

BIBLICAL ELDERSHIP – PART 2

CHAPTER 5 – LEAD WITHOUT LORDING

- It is important to understand that God intends his church to be led by a team of godly, qualified men who lovingly, sacrificially, and unanimously lead and shepherd that church under the authority of Christ
- In other words, elders are to lead

Christ Possesses Sovereign Authority to Build His Church

- When talking about God’s design for church leadership, we must begin with the authority of Christ since he is both the foundation and head of his church

Ephesians 1:22-23 ~ And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church,²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Ephesians 2:20 ~ having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the corner stone

Ephesians 4:15-16 ~ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, even Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Ephesians 5:23 ~ For the husband is the head of the wife, as Christ also is the head of the church, He Himself *being* the Savior of the body.

Colossians 1:18 ~ He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

1 Peter 5:4 ~ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

- Christ is head of the church because he founded it on his own initiative and design
- The church was not started by a group of young entrepreneurial upstarts who were disenchanted with the current establishment...or some splinter group of the state church
- It was not started by any individual like Peter or Paul...nor was it the product of some clever marketing strategy
- The church began because Jesus Christ, by the authority of the Father, willed that the church would come into existence

Matthew 16:18 ~ I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it

- This is the first mention of the church in the NT
- Here Jesus promises that a new body would come into existence
 - “I” – the church is built on the authority of Christ
 - “will” – shows that the formation of the church is grounded in the certainty of Christ’s word
 - “build” – speaks of the process of growth

- “my” – it is Christ’s church
- “church” – it is the gathering of God’s people; it is not a building, but rather an assembly (*ekklesia*) of people who have been called out (*ekkaleo*) of the darkness
- The church owes its origin to Jesus Christ, who brought it into existence by his death, burial, and resurrection
- As a result, the one supreme authority over the church is Jesus Christ
- That is important for us to understand because he is the one we look to for how the church is to be led
- We desire to obey him, to imitate him, to seek his mind in everything
- We don’t want to come up with a plan for how to do church and then ask Him to bless it
- Rather, we want to come alongside what He desires to do in the church and get in line with that
- In doing so, we want to know how he desires his church to be led

Elders Possess Delegated Authority

- After he ascended to heaven, Christ has given authority to the elders of the church to lead and serve the church to accomplish his purposes
- Elders do not possess their own authority over the church, but rather a delegated one
- Initially, Christ’s work was to be carried out by the apostles
- Christ knew that in order for the ministry of the Gospel to carry on after his ascension into heaven there would need to be others who continued it
- So, Christ chose, trained, sent out, and commissioned 12 apostles to be his representative
- He invested in them and disciplined them and trained them and taught them

Mark 3:14 ~ And He appointed twelve, so that they would be with Him and that He *could* send them out to preach

- He trained these 12 apostles to be carry on his work in his absence
- They in turn would need to train others to replace themselves

Matthew 28:19-20 ~ Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit, ²⁰teaching them to observe all that I commanded you; and lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the age.”

- The apostles would need to disciple other men who would be able to carry the mantle of shepherding Christ’s church
- The men whom the apostles trained were not more apostles, but elders
- This refutes the position of the Catholic church which teaches apostolic succession...i.e. that Peter was the first pope and that he passed his apostleship on to succeeding popes
- Rather, the mantle of responsibility and authority in the leadership of the church was passed from the apostles to the elders
- This transition from apostles to elders is very evident within the book of Acts which describes three stages of church leadership in the early church:

1. Only apostles in leadership (no elders)
2. Apostles and elders leading the church together
3. Only elders in leadership (no apostles)

Only Apostles in Leadership (Acts 1-9)

- When the church was initially founded, it was only apostles (primarily Peter) who were leading it
- The church was founded in Acts 2 when the Holy Spirit was given as Peter was preaching on Pentecost in Jerusalem
- In Acts 3, Peter and John healed the lame beggar; Peter preached a second sermon
- In Acts 4, money from the people was laid at the apostles' feet for them to distribute it as they saw fit
- In Acts 6, the apostles instructed church to select men who could function as proto-deacons
- In Acts 8, persecution scattered the church, but the apostles remained in Jerusalem to lead the new church

Acts 8:1 ~ Saul was in hearty agreement with putting him to death. And on that day a great persecution began against the church in Jerusalem, and they were all scattered throughout the regions of Judea and Samaria, except the apostles.

