

The Organization of the Church

AN ESSAY BY

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DEFINITION

Apart from the foundational offices of apostles and prophets, the early churches had qualified leaders, elders and deacons, who served the church under the lordship of Christ, guided by both the Scriptures and the Spirit.

SUMMARY

The New Testament presents a consistent, though perhaps not completely uniform, pattern of church leadership. One of the offices was variously called “elders,” “overseers,” or “pastors” (all three of these terms refer to the same group and were used interchangeably in the New Testament). These leaders were charged to lead, shepherd, teach, and equip the flock entrusted to them. The other office, that of deacon, was intended to serve the needs of the flock and to enable the elders to carry out their responsibilities. Other offices mentioned in the New Testament either refer to a foundational role (apostle, prophet) or a role not tied to an individual congregation (apostle, evangelist).

The organizational structure of the early church was simple, even if not completely uniform. Churches had qualified, designated leaders who served the church under the lordship of Christ, guided by both the Scriptures and the Spirit. Although various titles were used to describe leaders in the church, oftentimes multiple terms could be used to describe the same office. But how many *church* offices do we find in the New Testament?

The Number of Church Offices

Apostles, Prophets, & Evangelists

In Ephesians 4:11 Paul mentions that the risen Christ has given leaders to the church, including “apostles,” “prophets,” and “evangelists” (cf. 1 Cor. 12:28). Should each congregation therefore have such designated offices? The reason most Christian congregations do not use these titles (perhaps with the exception of “evangelist”) is that these offices were not tied or limited to a single congregation. This is especially true for apostles, particularly the Twelve Apostles (and the apostle Paul). In the New Testament, the Greek term “apostle” (*apostolos*) has a technical usage which specifically refers to those who were chosen and commissioned by Jesus as well as a non-technical usage which refers more generally to a “messenger” or “accredited representative” (for example, 2 Cor. 8:23; Phil. 2:25). Those given the title according to the former meaning had to be eyewitnesses of Jesus’s resurrection (Acts 1:22; 1 Cor. 9:1) and commissioned by Jesus (Acts 9:5–6; 15–16; 26:15–18; cf. Gal. 1:1). Paul declares that these apostles were given to the church as a foundational office (Eph. 2:20), which included the writing of Scripture. As such, their authority was not limited to one particular church but extended to all the churches.

Prophets are rarely mentioned in the life of the early church, with most of the references found in the book of Acts (11:28; 13:1; 15:22–23, 32; 21:11). We also know that the church at Corinth had prophets (1 Cor. 12:28; 14:20). The primary function of the prophet was to proclaim God’s word to his people, which was especially crucial before the New Testament was written (cf. Heb. 1:1–2). Again, Ephesians 2:20 confirms that the church was built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets.

The term “evangelist” is used only three times in the New Testament (Acts 21:8; Eph. 4:11; 2 Tim. 4:5). Although not much is known about evangelists, they often accompanied the apostles or were sent on special tasks. As the title indicates, their primary mission was sharing the gospel with others. Because those who held this office ministered outside the church as they evangelized the lost, the office should not be viewed as limited to a local congregation.

Informal Terms

Sometimes leaders are mentioned but no title is given. For example, Galatians 6:6 mentions that those who receive instruction should support “the one who teaches.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13, Paul exhorts the congregation to give recognition and respect to “those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.” The author of Hebrews likewise urges the congregation to “obey” their leaders and “submit” to them (Heb. 13:17; cf. 13:7, 24). Although we do not know what particular “office” these leaders may have held, we do know that the author has in mind a distinct group of individuals.

When Paul writes the Pastoral Epistles, there are two established offices in the church—overseers and deacons. Yet, overseers and deacons were also mentioned in Paul’s earlier letter to the Philippians (1:1). In 1 Timothy 3, Paul gives qualifications for the two offices, with qualifications for overseers in 3:1–7 (see also Titus 1:5–9) and deacons in 3:8–13.

Other titles that are also used for church leaders include “elder” and “pastor.” Although the term “pastor” (or “shepherd”) is commonly used in our modern church context, it is used only one time in the New Testament as a reference to a church leader (Eph. 4:11). The verb form, *poimaino*, “to shepherd/pastor,” however, is used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2. In this latter passage, the term is understood in connection with our Lord’s title, “Chief Shepherd/pastor”; reasoning from this observation, the pastoral office has often been referred to as that of “under-shepherd.”

