the leaders (Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).⁴
 - Paul does not appoint or instruct more apostles or prophets in the church at Ephesus, but rather its elders (Acts 20:17).

So, though it may appear at first glance that the church needs functioning apostles and prophets,⁵ the evidence of the NT seems to be overwhelmingly against this notion.

³ There is debate as to whether the office of “evangelist” is still in existence today. It doesn’t get as much “press” as the offices of apostle and prophet. Those who argue that it has ceased appeal to the fact that there are no instructions given in the NT for who is qualified for this office, and what exactly this office “looks like.” Others say that it is still in existence, for it is not a “foundational” office, but, like the office of “pastor/teacher,” a necessary office in the planting and building up of local churches.

⁴ It seems that Paul is referring to some form of recognized leadership as well in 1 Corinthians 16:16.

⁵ In addition to Ephesians 4:11, proponents of a continuing apostolic and prophetic ministry in the local church appeal to 1 Corinthians 12:27-28. But the same arguments enumerated above apply. Just because “apostles” are “first”, that does not mean that they have not ceased. They are “first” in the sense that Christ “gave” them to the church to establish its foundation on apostolic revelation, which has been completed in the NT Scriptures. Thus,

Biblical Eldership

Since the church, as “the household of the living God,” is “the pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), it only makes sense that the leadership of such a household is held to the strictest of standards (3:1-13). God is so jealous and concerned for His household that He goes out of His way to make sure its stewards meet His standards.⁶

Before we look at such qualifications for elders, we need to first understand that the words “elder,” “pastor/shepherd,” and “overseer” all refer to the same “office” and are thus interchangeable.⁷

- Thus, as elders, Nathan and Marvin are just as much a “pastor/shepherd” or “overseer” as Ryan.

God gives these various titles to better picture the roles that these men play in God’s household, the local church.

- “Elder” (*πρεσβύτερος, presbuteros*) connotes wisdom, maturity, prudence, discernment, and knowledge. Though not restricted to one’s number of years, the Bible – both old and new testaments – warns of leaders who are young men and not adequately instructed in life.
- “Pastor/shepherd” (*ποιμήν, poimēn*) emphasizes that such men will lead Christ’s sheep as a gentle, loving, nurturing, serving, and sacrificial shepherd. Pastors are commissioned to “feed” Christ’s sheep with the Word of God, teaching it and applying it to their lives (cf. Ephesians 4:12-16; 1 Timothy 3:2). They will guard the sheep from folly and error (cf. Titus 1:9-16), and will protect the flock from the ravages of false teachers (cf. Acts 20:28-30). Ultimately, such shepherds imitate and follow in the steps

though “first,” they are no longer necessary, since we have all the “prophetic revelation” we need in the Scriptures. What the church needs more of, says Paul, is not apostles and prophets, but “love” (ch. 13) and teaching of that revelation (ch. 14).

⁶ I love my daughters. Therefore I hold the strictest of standards for any would-be suitor who feels called to shepherd them as the head of a new household.

⁷ E.g. see how different titles are applied to the same person in the following three texts: Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Peter 5:1,2. For further reading, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 79-83.

of the “chief Shepherd” (ἀρχιποίμην, *archipoimēn*) of the sheep, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:4).

- “Overseer” (ἐπισκοπή, *episkopē*) means literally that, one who watches over the flock.

Qualifications for Elders

Interestingly, the first qualification is that every local church be led by a *plurality* of elders:

- Paul’s own practice was to appoint elders – plural – “in every church” (Acts 14:23).
- The local churches in Acts are always described as having elders – plural (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17).
- The NT letters always refer to elders – in the plural (1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, 5; cf. “leaders” in Hebrews 13:7, 17 and “those” – plural – “who are over you in the Lord” in 1 Thessalonians 5:12).

Second, those who are elders, must have a personal “desire” for this office. That is, they are not shoe-horned in against their will.

- 1 Timothy 3:1 – “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.”
 - The Greek word for “aspire” (ὀρέγω, *oregō*) literally means to “stretch out for something.”
 - ➔ That Paul uses a present tense emphasizes that this is an abiding and undiminishing desire.
 - ➔ That Paul uses a middle voice emphasizes that the individual is actively and emotionally involved in this desire to shepherd Christ’s flock; elders are not impassionate robots but loving shepherds.

Third (though perhaps better second), elders are men.

- 1 Timothy 3:2 – “Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband (ἄνδρα, *andra*) of one wife.”
 - If it wasn’t clear enough that all the pronouns in 3:1 were all masculine, Paul makes it crystal clear in 3:2.

