

WE AFFIRM THE BIBLICAL MODEL OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

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We arrive at perhaps the least interesting but nonetheless contentious question, that of church government. Even though some churches might come away with convictions differing from ours (and we should show them appropriate grace), we still strive to allow the whole council of God to develop our convictions on the subject. We also need to identify if our thoughts are influenced by tradition. This way, we can know we've tethered our thinking to Scripture and allowed the Holy Spirit to guide and to guard us.

Regardless of opinion on the question of polity, one area in which all Christians must agree is that Christ *alone* rules the church. He owns it, having purchased it with His blood (Acts 20:28). He's the Head of His body (Col 1:18), the Chief Shepherd herding His sheep (see 1 Pt 5:4). Moreover, He has plans for His church that He set in motion from ages past (Eph 3:9), plans including proper conduct for its members (1 Tm 3:15). He gave Christians a variety of gifts for the edification of the church (Rm 12; 1 Cor 12), specifically apostles, prophets, evangelists, and shepherds and teachers (Eph 4:11). Therefore, perhaps the best way to describe church government is as a theocracy as we read His Word to order ourselves according to it.

Since the church is His, we won't be surveying the various forms of church government today, but looking at what He has established – two offices for the church, described here in 1 Timothy 3 as overseers (vv. 1-7) and deacons (vv. 8-13). Churches should be governed by a plurality of biblically-qualified elders, ruling independently from others, dependently upon the grace and power of God, and subordinately to His Word. Alongside come deacons, helping to serve the needs of the church, but who do not have ruling authority. Let's start with the first of those.

THE BIBLE CALLS FOR THE OFFICE OF ELDERS

The term *pastor* is far more familiar, and some use the older English term *bishop* (which means "overseer"). Scripture uses these terms with elder **interchangeably** (Acts 20:17,28; Tit 1:5,7; 1 Pt 5:1-2), meaning the overseers here in 1 Timothy 3 are elders or pastors. The early church likely followed the pattern of the synagogues in implementing elders, with the apostles initially appointing them "in every church" as they planted churches (Acts 14:23). This terminology communicates a leadership role within the church, so let's first consider who is qualified for office.

ELDERS MUST BE BIBLICALLY QUALIFIED

Search committees have lots of ideas as to what to look for in a pastor (someone young and full of experience!), but we've read the qualifications to look for. Elders must be men full of the Spirit, with their marriages, ministries, and work in the world commensurate with a Christian ethic. While elders will never be perfect, they should be able

to set an example in these areas (cf. Phil 3:17). This means that *everyone* in the church should be striving to meet these character traits, but elders do well with these qualifications:

Based on 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, an elder must...		
be above reproach,	be not addicted to wine,	be not a new convert,
be the husband of one wife,	be not pugnacious,	be self-controlled,
be temperate,	be gentle,	be sensible,
be prudent,	be uncontentious,	be not self-willed,
be respectable,	be not fond of sordid gain,	be not quick-tempered,
be hospitable,	manage his household well,	loving what is good,
be able to teach,	control his children with dignity,	be just and devout, and
be free from the love of money,	be able to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict,	have a good reputation outside the church.

ELDERS MUST BE BIBLICALLY PLURAL

Don't be confused by our use of the singular here. Even though some of us are used to seeing a single pastor in charge, a plurality of elders should rule within the local congregation – if for no other reason than the deceitfulness of the human heart (Jer 17:9) and that there's safety in an abundance of counselors (Pv 11:14). Scripture always references elders in the plural (Acts 14:23; Ti 1:5; Js 5:14). That doesn't mean that, among the elders, there won't be a "first among equals" in the pastor-teacher, but a board of individuals guards against the interests of any one man.

The New Testament doesn't command a definitive number of men who should serve as elders, so, we're free from the temptation to appoint questionable men simply to meet a quota. However, God-given sense dictates that the number should be commensurate with the size of the church. Prayerful consideration must be taken by each church to seek what number of elders would best serve the needs of the flock and weigh that against the number of qualified individuals who are in the flock.

ELDERS MUST EXERCISE BIBLICAL AUTHORITY

As we've been discussing this, you may find discomfort in some of the terminology. Some don't like "elder," but others may be more bothered by terms like "overseer" or "rule" (5:17). Here, an elder's care for the church is likened to managing a household, keeping "children under control with all dignity" (v. 4). This means that elders have *authority* – the question is what it looks like.