But what is the relationship between the terms “overseer” (*episkopos*), “elder” (*presbyteros*), and “pastor” (*poimēn*)?

The Office of Elder

Elders & Overseers

The terms “elder” and “overseer” are two different titles that refer to the same office. This can be demonstrated in at least four ways. First, the two terms are used interchangeably. In Acts 20, Paul calls for the “elders” of Ephesus to meet him at Miletus (20:17) and then tells them that the Holy Spirit has made them “overseers” to shepherd God’s church (20:28). Paul writes to Titus instructing him to appoint “elders” in every town (Titus 1:5), but when he gives the needed qualifications just two verses later he switches to the term “overseer” (1:7). As a fellow elder, Peter exhorts the “elders” to shepherd the flock of God, serving as “overseers” (1 Pet. 5:1–2).

Second, elders are never given a separate list of qualifications. If elder and overseer are two separate offices, then it would seem reasonable to expect Paul (or some other New Testament author) to give the necessary qualifications for each office. Both 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:7–9 only mention qualifications for the office of overseer. However, in both 1 Timothy 5:17–25 and Titus 1:5, “elders” are also mentioned. If the offices are distinct, then we are never given the qualifications for someone to become an elder which would be surprising for such an important position (see 1 Tim. 5:22).

Third, elders and overseers have the same functions of ruling or leading (Acts 20:28; 1 Tim. 3:4–5; 5:17) and teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Because they are given the same tasks, they should be viewed as representing the same office. Fourth, elders and overseers are never listed as separate offices which suggests that the three-tiered ecclesiastical system is foreign to the New Testament.

Elders & Pastors

Although the title “pastor” is commonly used today, it is used only one time in the New Testament as a designation for a church leader. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul declares that in addition to apostles, prophets, and evangelists, the risen Christ has given “pastors and teachers” to the church. The term “pastor” is linked with the term “teacher,” which together denote one order of ministry (i.e., the pastor-teacher).

What then is the relationship between the office of pastor and that of the elder or overseer? There are two compelling reasons these terms represent the same office. First, elders or overseers are given the same tasks as pastors of shepherding (Acts 20:17, 28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:1–3) and teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Second, if the office of pastor is separate from the elder or overseer, then we have no list of qualifications for those who hold this office. Paul gives qualifications for elders or overseers but never for pastors. Consequently, it is best to view the three terms (elder, overseer, pastor) as representing the same office in the early church. This equation of the three terms seems to be indicated in 1 Peter 5:1–4.

The Number of Elders

Although the New Testament does not designate a particular number of elders to lead the church, there is a consistent pattern of each church being led by a plurality of elders. In fact, shared leadership is a common theme in the Bible, which is seen in the Old Testament with the elders of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus chose twelve apostles to lead the church. The early church also appointed seven men to assist the apostles to care for the needs of neglected widows (Acts 6:1–6). This pattern of plurality was continued with the establishment of Christian eldership.

The New Testament evidence indicates that it was the norm for every church to be led by a plurality of elders. There is no example in the New Testament of one elder or pastor leading a congregation as the sole or primary leader. There was a plurality of elders at the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; Acts 15:4, 22–23), Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (Acts 14:23), Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17), Philippi (Phil. 1:1), the cities of Crete (Titus 1:5), the churches in the dispersion to which James wrote (Jas. 5:14), the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Pet. 5:1), and possibly the church(es) to which Hebrews was written (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

The Authority of Elders

According to the New Testament, elders possess authority. Paul instructs the Thessalonian Christians to respect those who “labor” among them, who “are over” them in the Lord, and who “admonish” them (1 Thess. 5:12). Just as elders have authority in their homes, so also they have authority in the church (1 Tim 3:4–5). Paul tells Timothy that the elders who “rule” (or lead) well are worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17). The author of Hebrews appeals to the church to “obey” and “submit to” their leaders (Heb. 13:17; see also 1 Cor. 16:15–16; 1 Pet. 5:5).

The duties of the elders also infer a certain amount of authority. As teachers, they are charged with the task of authoritatively proclaiming God’s Word (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). As shepherds, the elders are given the task of leading God’s people (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Pet. 5:2). As representatives, they speak and act on behalf of the entire congregation (Acts 11:30; 20:17).