- ➔ It could be argued that Paul is simply emphasizing an elder's faithfulness here (i.e. "a one-woman man" can easily be applied and transferred to a female pastor who is "a one-man woman").
- ➔ However, that is not what the text says. To say otherwise is erroneous and irreverent at best, and deceitful and blasphemous at worst. Paul could have easily used a neuter, and could have easily said "must be faithful to their spouse." But he didn't.
- Despite what our culture says, and despite what many churches practice, the Bible is clear: men alone are qualified as pastors of God's household.
- 1 Timothy 2:11-12 – "Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman (*γυνή*, *gunē*) to teach or exercise authority over a man (*ἄνδρα*, *andra*); rather, she is to remain quiet."
 - The context to which Paul is writing is gathered worship in the local church (2:1-10).
 - ➔ That is, this command is not forbidding a woman from ever talking; specifically, it means that when the church has gathered, women are not to exercise teaching leadership or authority over men, for this is only granted to the elders of the church (3:2b), who themselves are men (3:2a).
 - Since the local church is likened to a household (3:14), and since households are to be led by the husband (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-24), it only makes sense – consistently – that the exercise of authority in the church through teaching is limited to men who have been called and qualified by God.⁸
 - ➔ Despite what many compromising churches assert,⁹ this is not a passage limited to Paul's own time or culture. The very fact that it is

⁸ This is exactly what Paul argues in 1 Timothy 3:5, using the exact same Greek word for "household."

⁹ A favorite text to defend such an erroneous view is Galatians 3:28 – "There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, **for you are all one in Christ.**" Unfortunately, such proponents fail to concede that the context of Galatians 3 has nothing to do with roles within the home or church. Rather, Paul has been dealing with the fact that "in Christ" we are all equal in worth and value before God. This verse has nothing to do with who and how the church is to function. If we want to follow this kind of thinking, why should we listen to – or obey – Paul anymore than anyone else? Yes, he is an apostle and prophet. But really, he

grounded in God's creation of the household (2:13; cf. Gen. 1:27; 2:8, 18, 22) reminds us that it is an enduring truth for us today.

Fourthly, an elder must be, in an overall and general sense, a spiritually mature and holy man who functions as a role-model of godliness to the church.¹⁰

- In both 1 Timothy 3, the “first” proper adjective Paul uses of the elder is that of being “above reproach.” This then is “unpacked” with a larger list of what it looks like for such a man to be above reproach:
 - a. A one-woman man”¹¹
 - b. Sober-minded (CSB, NLT = “self-controlled”; NET, NIV = “temperate”)
 - c. Self-controlled (NLT = “live wisely”; CSB = “sensible”; NASB = “prudent”)
 - d. Respectable (BDAG = “well-arranged”; “modest”)
 - e. Hospitable (BDAG = “stranger-loving”, i.e. kind to strangers)
 - f. Not a drunkard
 - g. Not violent, but gentle
 - h. Not quarrelsome
 - i. Not a lover of money
 - j. He must manage his own household well

In addition to these qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, there are a few more that we can add when we look at Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5:

- His children are faithful,¹² who do not “have a reputation of being wild or rebellious” (NLT).¹³

has no authority over me, right? This is a dangerous and self-refuting argument that appeals not to exegesis, but acceptance in an increasingly feminist-militant and anti-male culture.

¹⁰ Generally speaking, all Christians are to aspire to a character that is “above reproach,” both in the church and out of the church. The elders are to model godliness in both their teaching *and* living before the church. As Carson says, “An elder does what an ordinary Christian should do extraordinarily well.”

¹¹ Though this translation allows for an elder to be a single man, it doesn't necessarily mandate it. I hold to this translation, not because it “opens the door” for single men, but because it seems to emphasize more of the heart and health of a man's marriage. A husband can have “one wife,” but that doesn't necessarily mean he is a good husband, or that he doesn't have ‘wandering’ eyes or thoughts. The NLT seems to intimate this, translating it, “He must be faithful to his wife.”

¹² Some translations (ESV, NLT, NASB, NIV) translate the Greek (τέχνα ἔχων πιστά) as “believing children.” That is, if a man has unbelieving children, he is not qualified to be an elder in a local church. This all depends on

- Not arrogant
- A lover of good
- Upright, holy, and disciplined
- Willingly, eagerly, and gladly serves
- Not domineering

Fifthly, he must not only communicate the gospel in his life and family, he must be able to communicate – clearly and correctly – with his lips and teaching. That is, he must be, in the words of Paul, “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

