

A BIBLICAL MODEL FOR LOCAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Elder-Led • Pastor-Teacher-Guided • Congregation-Affirming

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PURPOSE

Conservative Evangelical churches continue to wrestle with questions such as:

- Who has final earthly authority in the local church?
- How should elders lead?
- What role should the congregation have?
- What is the role of the senior pastor?
- How can leadership be biblical without becoming authoritarian?
- How can congregational involvement be meaningful without becoming disorderly?

This handout summarizes the theological foundations and practical structure of the proposed model. The model does not begin with efficiency, personality, or denominational tradition. It begins with Christ's headship and the sufficiency of Scripture, then asks how the New Testament distributes responsibility among the congregation, a plurality of elders, and a pastor-teacher who provides primary influence and guidance. The book is not only theological; it is meant to help: pastors, elders, deacons, ministry students, churches in transition, and church members. It moves from doctrine to implementation.

FOUNDATION: SEVEN GUIDING PRINCIPLES

1. **Christ is the Head.** Every leader and congregation remains under His unchallenged authority. Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18.
2. **The church is the body of Christ.** The spiritual body of true believers from Pentecost to the Rapture, expressed visibly in local congregations that should display its unity, holiness, and mission. Acts 2:1–4; 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 4:4–16.
3. **Biblical images define and help direct church life.** Body, building, bride, flock, family, temple, and priesthood describe God's design and prescribe what the church is and how it should live (conduct itself). Ephesians 2:19–22; 5:25–27; 1 Peter 2:4–10.
4. **The church is distinct from Israel (it's not the *new* Israel) and from the future kingdom.** This distinction preserves the Bible's storyline and makes the New Testament primary for church polity. Acts 1:6–8; Romans 11:25–29; 1 Corinthians 10:32.
5. **Scripture is sufficient.** The inspired, inerrant, authoritative Word supplies what the church needs for doctrine, leadership, and governance. 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21.
6. **Interpretation matters; interpretation is the present issue.** Scripture must be read by a normal, grammatical-historical method. Let the text speak in a normal sense, in context, before importing tradition or a preferred model. Nehemiah 8:8; Luke 24:27; 2 Timothy 2:15.
7. **Every practice must submit to Scripture.** Every doctrine, tradition, experience, and practice must be chastened by Scripture; the New Testament is primary for developing church leadership. Tradition can advise, but Scripture judges. Acts 17:11; Mark 7:8–13; 1 Thessalonians 5:21.

These foundational principles establish the authority and method. What follows then applies them to a working model with three coordinated dimensions.

THE PROPOSED MODEL AT A GLANCE

Congregation-Affirming

The congregation carries final human responsibility under Christ in major matters. It receives, evaluates, and affirms elder recommendations rather than initiating every decision. Congregational authority is especially visible in discipline, doctrinal accountability, recognition of servants and leaders, missionary commissioning, and major governance decisions. Matthew 18:15–17; Acts 6:1–6; 13:1–3; 15:1–23; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 2 Corinthians 2:6.

Plural-Elder-Led

A plurality of biblically qualified elders shepherds, teaches, protects, and oversees the church. Their authority is real but delegated, limited, and accountable to Christ, Scripture, one another, and the congregation. Plurality supplies complementary gifts, shared labor, continuity, wiser judgment, and protection from error. Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17–25; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4.

Pastor-Teacher-Guided

Within the plurality, a vocational pastor-teacher may exercise primary influence through preaching, teaching, management, and visible leadership. He is first among equals—not above the elders, not independent of them, and not free to act unilaterally. Equality of office allows differentiation of function. Acts 15:7–22; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17–18; Titus 1:7–9.

KEY DISTINCTIONS

- Congregational affirmation is not unmanaged democracy; it is informed participation under biblical leadership. The congregation has genuine authority, but it is not independent authority. The congregation does not create truth by vote. Instead, the congregation is responsible to **recognize, affirm, and act upon what accords with Scripture. Why “affirmation” rather than merely “rule”?** The language of **congregational rule** can be misunderstood. Some may hear it as: “The congregation must vote on everything.” Or: “The congregation functions as a check on leadership at every point.” The book prefers **congregational affirmation** because it better expresses the biblical pattern:
 - leaders guide;
 - elders deliberate;
 - recommendations are brought forward;
 - and the congregation approves, recognizes, or affirms major matters. The New Testament presents the whole church involved in major decisions.

Examples include:

1. Church discipline

Matthew 18 and 1 Corinthians 5 show that final earthly responsibility in discipline rests with the church.

2. Selecting servants (deacons) in Acts 6¹

The apostles identified the need, gave direction, and the congregation selected qualified men. This is a key pattern: Leadership gives direction; the congregation affirms and participates.

3. The Jerusalem Council in Acts 15

¹ The office, role, and responsibilities of deacons are not addressed in this handout. However, the book, *Leading the Church God's Way*, contains several chapters devoted to deacons. The focus of the handout is church governance.