NOTE THE AUTHORITY THE BIBLE GRANTS TO ELDERS

- **Elders must oversee God's people.** That's the term used here, and in Acts 20:28, Paul told the elders that "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." In 1 Peter 5:1-2, we read that elders are to be "exercising oversight," meaning "to accept responsibility for the care of someone."¹
- **Elders must care for or manage God's people (cf. vv. 4-5).** These terms are interchangeable in this text. Consider these applications from candidates' households:

¹ William Arndt et al., *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 379.

- Men who won't work to take care of their families deny their faith and are worse than unbelievers (1 Tm 5:8). If they won't work for their loved ones, they won't work for church members.
- Men who won't apply painful discipline to his children demonstrate hatred (Pv 13:24) and likely won't love church members enough to discipline them.
- Men bringing up their children in the discipline and instruction of the Lord (Eph 6:4) are likely to be sober-minded, self-controlled, and able to teach (1 Tm 3:2).
- Men provoking their children unto wrath (Eph 6:4) will likely also lack self-control or gentleness and be pugnacious or domineering over church members (cf. 1 Tm 3:2-3; 1 Pt 5:3).
- **Elders decide policy for God's people.** In a passage misunderstood if not read carefully, Acts 15, we see the Paul and Barnabas come to Jerusalem because of a debate over circumcision (let's turn there).
 - In v. 2, we read that Paul and Barnabas were sent to the "the apostles and elders concerning this issue." They were received by the whole church in v. 4. However, when some of the believing Pharisees began to teach the necessity of circumcision (v. 5), the text says, "The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter" (v. 6).
 - Since they were *already* present according to v. 4, *this* coming "together" must mean that they gathered together *away* from the church body to debate the Pharisaical claims. We see that in v. 7, and Peter addressing "them" (the "the apostles and the elders"). Skipping down to v. 12, once he ceased speaking, "all the assembly fell silent" (again, the "the apostles and the elders")—who then begin listening to the testimony of Paul and Barnabas.
 - For the sake of time, we'll have to forgo what James says in vv. 12-21, except to note that says the Gentiles shouldn't abuse their liberty and respect the tenants of the Law. What's significant is that James—*who was not an apostle and was therefore an elder*—had the final word in the letter (comp. vv. 19-20 to vv. 28-29). The apostles were involved, but the elders play a vital role in these decrees.
 - Throughout this text, we see an explanation of v. 2—the apostles and the elders are making the call. Some get confused because v. 22 says, "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." However, this doesn't mean the whole church came to this decision, because we've seen that they weren't previously involved—they're together now because of the decision of apostles and elders! Perhaps the whole church was involved in choosing who from among them would accompany Paul and Barnabas, but the letter starts out in v. 23, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren." Moreover, 16:4 says "they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and elders," not the decision of the whole church.
 - It's worth noting a similar instance later in Acts. Paul visits with James and the elders at Jerusalem (21:17-18) because there was a false rumor about Paul (vv. 20-22). So, the elders say to the *apostle*, "Do therefore what we tell you" (v. 23)—instructing him to purify himself to help four men with their Nazarite vows (vv. 23-24). This didn't change their previous decision at the Jerusalem Council, as their command only applied to Paul (v. 25). We conclude that elders decide policy.

- **Elders lay hands on or ordain those ministering to God's people.** Earlier in church history, the apostles appointed elders (Acts 14:23), and then they sometimes appointed others to appoint elders (like with Titus in Titus 1:5). With Timothy, elders ordained him (cf. 1 Tm 4:11). Considering the timing of these three examples, a transition arises as the apostles were passing from church history. Of course, ultimately, the Holy Spirit appoints elders (Acts 20:28)—and when God's Word recorded through the apostles is followed, we can have the assurance that God's will in the matter has been fulfilled.
- **Elders are to rule God's people well** (1 Tm 5:17; cf. 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tm 3:2). Here's the word that people shy away from, but it's a biblical term. Some argue that the word simply means to simply *lead* or *guide* in a persuasive manner. While it's true that elders have no license for tyranny, this is the same term that is translated "manage" in 3:4, 5 and 12, and simple persuasive guidance wouldn't be suitable to fatherhood (imagine a dad who only coaxes his one-year-old to stop sticking forks in outlets)! One of the best Greek lexicons says that, in 5:17, the word means "to exercise a position of leadership, *rule, direct, be at the head (of).*"² That's why the NASB, ESV, KJV, NKJV, and RSV all translate the word "rule." Incidentally, the same term is similarly used in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, which says that elders "have charge over you in the Lord."
- **Elders instruct God's people in sound doctrine and rebuke those who contradict it** (Ti 1:9). Of course, elders do have a charge to persuade others in the Word, but with the weight of authority. An elder must watch for wolves from both outside and inside the congregation and rebuke them (Acts 20:28–31).

