

The Draw of the Ditches

Growing up on the farm, I had to get used to driving on gravel roads. Rainfall would make these roads impassable if it were not for the skillful work of the municipality graders. These graders regularly “crowned” the roads, pulling the gravel from the sides to the center so that the rainwater would not sit on the road itself but naturally run off into either ditch. That kept the roads drivable, but it also introduced another problem. The natural slope of the road to each side meant that it was easy—if you took your eyes off the road—to veer into either ditch. Gravity naturally pulls you downward from the crown.

The exercise of authority in the church has constantly faced the same danger. Leadership in the church is necessary. Yet without attentiveness to God’s explicit design for church government, Christians are naturally drawn into one of two ditches: *anarchy* on the left, and *over-complexity* on the right. Both ditches feature their own forms of ruin.

Those pulled into the ditch of anarchy are drawn by an inherent distrust of authority. At best they look with suspicion on everything related to structure, order, leaders, and laws. At worst they look on these things with disdain. In some cases, real experiences with abusive leaders—pastors with the Diotrephes Syndrome (see 3 John 9–10)—are the acknowledged reason for the swerve into anarchy. But in other cases, jealousy, arrogance, and stubbornness provide the pull. Whatever the cause, the ideal of “liberty” and “egalitarianism”—where no one has authority over another—becomes the desirable form of church government. But after coming to terms with the fact that such an ideal is never achievable, individuals typically retreat into their own “church”—one with only three members: me, myself, and I. This end is summarized well by the words of Judges 17:6 and 21:25: “In those days there was no king in Israel; every man did what was right in his own eyes.”

But then there is the opposite ditch. If the flesh cannot have *absolute liberty*, it will settle for *hierarchical bondage*. The appeal of this complexity is bewildering, but we see it everywhere. In social contexts we find it with the ever-burgeoning size of government. Tech experts speak of “complexity creep”—the inevitable tendency to accumulate extra layers, rules, or steps in systems, processes, or designs. There is even something called “Lehman’s Law,” or “the second law of software evolution,” that states that systems grow more complex as people continuously change them, unless there is the active and continuous effort to return to simplicity. Such over-complexity is observed in Israel’s religious history (e.g., Ezek 34:2–4; Matt 23:1–7). It is also painfully evident in church history. Ever-expanding layers of leadership, the introduction of the clergy-laity distinction, the use of clerical vestments, appointment of popes and patriarchs, and the vast numbers of people who accept these things without Scriptural warrant, testify to the pull of over-complexity.

In summarizing the ditch on the left, *anarchy*, Mark Dever (*Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*, 199–200, 223) writes,

We’ve become accustomed to thinking about abuse and power in the same sentence, and about authoritarianism whenever we think about authority. Whatever the reason, there is a pervasive and inherent suspicion of authority in our society. . . . A world without authority would be like desires with no restraints, a car with no controls, an intersection with no traffic lights, a game with no rules, a home with no parents. It might go on for a little while, but before long it would seem pointless, then cruel and unutterably tragic.

In summarizing the ditch on the right, *over-complexity*, Alexander Strauch (*Biblical Eldership*, 101–102) states,

Some of the worst havoc wrought to the Christian faith has been a direct result of unscriptural forms of church structure. Only a few centuries after the apostles’ death, for example, Christ’s churches began to assimilate both Roman and Jewish concepts of status, power, and priesthood. . . . Under Christ’s name an elaborately structured institution emerged that corrupted the simple, family structure of the apostolic churches, robbed God’s people of their lofty position and ministry in Christ, and exchanged Christ’s supremacy over His people for the supremacy of the institutional church.

But authority and leadership must never be understood as inherently evil. After all, God is a God of power and authority (Ps 103:19). True, the absence of leadership, or the corruption of leadership, inflict untold harm and suffering on those under it. But the opposite is equally true. At the end of his reign over the nation of Israel, King David stated, “He who rules over men righteously, who rules in the fear of God, is as the light of the morning when the sun rises, a morning without clouds, when the tender grass springs out of the earth, through sunshine after rain” (2 Sam 23:3–4). Equally, **godly leadership is a supreme blessing to the church and the key to its spiritual prosperity.** A survey of the Bible’s teaching on leadership in the church gives testimony to this truth.

I. The Biblical OFFICES of Church Leadership

- A. When it comes to authority in the church, it all begins with ***Jesus Christ—the Head of the church***. Any legitimate authority to be exercised in the church must originate in the absolute rule of Jesus Christ over His church. The church belongs to Christ, and He is its Builder (Matt 16:18). He alone has been given “all authority” to oversee and delegate its mission (Matt 28:18–20). He is the church’s “head” (Eph 1:22–23; Col 1:18). He is the church’s ultimate “foundation” (1 Cor 3:11). He walks among His churches, providing unassailable assessment and judgment (Rev 1:10–20). He is the church’s ultimate “Shepherd” and “Guardian” (1 Pet 2:25; 5:4; Heb 13:20). To understand the exercise of authority in the church correctly, one must first take this into account.
- B. As Lord of the church, Jesus Christ has chosen *means* to administer His authority on His behalf. These means are **the apostles, the *delegated foundation of the church***. Christ assigned His authority to this select group of men whom He commissioned to establish His church in the world. This was not an ordinary group of people. They had to be those selected by Jesus Christ Himself. They had to be those who personally witnessed Jesus in His resurrected body. They needed to have special spiritual gifting—the ability to perform supernatural works known as “the signs of an apostle” (see Acts 1:21–22; 2 Cor 12:12; etc.). In other words, this group was limited—both in number and in time. They were necessary to form the church’s foundation (see Eph 2:19–22).