- The emphasis in Acts 1-9 is on the apostles...they had initially been granted the responsibility and authority by Christ to carry out the work of the ministry

Apostles and Elders Lead the Church Together (Acts 11-16)

- Elders are first mentioned in Acts 11:30

Acts 11:29-30 ~ And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. 30 And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

- These men were apparently elders in the church in Jerusalem who were working together with the apostles
- On Paul's (an apostle) first missionary journey, he appointed elders to lead and shepherd the newly founded churches

Acts 14:23 ~ When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

- There is overlap between apostles and elders...apostles were leading the church in Jerusalem with elders... and Paul was appointing elders in churches
- This transition is also evident in Acts 15-16

Acts 15:2 ~ And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the **apostles and elders** concerning this issue.

Acts 15:4 ~ When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the **apostles and the elders**, and they reported all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:6 ~ The **apostles and the elders** came together to look into this matter.

Acts 15:22 ~ Then it seemed good to the **apostles and the elders**, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren,

Acts 15:23 ~ and they sent this letter by them, “The **apostles and the brethren who are elders**, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.

Acts 16:4 ~ Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe.

- Clearly, the apostles and elders were working together in Jerusalem
- The elders assumed the same responsibilities as the apostles
- There was a transition taking place: from the apostles to the elders

Only Elders in Leadership (Acts 20-28)

- Paul’s farewell to the leaders of the church in Ephesus reveals the presence of only elders, no apostles

Acts 20:17 ~ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church.

Acts 20:28-30 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. 29 I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; 30 and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after them.

- The situation in the church in Jerusalem was similar...by this time, only elders were leading it

Acts 21:18 ~ And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

- There was no mention of apostles in the church in Jerusalem (James was the half-brother of Jesus, not John’s brother, James)
- That’s why in the rest of the NT, the elders are described as those leaders in the church who possess Christ’s authority to oversee and shepherd

1 Timothy 3:1, 5 ~ It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires to do...5 (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)

1 Timothy 5:17 ~ The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

Titus 1:5 ~ For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you

1 Peter 5:1-2 ~ Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, 2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

James 5:14 ~ Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord

- Clearly, elders were the preachers, overseers, leaders, and shepherds of NT churches after the apostles
- The consistent pattern throughout the NT is that each local body of believers is to be led and shepherded by a plurality of God-ordained elders
- This is the only pattern for church leadership given in the NT

- Some implications:

1. Elders Must Lead

- “If you are an elder, step up and work hard at leading your church. You don’t need to have all the answers, and you certainly won’t get everything exactly right. But Jesus has commissioned you to guide his flock. Your church needs you to take the initiative and plot a course forward...Brother elder, don’t hide when the church needs leadership. It’s time to crawl out of the duffle bag, exit the cargo hold, and take your seat in the cockpit.”¹
- “Elders should take this assignment to heart and courageously govern their churches. Wimpy, passive overseers only cause church problems to degrade from bad to worse. I plead with all my fellow elders: for the sake of the church, for the sake of the gospel, and for the sake of God’s glory, lead your congregations.”²

2. Congregations Must Honor the Elders

- Because elders have been given a delegated authority by Christ, those within the church are to respect, honor, and appreciate them for the work they do
- The body is even charged with making the elder’s job a joyful one

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 ~ But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

Hebrews 13:17 ~ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

- Some objections:

1. Why do those men get to be elders?

- Some might question why certain men get to lead the church rather than others
- It is important to remember that ultimately it is God who makes men overseers

Acts 13:1-2 ~ Now there were at Antioch, in the church that was there, prophets and teachers: Barnabas, and Simeon who was called Niger, and Lucius of Cyrene, and Manaen who had been brought up with Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. 2 While they were ministering to the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.”

Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

2. Won’t they abuse their power?

- Some object saying that absolute power corrupts absolutely...they use Diotrophes as an example

3 John 9 ~ I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say.

- True, some men might abuse their position, taking advantage of people and leading harshly

¹ Jeramie Rinne, *Church Elders*, 74-75.

² *Ibid.*, 83.

- But a number of factors mitigate against that:
 - a. Choose humble men who are servants – they follow Christ’s example (Mark 10:45; John 13:14-16; Phil 2:5-11)
 - b. Choose qualified men – they meet the character qualifications established in 1 Tim 3 and Titus 1, especially not “self-willed, not quarrelsome, not arrogant”
 - c. Choose men who will not lord it over the flock – they understand Peter’s charge

1 Peter 5:3 ~ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

- d. Have a process to confront sinning elders

1 Timothy 5:19-20 ~ Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses. 20 Those who continue in sin, rebuke in the presence of all, so that the rest also will be fearful of sinning.

CHAPTER 6 – SHEPHERD TOGETHER

- Although the task of leading the church and shepherding God’s people can be an overwhelming one, the duty is made much lighter knowing that God has designed the church to be shepherded by a **plurality** of qualified men who unanimously, equally, and autonomously serve the local body of believers.
- Nowhere in the Scripture does one find a local assembly ruled by majority opinion or by a single pastor
- Again and again, reference is made to a plurality of elders who share the load of leading

The Terminology of Plurality

- There are three major terms that describe church leaders in the NT: overseer, elder, and pastor
- These three terms all refer to the same office and are used interchangeably in the NT

Bishop/Overseer/Episkopos

- The word is used 9 times in NT; 6 of those times referring to one who leads the church
- It refers to those leaders within the church tasked by God with the work of watching over or guarding or overseeing the flock

1 Timothy 3:1 ~ It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires *to do*.

Titus 1:7 ~ For the overseer must be above reproach...

Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

- This word is also used as a title of Christ

1 Peter 2:25 ~ For you were continually straying like sheep, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Guardian (lit. overseer) of your souls

Elder/Presbuteros

- This is the most common term for church leaders in the NT (used 16 times)
- It refers to a mature group of spiritual leaders who have responsibility for the church

- The focus is on his age, maturity, and character (think our word “elderly”)
- Elders are spiritually mature men who are strong and consistent in their moral character

Pastor/Shepherd/Poimen

- This term emphasizes the pastoral role of caring for and feeding the flock of God
- It draws on the imagery of a shepherd in the OT who cared for, nurtured, protected, and guided the sheep
- The focus is on the man’s attitude, his heart, and his spiritual maturity
- To be qualified as a pastor a man must have a shepherd’s, caring heart

Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood

Ephesians 4:11 ~ And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers

1 Peter 5:2 ~ shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness

- So, the term “bishop” speaks of what a church leader does → oversees
- The term “elder” emphasizes who the man is → godly, mature
- The term “pastor” deals with his heart and attitude toward those he leads → loving, caring, nurturing
- These terms are synonymous, all referring to the same office
- This is corroborated by the fact that all three terms occur in the same context in two places in Scripture:

Acts 20:17, 28 ~ ¹⁷From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** (*presbuteros*) of the church...²⁸ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers** (*episkopos*) to **shepherd** (*poimen*) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

1 Peter 5:1-2 ~ Therefore, I exhort the **elders** (*presbuteros*) among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ²**shepherd** (*poimen*) the flock of God among you, exercising **oversight** (*episkopos*) not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness.