So, when we were first forming this church last year, the question was raised as to whether an elder should have any role in the decisions of the general operations of the church, or if they are only supposed to focus on preaching and prayer. We now see that words like oversee, care, manage, decide, lay hands on, rule, instruct, and rebuke all describe the office of elder. Under Christ, elders have authority nowhere granted to the whole church.

This teaching is sometimes called "elder rule," for better or worse, which stands in contrast to a model of "congregational rule." Instead of granting decision-making power to a popular vote, Scripture commands the congregation to **appreciate** and even **esteem** its elders (1 Th 5:12–13), to **remember** and **imitate** its elders (Hb 13:7), and to **obey** and **submit** to its elders; "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" (Hb 13:17). God says more to congregations—Christians don't blindly follow their leaders, and next week, we are going to talk more about what God expects from the congregation.

The general principle we've seen is that elders are to rule churches and the congregations to submit. This certainly guards against "mob rule," acknowledging that popular opinion rarely reflects godliness (See 1 Cor. 1:10; cf. Eph. 4:3; Phil. 1:27; 2:2). Still, we can't conclude that God grants elders unchecked authority.

NOTE THE LIMITS ON AUTHORITY THE BIBLE PLACES ON ELDERS

² William Arndt, Frederick W. Danker, Walter Bauer, et al., [*A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature*](#) (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2000), 870.

With the list of qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 come a few forewarnings. For instance, v. 6 introduces the possibility of elders who “become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.” The next verse follows in like manner – an elder may “fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.” What’s the dividing line?

Let’s consider the Great Shepherd for a moment. Contrasting Himself to the religious leaders of His day, our Lord says, “I am gentle and humble in heart” (Mt 11:29). He told His disciples that those wanting to be first must serve all (Mk 9:33–35). When His disciples ask about seats of prominence, He tells them about the importance of sacrifice and suffering (Mk 10:35–45). He highlights that the self-important leaders of the day loved titles and honors, but the humble will be exalted (Mt 23:1–12). He calls His people away from lording their positions over others and toward humble service (Lk 22:25–27).

If elders represent Jesus’s teachings and ways in their congregations, then they should model His life. In the picturesque account of the Lord washing His disciples’ feet, He calls them to do the same (Jn 13:3–17). So, far from cloistering themselves away, they serve – helping to sort through the opinions of church members with prayer and the searching of Scripture, just as we saw in the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15. They also serve the physical needs; Paul’s apostolic example was that of “deaconing” (Rm 15:25; Acts 20:19; 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 3:6; 6:4; Eph 3:7), and in Acts 11:29–30, elders were responsible for distributing money. So, elders must be theologians in residence, but never view themselves as ivory-tower, intellectual elites, above “menial” tasks.

Their office is that of servant leadership. Elders are still members of the congregation, and the Bible states that the whole church (not just elders) builds itself up (Eph 4:11–16). All the “one another” commands for Christians nuance elder rule, so elders should count the needs of others before themselves. Whatever an elder does, whether it be teaching or ruling or serving in some other way, he must do all with the goal of ministry in mind.

In other words, there’s a right way and a wrong way for an elder to lead. Remember that God condemned the false shepherds of Israel for ruling “with force and harshness” (Ez 34:4), and Jesus commanded His apostles to not lord their position over people (Mt 20:25–28). As such, consider that with the many caveats to elder rule:

- He should manage or care for the church *well* (1 Tm 3:4–5).
- He should pay as careful attention to *himself* as he does to the flock (Acts 20:28).
- He should not neglect his gift(s) (1 Tm 4:11).
- He should rule *well* and *labor* in preaching and teaching (1 Tm 5:17).
- He must hold *firm* to the trustworthy word *as taught* (Ti 1:9).
- According to 1 Peter 5:1–3, he must shepherd the flock:
 - eagerly and willingly exercising oversight (it’s a personal, God-given desire)
 - *without* being compelled to do so (which would be no profit to the church),
 - *without* seeking shameful gain (his desire is not wealth or influence),
 - *without* domineering (he may be firm in conviction, but gentle and humble in heart),
 - And overall exemplary service to the flock.