But although the apostles passed out of existence almost 2000 years ago, their authority lives on—in the pages of the New Testament. The Scriptures they penned serve as the everlasting record of their instruction. Thus, to abide under their authority is to obey their words. The only “**apostolic succession**” that exists is the faithful succession of their inspired texts. To follow them means to follow their teaching, including what they say about leadership and the exercise of authority in the church. Thus, as Guy Waters observes, “The Bible alone affords the church its elements of polity, thereby excluding any human additions whether deriving from custom, tradition, human authority, expediency, or any other consideration” (*One Holy, Catholic, and Apostolic Church*, 170–71).

- C. What did the apostles teach with respect to leadership after their passing? Contrary to popular opinion, they taught quite a lot. In fact, a survey of their teaching in the New Testament indicates that **elders are to be the ruling officers in the local church today**, responsible for *knowing, teaching, leading, and protecting* church members.

How do the apostles identify these men? They certainly do not identify them according to *lineage, family connections, financial prosperity, social status, education, or worldly acclaim*. Rather, the apostles identify them as men who have been *spiritually gifted by God according to His own sovereign choice*. They are men who respond with *faithfulness to the truth of God’s Word*. And they are men who are *characterized by practical obedience* and a track record of *conformity to the likeness of Jesus Christ* (see 1 Tim 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). Practically speaking, the apostles have identified them by **three helpful titles: “elders,” “overseers,” and “pastors.”**

1. The term “**elder**” is the most common term for this category of leadership. The term translates the Greek word πρεσβύτερος (*presbyteros*)—a term which **emphasizes maturity and character**. The nation of Israel itself benefited from the leadership of “elders” (e.g., Exod 3:16; Deut 19:12; Josh 24:31; 1 Sam 8:4). Soon after the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2), and in anticipation of the growth of the church and the apostles’ eventual passing from the scene, “elders” ruled the church in Jerusalem alongside the apostles themselves (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22–23; 16:4; 21:17–18). The letter of James—the earliest of the NT books (written around AD 45)—attests to the ministry of “elders” in the individual local assemblies of Jewish believers at the time (James 5:14).

But the role of “elders” in the church was not unique to the Jewish churches. In fact, it was essential in the formation of the churches beyond the land of Israel. The apostle Paul specifically appointed “elders” (plural) in each Gentile church throughout his ministry (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17, 19–20; Titus 1:5). The apostle Peter also mentions the “elders” among the churches to which he wrote (1 Pet 5:1). By a closer look at the language of these texts, it becomes undeniable that the apostolic practice was to establish a **plurality of elders—mature, wise, respectable men—for each individual church**.

2. Another term used in the New Testament to describe this same office of leadership is the term **“overseer”** (translated as “bishop” in some translations). The term translates the Greek word ἐπίσκοπος (*episkopos*)—a term which **emphasizes function**. The word points to “one who has the responsibility of safeguarding or seeing to it that something is done in the correct way” (BDAG). It describes the duty of **watching over, from within**.

The classic occurrence of this term is in 1 Timothy 3:1–2, where Paul begins a detailed list of the qualifications necessary for anyone who would lead the church at this level: “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to **the office of overseer**, it is a fine work he desires to do. **An overseer**, then, must be . . .” (see also Titus 1:7). Paul goes on to provide more than a dozen qualifications related to character and skill that must mark a candidate who is to engage in this responsibility of guardianship. But although Paul uses the singular number in 1 Timothy 3:1–2 (“an overseer, then, must be . . .”), this cannot be taken as if just *one* overseer was all that a church needed. When Paul later addresses the church in Ephesus, and the church in Philippi (cities which would have had just *one* church), he refers to these leaders in the *plural*: **“overseers”** (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1). As Tom Pennington states about a plurality of overseers, **“Collectively, we are wiser than we are individually.”**

3. The third synonymous term is the English term **“pastor”** (a word derived from the Latin term for “shepherd”), which translates the Greek term ποιμήν (*poimēn*). When used to speak of church leadership, the term **emphasizes the manner** by which leadership is to be exercised. Christ called Himself the “good Shepherd” (John 10:11) because of His self-sacrificing care for His people. After Him, Peter called Christ “the Chief Shepherd” (1 Pet 5:4; see also 2:25) and the writer of Hebrews calls Christ “the great Shepherd” (Heb 13:20).

