Plurality of Elders, Yet a “First among Equals”

Part 2 of “NT Biblical Eldership: Leadership Perseverance in Plurality”

**Dave Burggraff** │Professor of Historical and Systematic Theology, STS

**Plurality in Number**

The New Testament never mentions a specific number of elders for a congregation; however, it regularly refers to “elders” in the plural (Acts 14:23; see also 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; 1 Tim 4:14; 15:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1). [See Rich Main’s presentation for fuller discussion of plurality.]

The pattern is uniform and the evidence overwhelming. The only singular reference to an elder occurs in 2 and 3 John, and 1 Peter, where the writer simply refers to himself as “the elder,” and in 1 Timothy 5, where Paul offers instruction for an accusation against “an elder.” Essentially, the New Testament uniformly presents churches as led by a body of elders, not simply one elder.[[1]](#footnote-1) On the plurality of elders, Stephen Davey rightly observes:

This doesn’t mean there weren’t congregations led by one pastor/elder—no doubt there were new or immature churches that had no more than one man qualified to lead. Further, we can assume there were churches that had *no one* qualified—or identified—to lead them. Evidently, the churches on the island of Crete fit this category: leaderless . . . or worse—they had unqualified men leading these congregations.

However, to our point, we are never given an example of a flock in the New Testament where one man served alone.

Proponents of a one-elder rule say that there were elders in a city church that was composed of many individual house-churches where a single elder had oversight; all the house churches in the city got together periodically, and from that you had a plurality of elders. But the fact still remains: the Church was seen as *one* church in that city, and decisions were made by a collective process of elders in reference to the whole Church, not individual parts. This view effectively supports a plurality of leaders making decisions.[[2]](#footnote-2)

What is important to understand is that there is not one passage that explicitly says one elder has *all* the authority in a church. In fact, that would be characteristic of a cult, not a church.[[3]](#footnote-3)

The New Testament informs us that elders (plural) were appointed in every church (singular), and the sharing of responsibilities and authority was the sign of a healthy, vibrant local church.

**The Number of Elders**

There is no mandate in Scripture for the total number of elders required to be present on the elder board. The only biblical precedent for the number of elders is a plurality of elders. Therefore, each church should determine the total number of elders necessary to appropriately lead the congregation based on the unique size and needs of the congregation.

Depending on the unique size of the congregation, the number of elders needs to be sufficient to execute the tasks and responsibilities of the elders. For instance, it would be insufficient to think an elder board of two elders could appropriately oversee and manage a congregation of 1,000 people. So, there is a caution that an elder board could be proportionately too small for the size of the church. However, the opposite caution is true—an elder board could be proportionately too large for the size of the congregation. For instance, it would be unnecessary to have five elders overseeing a congregation of one hundred people.

Additionally, it is important to recognize the principle that the larger the elder board is, the more challenging it is to appropriately oversee and manage the affairs of the church in a way that fosters functionality. Logistically, when an elder board gets too large, it actually prevents the elders from being able to meet and collaborate on issues pertinent to the health of the church.

Also, it is important to note that a large elder board creates more obstacles for unity and unanimity. Smaller elder boards foster the ability to have unity and reach points of unanimity because there is more time for each elder to share their unique insights in order to process matters together. Unanimity isn’t a requirement for elder boards, but it is a benefit of smaller elder boards.

Lastly, for the sake of clarity, it will be helpful for every congregation to set a goal for how many elders is necessary to adequately shepherd the congregation. However, this goal should not be seen as a legalistic “quota” or requirement if a vacancy forms within the elder board. As vacancies form within the board, only qualified candidates who meet the biblical qualifications for eldership should be elected as elders. The board should appropriately caution any efforts of hurry or panic to nominate new elders.

**Various Roles among the Elders**

When it comes to the variety of roles among the elder board, it is important to note that every elder possesses **equality in essence**. What that means is that each elder carries the same level of value and importance. There should be *no level of superiority among the elder board*. Each elder serves together and maintains equality in their essence.

Though each elder is equal in essence, it is important to note that all elders are not equal in their function. Another way to say it is that each elder has his own gifts and qualities he brings to the table. Alexander Strauch says it this way: “Although elders act jointly as a council and share equal authority and responsibility for the leadership of the church, all are not equal in their giftedness, biblical knowledge, leadership ability, experience, or dedication.”[[4]](#footnote-4)

We are also told more specifically that some elders are deserving of greater honor. Paul wrote to Timothy that those elders who work at preaching and teaching are worthy of “double honor”—an expression determined in this context to refer to financial remuneration in addition to respect.

*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle the ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”* (1 Timothy 5:17-18)

We see from this passage that all the elders in a local church did not necessarily spend the majority of their time preaching and teaching. This passage also offers information critical to our understanding of what we see developing in church polity in the New Testament. The passage hints at the emerging role of elders who teamed together in leadership but were responsible for a variety of roles within a local church.

**First Among Equals: The Senior Pastor (His Role and His Authority)**

It’s also helpful at this point to recognize the principle of “*first among equals*” or the “*leader among leaders*.” This does not mean the “first among equals” elder has a higher level of authority or gets to be the boss of the elders. Rather, it just means that the first among equals has a unique gift of leadership as the pastor-teacher to help lead the entire flock.

The principle of a leader among leaders is illustrated in the church at Jerusalem with the prominence of James, the pastor-teacher who was observably leading the other leaders, directing the church toward a final decision regarding Gentile converts (Acts 15:13-21). This same text clearly refers to a plurality of elders within the Jerusalem church (Acts 15:22).