With those important limitations noted, we must stay balanced – the simple exercise of authority is *not* authoritarian. The Lord still calls His elders to rule, and there wouldn’t be so many warnings against heavy-handed

authority if elders lacked authority to exercise. Their attitude, though, is to be that of service, just as the congregation's is to be that of submission. If any fall into sin and step out from under the roles God has called them to, then Christians in the congregation should engage in the church discipline process (a topic we'll discuss in a couple of weeks).

We could say more about elders. If you want a detailed treatment on elders, then I recommend Alexander Strauch's book, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*. That said, we're talking about church leadership today, and invariably, the question of deacons arises. So, let's devote a moment to exploring what the Bible says about them.

THE BIBLE CALLS FOR THE OFFICE OF DEACONS

Many of us who have come from a Southern Baptist background typically think of a single pastor who operates like the CEO of a company, with a board of vice-presidents known as deacons. Some churches imbue the deacons with the ultimate authority – perhaps informing the pastor that he answers to them! In most cases, a deacon operates as a lay leader of the congregation, helping to make decisions about the operation of the church. This is not how we see deacons in Scripture.

So, what does Scripture say? The Greek word family that the Bible uses (*diakonos*, *diakonia*, and *diakoneō*) speaks of general service such as serving food, like when Peter's mother-in-law was healed (Lk 4:39; cf. Jn 12:2; Lk 10:40; 17:8). It can refer to administration or "ministry" (1 Cor 12:5; 2 Cor 9:12), like the monetary "relief" efforts for those in Judea (Acts 11:29). The Christian concept is service to others and to "the Lord with all humility" (Acts 20:19).

All Christians should be involved with this spiritual service, and the Lord commends the church active in it (Rv 2:19). Even so, as with other spiritual duties in the faith, God wants some in the church to specifically devote themselves to the "deaconing" task. Interestingly, though, the Bible doesn't specifically describe the duties of the deacon, and only a verse or two indicates that there even *is* an office of deacon within the church (some respected Bible teachers therefore conclude that it doesn't even exist). At the very least, we can conclude that the New Testament doesn't put the emphasis on the office of deacon as some of our fellow Baptist churches do.

Even so, the office (and need) exists. For instance, Acts 6:1–6 calls for qualified men who could fulfill the ministerial need for the neglected Hellenistic Jews. Philippians 1:1 refers to both "overseers and deacons," i.e., the groups of *elders* and *servants*. Here in 1 Timothy, we read, "Deacons likewise" (v. 8), giving a similar list of qualities. The emphasis of Scripture is simply on the personal and spiritual character of the individual, not the job description.

It's an office, but this doesn't mean that deacons *only serve*. Both Philip and Stephen, deacons from Acts 6, performed apostolic signs among the people (cf. Acts 6:8; 8:6–7). While such signs didn't continue past the apostolic age, we note that their work included gospel proclamation (cf. Acts 7), as Scripture also calls Philip an evangelist (Acts 21:8). Here, in 1 Timothy 3:9, we read that deacons should be "holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience." As such, deacons should continue to grow in spiritual knowledge and proclaiming the gospel.

Even though we see deacons as having an office, they are not a group with unique authority in the church. When the deacons were selected by the church in Acts 6, we see that the Apostles appointed them (v. 6). Again,

when the church needed those relief funds, they were “sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the elders” (Acts 11:29–30). The deacons are always depicted in Scripture as being under authority, and we nowhere read that they made any decisions for the church.

CONCLUSION

We’re used to more democratic governments both in our churches and in Western society, and for good reason—it provides safeguards in unbiblical environments. Don’t misunderstand me—other churches are not *false* if they lack the exact model of church leadership we employ. God is gracious, He saves people in many kinds of churches, and praise Him for it.

Even so, we should want everything we do to be directed by Scripture, and it doesn’t authorize a model of leadership represented by a single pastor, deacons, the congregation as a whole, or a governing body over the church. Our conviction is that authority starts with the Lord Jesus Christ and His Word, applied faithfully through a biblically-qualified elders, assisted in ministry by deacons, with all Christians bearing responsibility for their belief and conduct within the church.