Naturally, those who would be **Christ’s “under shepherds”** in local congregations must manifest this same self-sacrificing care for the people of God. Thus, Paul called upon the Ephesian elders/overseers **“to shepherd the church of God** which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The apostle Peter similarly challenged the elders in the churches to which he wrote to **“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” (1 Pet 5:2). As such, **pastoral leadership must always be marked by selflessness and sacrifice**.

There can be no doubt. **All three terms—“elder,” “overseer” (“bishop”), and “pastor”—refer to the same leadership office.** Each term emphasizes a different nuance, but each refers to the same person.

4. A fourth term could be added to this: **“leader.”** The term is derived from the Greek verb ἡγέομαι (*hēgeomai*), which means “to be in a supervisory capacity.” Once again, the term **emphasizes the function** of the leader. In particular, the writer of Hebrews uses this term to describe elders/overseers/pastors (see Heb 13:7, 17, 24). In other words, the elders/overseers/pastors/leaders of the church must be marked by the skill and courage necessary to guide, instruct, equip, protect, and discipline the members of their local church.

For this leadership to be a *blessing* to the church, the apostles provided clear, enduring requirements for candidates that must be followed just as much in our day as in theirs. These leaders must have:

- **Conviction** – they must “aspire” to the work (1 Tim 3:1)
- **Character** – they must be “above reproach” (1 Tim 3:2–7; Titus 1:6–9)
- **Competency** – they must be “able to teach” and “manage well” (1 Tim 3:2, 4–5; 5:17; Titus 1:9)
- **Consistent** – they must “hold fast the faithful word” (Titus 1:9)
- **Cooperative** – they must lead together with others (Acts 20:28)
- **Confirmed** – like the deacons, they must be “tested” before serving (1 Tim 3:10)

- D. The apostles, with the authority of Jesus Christ, established another office that must be part of the life of every local church: **the deaconate**. Like the elders, deacons must be those who possess *spiritual gifting which God alone grants*, a *fidelity to God's Word*, and *godliness of character*. In fact, for the most part, deacons must have the same character qualifications that the elders must have, but with an exception: **they are not expected to have competency in teaching and decision-making**. For references to the deacons in the NT, see Philippians 1:1 and 1 Timothy 3:8–13.

The term “**deacon**” generally describes “**one who is busy with something in a manner that is of assistance to someone.**” It can be further defined as “one who serves as an intermediary in a transaction, *agent, intermediary, courier,*” or “one who gets something done, at the behest of a superior, *assistant to someone*” (BDAG). Thus, deacons are not a *competing or parallel* form of leadership in the church. Instead, they are a *complementary one*—one that provides *practical assistance* to the elders in the implementation of their leadership. Moreover, the need for deacons does not negate the responsibility all believers have to “serve one another” (e.g., Gal 5:13), but deacons are to ensure this service takes place in the corporate/formal aspects of church life.

Ultimately, it is crucial to note that Christ so values service within His church that He established a special office in that would be formally tasked with that responsibility.

II. The Biblical FORM of Church Government

As Robert Saucy stated, “The church must have some form [of government]; in fact, it always does. The question remains as to which form is prescribed in the Scriptures” (*The Church in God's Program*, 105). In the history of the church, three general forms of church government have been proposed:

- A. Episcopalian
- B. Presbyterian
- C. Congregational

See Grace Community Church's “What We Teach,” in the section on “The Church” (available here: [Doctrinal Statement | Grace Community Church](#)) for a defense of “Elder-Rule.” See also Tom Pennington's booklet, “The Case for Elder Rule.”

For Discussion

1. How should you as a church member insist on “qualified leadership” in your church? What are ways to let your current leaders know that this is essential for you, because it is required by Christ and necessary for the well-being of the church?
2. Read 1 Timothy 5:19. How does this exhortation shape the way you are to respond to complaints against the leaders in your church?
3. Discuss the merits of this statement: “To aspire to the office or title is dangerous; to desire the labor of it is good.”
4. Is the Lord burdening your heart with the labor of the elder or the deacon? Get counsel about what you should do next.
5. Compile a list of practical ways that you can be an encouragement to the elders and deacons of your church.

For Further Study

1. **Memorize:** Hebrews 13:7, 17
2. **Read (beginner):** *A Biblical Case for Elder Rule*, by Tom Pennington (available on Kindle).
3. **Read (intermediate):** “Spiritual Authority in the Church,” pages 753–775 in *Biblical Doctrine*, by John MacArthur & Richard Mayhue.
4. **Read (advanced):** *The Church in God's Program*, by Robert Saucy, pages 98–126.
5. **Sing:** “Rise Up, O Men of God” (#339 in *Hymns of Grace*).
6. **Pray:** Spend a significant amount of time this week in prayer for the leaders of your church.

Audio, video, and handouts for this session are available at www.gracechurch.org/motw.

Next meeting: September 30, 7pm – “Ekklesia: Water Baptism”