- The different terms do not reflect different levels of authority or separate offices; the terms are simply different ways of identifying the same people
- The terminology indicates that God intends for there to be a plurality of leaders who shepherd his flock
- At MBC, this is why we view all eight elders as equals
- True, there are firsts among equals (based on giftedness and being set apart)...but all MBC elders are equal in responsibility and delegated authority...ministry is a team effort at MBC by all the elders
- This is also why we don’t prefer the term “senior pastor”

The Testimony of Plurality

- The consistent pattern throughout the NT is that each body of believers is shepherded by a plurality of elders
- This model that ensures that the headship of Christ over the church is preserved
- Scripture identifies a clear pattern: plural elders; single church

Acts 11:30 ~ And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders.

Acts 14:23 ~ When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 20:17, 28 ~ From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church...28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

Philippians 1:1 ~ Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 ~ But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, 13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

1 Timothy 5:17 ~ The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

Titus 1:5 ~ For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,

James 5:14 ~ Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord;

Hebrews 13:17 ~ Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

- This points to a clear pattern: a plurality of elders in each church is to lead and shepherd in a team effort
- There is no evidence in the NT for a congregation being governed by one pastor, elder, or overseer
- There is no evidence in the NT for organizational hierarchy

- There are many benefits of a plurality of elders:

1. It lightens the workload

- The demands of ministry are overwhelming and the weight of ministry can crush a person
- But in plural leadership, the heavy burdens of ministry are shared by a number of shepherd elders

2. It provides accountability

- A ministry built around a single man can, because of the pride of the man, easily be corrupted if that power goes to his head
- But team leadership guards against that by providing genuine accountability

3. It ensures the expression of each man's giftedness rather than one man's

- God has blessed the church with leaders possessing a variety of gifts

Rom 12:4-6 ~ For just as we have many members in one body and all the members do not have the same function, ⁵ so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually members one of another. ⁶ Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us...

- No one man possesses all the gifts required to lead a church
- But a plurality of men uniquely expresses the fullness of the gifts Christ gave to the church

4. It ensures greater clarity on knowing the will of God

- Combined counsel and wisdom help assure that decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single man
- The will of God is best discerned through a plurality of godly men who together seek it since God uses the interaction of the plurality to clarify his will
- That's why at MBC we function in unanimity...we don't move ahead until we all agree that that direction is the will of Christ for this church body
- We believe there is one will of God for MBC...and if all the elders are submissive to Christ our head and are guided by the same Spirit, they should all have the mind of Christ and there should be unanimity in the decisions they make

Philippians 2:2 ~ make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose.

Acts 15 ~ having become one mind

- If there is division among the elders in making decisions, all the elders should study, pray, and seek the will of God together until consensus is reached
- In this way, the unity and harmony that the Lord desires for the church will begin with those individuals he has appointed to shepherd His flock
- At times this method of decision making is harder, but is better in the long run

CHAPTER 7 – MODEL MATURITY

- Being an elder begins with living a godly life since his *being* gives credibility to his *doing*
- When it comes to ministry, who the man *is* must precede what the man *does*
- A faithful ministry begins with a holy life
- An elder cannot watch over the lives of others if they don't first watch over your own life
- "Pastoral elders cannot watch over the spiritual lives of others if they do not first know how to guard their own souls...You prove that you are able to keep careful watch over God's flock by first demonstrating that you are diligently watching over your own spiritual life"³
- Personal integrity precedes public ministry...so before you can care for the souls of others, you must first care for your own soul

Your Personal Life Must be Marked by Holiness

Acts 20:28 ~ Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

1 Timothy 4:16 ~ Pay close attention to yourself and to your teaching; persevere in these things, for as you do this you will ensure salvation both for yourself and for those who hear you.

- You must first pay strict attention to your own spiritual state, guarding your own spiritual life

³ Alexander Strauch, *Acts 20: Fierce Wolves are Coming – Guard the Flock*, 108.

