NT Biblical Eldership: Leadership Perseverance in Plurality

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## Biblical Evidence for Plural Eldership

## In his book Biblical Eldership, Alexander Strauch provides a helpful summary of the New Testament pattern for church government:

## The New Testament records evidence of pastoral oversight by a council of elders in nearly all the first churches. These local churches were spread over a wide geographic and culturally diverse area — from Jerusalem to Rome. Consider **the consistent pattern of plural leadership by elders** that existed among the first Christian churches as it is recorded in the New Testament.

## Elders are found in the churches of Judea and the surrounding area (Acts 11:30, James 5:14,15)

## Elders governed the church in Jerusalem (Acts 15)

## Among the Pauline churches, leadership by the plurality of elders was established in the churches of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch (Acts 14:23); in the church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17, 1 Tim 3:1-7; 5:17-25); in the church at Philippi (Phil 1:1); and in the churches on the island of Crete (Titus 1:5)

## According to the well-traveled letter of 1 Peter, elders existed in the churches throughout northwestern Asia Minor: Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1; 5:1).

## There are strong indications that elders existed in churches in Thessalonica (1 Thess 5:12) and Rome (Heb 13:17).[[1]](#footnote-1)

## While the New Testament provides a clear pattern of plural elder leadership within each local church, it does not provide the answers for every practical detail regarding church governance.

## If you start looking in the New Testament for how we should organize a church, you won’t find a straightforward manual of church government; there is no ideal constitution for a church.[[2]](#footnote-2)

## The Polity of The Shepherd’s Church

In addition to the New Testament witness, much of how we view church government here at The Shepherd’s Church comes from historic Baptist principles:

* The Bible is the only rule of faith and practice (primitivism)
* Priesthood of all believers (soul liberty)
* Regenerated church membership (voluntarism)
* Two church ordinances (baptism by immersion, Lord’s supper)
* Autonomy of the local congregation (congregational polity)
* Separation of church and state

As such, we believe that the local church is fully equipped by God to govern itself, apart from any other earthly authority. Holy Spirit gifted believers are appointed as elders from within the congregation to lead the congregation, following principles and patterns set forth in the New Testament scriptures.

The local church has the absolute right of self-government free from the interference of any hierarchy of individuals or organizations. The one and only superintendent is Christ through the Holy Spirit. . . On all matters of membership, polity, government, discipline, and benevolence, the will of the local church is final. (TSC Constitution, Article 2, Section 7 - The Church).

As a local church in the Baptist tradition, we follow a congregational model of church government based on the New Testament witness and historic Baptist convictions. We also follow the New Testament pattern of plural local elder leadership. As such, the polity of The Shepherd’s Church can be described as elder-led congregational, as set forth in the practices outlined in our church Constitution and Bylaws.

* **Elder-led** - The leadership of The Shepherd’s Church is vested in its elders (TSC Bylaws, Responsibility and Authority of the Elders).
* **Congregational** - The elders are affirmed by the church membership, subject to discipline like any other member, and their actions are limited by congregational approval in a number of key areas (as set forth in TSC Bylaws, Limitation of Authority). Examples of actions which must be approved by the church membership include: approval of new members, approval of new elders and deacons, approving the annual budget, incurring new indebtedness over a certain amount, etc…

This practice of delegated decision making is common among many Baptist churches, although the exact details of which decisions are delegated (and to whom) differ from church to church:

Being autonomous, Baptist churches vary in the specific ways that they make decisions. Baptist polity calls for the entire membership to be ultimately responsible for decisions made on the basis of Christ’s will for the church. However, often it is not practical for the total membership to be involved in every decision. Therefore, churches follow a variety of procedures in carrying out the business of the church. Many churches formalize the procedures in a constitution and bylaws. (Congregational Governance, Baptist Distinctives, https://www.baptistdistinctives.org/resources/articles/congregational-church-governance)

## Practical Benefits of Plural Eldership

There are a number of practical benefits to Plural Eldership, as well. Several are provided here, but this is by no means an exhaustive list.

**Accountability and protection**. Plurality guards against error and provides necessary leadership accountability for the senior pastor.

Elders do not replace the need for a senior pastor who labors in the Word and gives leadership to the church. Instead, elders come alongside the senior pastor as fellow servants to the body, filling the gaps in the pastor's weaknesses, holding up his arms as he preaches, sharing the burden for the multiplied pastoral needs in the church.[[3]](#footnote-3)

**Balance of gifts and workload.** Plurality balances the strengths and weaknesses of the leadership team and provides sustainable shepherding.

A plurality of elders provides the church with balance. No one person has all the gifts or the time necessary to minister faithfully to the congregation. As a result, most pastors are not able to adequately fulfill all the responsibilities set before them. . . By having a team of elders, the deficiencies of one man are balanced by the other elders who complement his weaknesses. A plurality of elders also allows each elder to focus on his specific calling and gifting.[[4]](#footnote-4)

**Shared burden and durability.** Plurality fosters leadership team continuity and prevents burnout.

[Another] benefit of having a plurality of elders is that the burden of ministry is shared. Caring for the church is often too much for one man to handle and can lead to frustration and burnout.[[5]](#footnote-5)

**Healthier decision-making and discipline.** Plurality brings the wisdom of a multitude of counselors, tempers extremes in style and risk-taking, and handles discipline cases more fairly and credibly.

When elders are practicing a healthy plurality, it’s harder for one man’s views or tendencies to dominate, because the elders offset one another. The gentler elders temper the more fiery ones. The activists move the analyzers toward actually making decisions. The big-faith elders keep every decision from being one more exercise in fiscal conservatism and risk management, while the practical elders help the dreamers and visionaries not to do stupid things under the pretext of “trusting God.” That sort of mutual balancing generates an atmosphere that’s hard for egotists to tolerate.[[6]](#footnote-6)

**Congregational strength.** Plural leadership strengthens congregationalism by leading in most matters while referring the most important decisions to the congregation as a whole.

In the New Testament there seems to be a balance between the authority of the elders and the authority of the congregation as a whole. To ignore either side of this equation will create an unhealthy and dangerous imbalance. Thus, key decisions in the church should not be made only by the elders but should be brought before the entire congregation. Because the church is a body (and not merely a head or feet), all in the church are important and should be allowed to be a part of major decisions.[[7]](#footnote-7)

## Part 2 – Senior Pastor as First Among Equals

## (On this discussion, see the additional handout by Dave Burggraff)

Summary comments by Rich Main – “Working together as Chairman and Senior Pastor”

1. Strauch, Alexander. 2024. *Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Local Church*. Biblical Eldership Resources. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Dever, Mark. 2021. *Nine Marks of a Healthy Church*. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Phil A. Newton. *Elders in Congregational Life: Rediscovering the Biblical Model for Church Leadership* (Kindle Locations 314-316). Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. Dever, Mark, and Jonathan Leeman. 2015. *Baptist Foundations: Church Government for an Anti-Institutional Age*. B&H Publishing Group. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. Ibid. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Rinne, Jeramie. *Church Elders* (9Marks: Building Healthy Churches) (Kindle Locations 1009-1013). Crossway. Kindle Edition. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. Baptist Foundations. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)