- In the words of Paul to Titus, elders must “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound (lit. “healthy”) doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”
- The “word” – that is “the good news” that is preached and believed upon in justification (cf. 1 Peter 1:25), must subsequently be taught and believed upon in sanctification (cf. 1 Peter 2:2).
- The saints “grow up into their Head – Christ” and “equipped for the work of the ministry” as these pastors teach them “the faith” (cf. Ephesians 4:11-16). Without such doctrinal gospel teaching, they remain spiritual infants, and thus vulnerable and susceptible to dangerous and damning deception (4:14; cf. Titus 1:10ff.).
- 1 Timothy 5:17 – “Let the elders who rule well¹⁴ be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

Sixthly, he must be recognized and approved by the local church.

whether one takes this adjective “believe” as active or passive. As BDAG says, used actively, it means having faith (i.e. being a Christians); used passively, it means being faithful (i.e. someone who is faithful, trustworthy, dependable). Both are entirely possible. However, the parallel in 1 Timothy 3 (“keeping his children in control”) seems to argue more for the passive translation (cf. NET, KJV, NKJV), namely that the children are faithful and submissive to their father’s leadership.

¹³ This may fall under the “managing his own household well” of 1 Timothy 3:4-5.

¹⁴ Paul uses an interesting Greek word (*προΐστημι*, *pro’istēmi*) here, and literally means “to stand before.” This likely portrays the pastor as a shepherd standing before and leading the flock. BDAG notes the word means “protective leadership of/over,” and often means “care for, help.” BDAG also notes that the word carries the sense of “lead, direct, rule.” Again, elders are shepherds, and their crook for the sheep is the Word of God.

- This is what is referred to as the “external call.”
- Many men feel the “inward” call or compulsion to pastoral leadership, but have never been “tested” in and by a local church to verify if such a call is from God or not.
- 1 Tim. 3:10 – like deacons, elders must be “tested” or “approved¹⁵ first.”¹⁶
 - The location of this examination is not the seminary classroom, but the local church, where the sheep will recognize not only the Shepherd, but also His under-shepherds.
 - This is why elders ought to be voted in by a regenerate membership.
- 1 Tim. 5:21-22 – “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in laying on of hands – and take part in the sins of others.”
 - In Scripture, “laying on of hands” most often connotes and pictures the recognition of current leaders that God is bestowing authority upon an individual for leadership over God’s people in some capacity.¹⁷

To summarize succinctly, an elder must have all these qualifications:

1. The inward call of the Holy Spirit
2. Live a visibly, consistently holy life
3. The gift of teaching the Word clearly
4. The outward call of a local church

Conclusion

¹⁵ The Greek word (δοκιμάζω, *dokimadzō*) literally means to prove by testing.

¹⁶ It could be argued that the context says that only deacons are to be tested before being accepted into office. The “and” (καί, *kai*) is important. Like the “likewise” (ὡσαύτως, *hōsautōs*) in 3:8, it refers the reader back to the previous section on elder qualifications, reminding us that there is much overlap between elder and deacon qualifications.

¹⁷ In the OT, this is clear when Moses “passes on the mantle” to Joshua (see Numbers 27:15-23); in the NT, Paul commissions Timothy as his authoritative protégé (see 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). The church, after prayer and fasting, recognizes and publicizes Paul and Barnabas for missions by laying their hands on them (Acts 13:3). Understanding “laying on of hands” this way keeps us from abusing passages like Acts 8:17.

When the elders of local churches “keep a close watch on their life and doctrine” (1 Timothy 4:16a, NIV), Paul says that the result is salvation and deliverance (4:16b).

John Stott has famously said, “The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history.”¹⁸ If Stott is correct – even partially – how seriously ought we to take the leadership of Christ’s church?

Part of Israel’s plight throughout the OT was her horrific history of lacklustre leaders, who, instead of pointing them and the nations to God to inherit His blessing, led them away from God to invoke His cursing. Tragically, such false shepherds, instead of feeding the sheep, were caught feeding *on* the sheep.¹⁹

Thankfully, God, in His eternal purpose and goodness, promised His people a Shepherd who would come from heaven to earth to save them.

Additionally – and amazingly – He also promised His sheep under-shepherds who would help them on their journey from earth to heaven: “And I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15).

Praise the Lord. Christ has come. By His death, He has established a new covenant with His people, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:16; Because of His resurrection and ascension, He has poured out His Spirit from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:17; Through the gospel He is uniting His people in Himself, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:18-19. And finally, as the Lord of His church, He is giving His bride “gifts” – pastors and teachers, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:15.

May the Lord of the church, in His great love for His church, continue to raise up such shepherds, who, like Him, love the church and give themselves up for her!!

*Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.*²⁰

¹⁸ John Stott, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 19.

¹⁹ One could turn to passages such as Jeremiah 23 or Ezekiel 34, or even to books as a whole, like Malachi.

²⁰ Ephesians 3:20-21

Note how deacons operate like the Levites under the OC: to help the priests, as well as guard them.