D. A. Carson says this regarding a leader among elders:

*Where you have a group of elders, a group of pastors, a group of overseers, then inevitably, in the very nature of the case, some are going to be more senior than others, whether because they have been in the task longer, or because they are more experienced or they know more, or because they are better teachers of the Word of God.[[5]](#footnote-5)*

We also see this principle early on among Jesus’ team of apostles. Alexander Strauch explains:

*Jesus chose twelve apostles, all of whom He empowered to preach and heal, but He singled out three for special attention— Peter, James, and John (“ first ones among equals”). Among the three, as well as among the Twelve, Peter stood out as the most prominent (“first among equals”).[[6]](#footnote-6)*

What all this means is that every elder board will undoubtedly have a variety of roles and functions, including a “first among equals” (or, “leader among leaders”), in which that elder leads and contributes (and influences) by means of his preaching-teaching ministry of the Word to the overall shepherding of the church.

Sometimes pastors ask how it is possible to function as a senior pastor with elders who share pastoral authority and responsibility. One senior pastor with a plurality of elders has expressed it well.

I have been called to preach and love doing it. Because of my calling, I have more opportunities to address the congregation, and thus have a unique platform from which to exercise authority in the church. As the church's senior pastor, I am in a position to speak, to lead, and to bring about change within the church. Although my authority is sometimes more noticeable due to my position, it is not above that of the other elders. Not all elders have this calling to preach full-time, yet all of us share in the authority of leading and giving oversight to the church. Some do more behind the scenes, while others--such as the senior pastor--present more visibly the authority vested in plural elders.[[7]](#footnote-7)

Pastor Mark Dever, the senior pastor of his church in Washington, D.C., expresses this well.

The elder that we usually refer to as "the" pastor—the person like me—is, these days, the one who is generally set apart to fill the pulpit on Sunday. He is the one who marries and buries. He will often be paid – either part-time or fully. If the church is larger, he may be the one who hires and fires, and who sets the direction for the church as a whole. In our congregation in Washington, I am recognized as an elder by virtue of my call as the senior pastor of the church. Anyone whom we hire to work in ministry will either be called an assistant, or a pastor.

Among these elders, I have only one vote. Because of the leadership responsibility I have as the main public teacher, there is undoubtedly a special degree of authority that attaches to my voice in elders' meetings, but the other brothers probably have by now a pretty good assessment of where I am most concerned and most helpful, and where I have less to contribute. In an eldership, though formal authority between the members is equal, there will always be those who garner special regard in one area or another.[[8]](#footnote-8)

One of the best explanations of the role of the senior pastor among a plurality of elders is offered by senior pastor Phil Newton. He writes:

So what is the role of the senior pastor in a plural eldership? First, he is often devoted full-time to the work of ministry. If so, he spends major time in study, prayer, preparation, proclamation, and teaching. He often will have pursued formal theological training, which equipped him for the responsibilities of senior pastor.

Second, he is needed as a leader among the elders since he devotes his full labors and energies to the ministry. **Quite practically, he is in the best position to lead, initiate policy, create changes, direct ministries, and give attention to the needs of the body.** He lives each day for this purpose, while the other elders might have other vocations such as sales or medicine or construction design, as in my church. The senior pastor's fellow elders support him as they recognize the priority of preaching for New Testament ministry (1 Cor. 1-3). They also seek to sharpen and home the senior pastor's skills and understanding of the Word through ongoing interaction.

Third, the distinct call to preach is not an equivalent to the office of elder. A church might have preachers who are not elders and elders who are not preachers, since the call to preach or ability to fill the pulpit is not required of elders. There is no hint that all preachers must be presbyters [elders] or that all presbyters must be preachers. Instead, the need to consistently, carefully feed the flock of God must not be undermined by routinely passing around pulpit responsibilities.

Finally, although the senior pastor has the major platform for addressing the church, he does so with the knowledge that his fellow elders stand with him in the work of ministry.[[9]](#footnote-9)

*NOTE: It is the intent of The Shepherd’s Church to have a “first among equals” serving on the board of elders. According to the bylaws, this role has the title of Senior Pastor or “Preaching – Teaching Elder.”*

1. Mark Dever, *Understanding Church Leadership*, 18 [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Stephen Davey, *Titus*, 61-62. An argument is often posed against plurality of elders by referring to the letters to the churches found Revelation 2-3. Stephen Davey address this: “Still others refer to the letters sent by Christ to individual churches in *Revelation 2-3.* They argue that since the letters to the churches were delivered to a singular angel (*angelos*) of the church, that this angel—or messenger—was a reference to a singular elder or singular pastor-teacher. The problem with this view is that we’re simply guessing. In fact, if the angel was indeed a pastor, it would just as easily reinforce the concept of a leader among leaders—a first among equals—in *Revelation 2-3*, since we’re not told that this elder didn’t represent a group of elders. In fact, we know that one of the churches that received a letter did, indeed, have more than one elder: Ephesus *(Revelation 2:1-7),*” 62. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Stephen Davey, *Titus*, 63. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Alexander Strauch *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Kindle Locations 620-622). Lewis and Roth Publishers [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. D. A. Carson, “Defining Elders,” [http://riversidecommunitychurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Carson-](http://riversidecommunitychurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Carson-Defining-Elders.pdf)Defining-Elders.pdf [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Alexander Strauch (2011-03-11). *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Kindle Locations 620-622). Lewis and Roth Publishers. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Phil. A. Newton, "Putting it all Together" in Phil A. Newton and Matt Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2014), 204. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. Mark Dever, cited in Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church*, 204-5. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)
9. Phil. A. Newton, "Putting it all Together," 205-6. Bold added for emphasis. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)