The authority of the eldership comes from God and not the congregation (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11). Furthermore, the elders’s authority is not absolute (Gal. 1:8). They derive their authority from the Word of God. The authority that the elders possess is not so much found in their office but in the duties they perform. Finally, the authority of the elders did not extend beyond the local church.

The Qualifications & Duties of Elders

The qualifications for an elder or overseer represent the basic characteristics that are expected of all Christians (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Pet. 5:1–4). The focus of the qualifications is on who a person is more than what a person does. The only qualification that directly relates to an elder’s duties in the church is that he must be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2) sound doctrine and be able to correct those who are in error (Titus 1:9).

Elders have at least four main roles: (1) leader, (2) shepherd, (3) teacher, and (4) equipper. First, an elder is called to lead the church. Just as a husband and father leads his family, so also an elder must lead the church (1 Tim. 3:4–5). Those who lead well are worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17). Second, an elder is called to shepherd Christ’s church (1 Pet. 5:1–2). The elders must be willing to protect the sheep from the false teachers (Acts 20:28–29). Elders are called to visit those who are spiritually and physically sick or weak (Jas. 5:14). They are to care for the souls entrusted to them as “those who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17). They must follow the example of Jesus, “the chief Shepherd” (1 Pet. 5:4) who “lays down his life for the sheep” (John 10:11; cf. 15:13). Third, elders are teachers of God’s word (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Finally, elders are to equip others to do the work of the ministry (Eph. 4:11). Just as Paul urged Timothy to entrust what he learned to faithful men who would then teach others (2 Tim. 2:2), so also elders are to raise up the next generation of leaders and disciple-makers in the church.

The Office of Deacon

The office of deacon is a separate and distinct office to that of the elder (or overseer or pastor). The word “deacon” comes from the Greek term *diakonos*, which normally means “servant.” In some contexts, however, the term can be used more formally to designate someone who holds an office in the church. Of the 29 occurrences of *diakonos*, only three or four refer to an office-holder (Rom. 16:1; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). The origin of the deacon seems to be connected to the Seven chosen in Acts 6. Although the noun “deacon” is not used, the verbal form is used and so this passage serves as a prototype of the New Testament deacon.

When the apostles discovered that the Hellenistic widows were being neglected, they decided to call all the disciples together to choose seven qualified men to be appointed with the task of overseeing the daily distribution of food. By appointing these men, the apostles took this problem seriously but also did not get distracted from their primary calling of prayer and the ministry of the word (Acts 6:1–6). This is a similar paradigm to what we see with the offices of elder or overseer and deacon. Like the apostles, the elders’s primary role is one of preaching the word of God (Eph. 4:11; 1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Like the Seven, deacons are needed to serve the congregation in whatever needs may arise. Thus, Acts 6 provides a helpful model of how godly servants can assist those who are called to preach the word of God and shepherd the church of God.

The New Testament does not offer much information concerning the role of deacons since the qualifications in 1 Tim. 3:8–12 focus on one’s character and family life. The most noticeable distinction between elders and deacons is that deacons do not need to be “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2), which suggests that the deacons do not have an official teaching role in the church. As the title itself indicates, deacons do not rule or lead the congregation but have a service-oriented ministry. Like elders, deacons must lead their families well. But when referring to deacons, Paul omits the section where he compares managing one’s household to taking care of God’s church (1 Tim. 3:5). Deacons are not given a ruling or leading position in the church since that is a function that belongs to the elders. Although the Bible does not clearly indicate the function of deacons, based on the pattern established in Acts 6 with the apostles and the Seven, it seems best to view the deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church. As a result, each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on their particular needs.

Conclusion

The New Testament presents a consistent, though perhaps not completely uniform, pattern of church leadership. Sometimes these leaders were called “elders,” “overseers,” or “pastors” (all three of these terms refer to the same office and were used interchangeably in the New Testament). The overwhelming evidence in the New Testament is that every congregation was led by a group of elders and not merely by a single pastor. While elders do have authority to lead the church, their authority should be balanced by the congregation.

FURTHER READING

- Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*
 - Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions about Elders and Deacons*
 - Benjamin L. Merkle, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members*
 - Greg R. Scharf and Arthur Kok, *The New Elder's Handbook: A Biblical Guide to Faithful Leaders*
 - Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders: How to Shepherd God's People Like Jesus*
 - Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership*
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