- This is where all faithful ministry begins...before you even think about teaching, preaching, leading, counseling, discipling, shepherding, overseeing...you must be attentive to your own spiritual growth
- This is your first order of business...your first duty!
- This is because there is a direct connection between your spiritual life and your usefulness to the Lord

2 Timothy 2:20-21 ~ Now in a large house there are not only gold and silver vessels, but also vessels of wood and of earthenware, and some to honor and some to dishonor. 21 Therefore, if anyone cleanses himself from these things, he will be a vessel for honor, sanctified, useful to the Master, prepared for every good work.

- There is an important spiritual principle here: your entire ministry is directly affected by the health of your spiritual state
- Threats to guard against

1. Satanic attacks

- “Take heed, therefore, brethren, for the enemy has a special eye upon you. You shall have his most subtle insinuations, and incessant solicitations, and violent assaults...take heed to yourselves, lest he outwit you...his bait shall be so fitted to your temper and disposition, that he will be sure to find advantages within you, and make your own principles and inclinations betray you; and whenever he prevails against you, he will make you the instrument of your own ruin...Do not allow him to use you as the Philistines used Samson – first to deprive you of your strength, then to put out your eyes, and finally to make you the subject of his triumph and derision.”⁴

2. Fleshly lusts

1 Peter 2:11 ~ Beloved, I urge you as aliens and strangers to abstain from fleshly lusts which wage war against the soul.

- These lusts “wage war” (*strateugo*) against our soul
- They are also “lusts of deceit” (Eph 4:22)
- “When we say to you, take care of your life, we mean be careful of even the minutiae of your character”⁵
- We must guard against these lusts which serve as a beachhead for sin to launch its assault

3. Worldly temptations

Romans 12:2 ~ And do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind, so that you may prove what the will of God is, that which is good and acceptable and perfect.

- Beware of what you let into your mind – careful of what you read...what you listen to...what you entertain yourself with...because error can subtly creep into our lives from a variety of sources
- Elders must pursue the highest degree of holiness because their work requires it!
- They must be like the cavalry officer who keeps his saber clean and sharp and who rubs off every stain
- They must be like the surgeon whose instruments are always razor-sharp and in perfect order
- They must be like the woodworker whose tools are always in the sharpest, cleanest condition

⁴ Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor*, 74-75.

⁵ Charles Spurgeon, “The Minister’s Self-Watch” in *Lectures to my Students*.

Your Personal Life Must be Imitatable

1 Corinthians 11:1 ~ Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ.

Philippians 3:17 ~ Brethren, join in following my example, and observe those who walk according to the pattern you have in us.

1 Timothy 4:12 ~ Let no one look down on your youthfulness, but rather in speech, conduct, love, faith and purity, show yourself an example of those who believe.

- Must of the Christian life is caught rather than taught
- For this reason, elders lives must be worthy of imitation and emulation
- “To put it another way, an elder’s job involves shepherding by *being* as well as by *doing*. Elders pastor churches not only by what they do but also by who they are. And without the being, the doing falls apart.”⁶

CHAPTER 8 – PLEAD FOR THE FLOCK

- Praying for the flock must be a central part of what elders do and one of the primary means by which they shepherd the sheep

Acts 1:14 ~ These all with one mind were continually devoting themselves to prayer, along with the women, and Mary the mother of Jesus, and with His brothers.

Acts 6:4 ~ “But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.”

- “Our practice of prayer not only needs to be pulled forward by the template of Jesus’ personal communion with the Father, it also should be pushed ahead by the demanding nature of shepherding work itself. Pastoral ministry can bring you to your knees, one way or another.”⁷
- “...when you lean into pastoral ministry to people, whether you are a paid staffer or a lay overseer, you come face to face with the limitations of your time, energies, knowledge, and gifting. Hopefully, that confrontation drives you to cry out for God’s help. For elders, prayer is not just a duty, it’s a crucial survival strategy.”⁸

⁶ Rinne, *Church Elders*, 101.

⁷ Ibid., 111.

⁸ Ibid., 112.