Acts 15 shows apostles, elders, and the whole church involved. James guides. The leaders deliberate. The whole church affirms the decision. This becomes one of the clearest examples of the model.

- Elder leadership is not elder sovereignty; elders remain accountable and major matters return to the congregation. Thus, *lead* is preferable to *rule*: elders are servant-shepherds, not sovereigns.
- Plurality is not sameness; elders share office and authority while differing in gifts and assignments.
- First among equals is not first over equals; influence does not become independent authority.
- Delegation is not abdication; the church as a whole, and leaders, remain responsible for what they entrust to others.

PRACTICAL SAFEGUARDS

1. Maintain meaningful membership and teach members their responsibilities.
2. Establish clear categories for congregational, elder, staff, and delegated decisions.
3. Select only biblically qualified elders; do not fill seats merely to reach a preferred number.
4. Require transparency, mutual accountability, and regular communication.
5. Protect against both personality-driven leadership and paralyzing committee culture.
6. Build consensus patiently, especially in doctrine, discipline, leadership recognition, and major change.
7. Keep preaching, prayer, shepherding, and mission central; governance serves ministry, not the reverse.

CORE SCRIPTURE INDEX

Christ's headship and ownership: Matthew 16:18; Acts 20:28; Ephesians 1:22–23; Colossians 1:18.

Nature and maturity of the church: 1 Corinthians 12:12–27; Ephesians 2:19–22; 4:11–16; 1 Peter 2:4–10.

Congregational responsibility: Matthew 18:15–17; Acts 6:1–6; 13:1–3; 15:1–23; 1 Corinthians 5:1–13; 2 Corinthians 2:6; 1 Peter 2:4–10.

Plural elders: Acts 14:23; 20:17, 28; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 3:1–7; 5:17–25; Titus 1:5–9; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1–4.

Pastor-teacher guidance: Acts 15:7–22; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 5:17–18; Titus 1:7–9.

Scripture's authority and sufficiency: 2 Timothy 3:16–17; 2 Peter 1:20–21; Acts 17:11.

Elders: 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). In his book *Biblical Eldership*, Alex Strauch provides a summary of the New Testament pattern:

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 are found in and led 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).²

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.³ 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.⁴

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.⁵

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.

² Strauch, Alexander. 2024. *Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Local Church*. Biblical Eldership Resources.

³ Mark Dever, *Understanding Church Leadership*, 18

⁴ 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.

⁵ Stephen Davey, *Titus*, 63.

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.

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.”⁶

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 Guidance)

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.

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

⁶ Alexander Strauch *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Kindle Locations 620-622). Lewis and Roth Publishers

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.⁷

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.⁸

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.⁹

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:

⁷ D. A. Carson, “Defining Elders,” <http://riversidecommunitychurch.org/wp-content/uploads/2014/05/Carson-Defining-Elders.pdf>. 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”).* Alexander Strauch (2011-03-11). *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Kindle Locations 620-622).

⁸ 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.

⁹ Mark Dever, cited in Newton and Schmucker, *Elders in the Life of the Church*, 204-5.

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 hone 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.¹⁰

One of my favorite quotes comes from veteran pastor and professor, Gene Getz. He said something to me when he spoke at a conference we were hosting at the seminary a few years ago. It stuck with me at the time; it's also found in his book *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church*.

One of the great principles that grabbed my attention . . . was "plurality in leadership." I'd always enjoyed working with a "team," but as I ventured into church planting, I became even more committed to this concept. I saw no other "plan" in the New Testament story—and still don't. To be perfectly honest, I have always been very disappointed with what I've perceived to be ministries built around the personality and abilities of a single leader.

Let me be perfectly honest. I was initially so committed to the principle of plurality in leadership that I, at times, downplayed and, in some respects, denied how important it is to have a strong primary leader. When I was asked, "Who leads the church?" I would always say, "The elders." In essence, that was a very true statement. And when I was then asked, "Who leads the elders?" I'd answer, "We lead the church, together." Again, this was a true response, but I didn't answer the question adequately. *The facts are that "I led the elders" and together "we led the church." I was then, and always have been, the primary leader in the Fellowship churches where I've served as senior pastor. Unfortunately, in those early years, I communicated a "model of leadership," I was not in actuality practicing.* It didn't take me long to discover I was overreacting to what I still believe is a distortion of what God intended in the realm of local church leadership. I needed to discover a balance.¹¹

This is a profound admission from one of the strongest advocates of plural-elder-led, congregational polity. Truth be told ("Let me be perfectly honest"), Dr. Getz's experience is what nearly every church

¹⁰ Phil. A. Newton, "Putting it all Together," 205-6. Bold added for emphasis.

¹¹ Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church*, 18. Italics for emphasis.

that claims a “plurality in leadership” is “in actuality practicing.” Perhaps, they too, need to discover a balance.

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).

Why James the Brother of Jesus Matters

From skeptic to servant-leader in the Jerusalem church

Why pay attention to James?

James the brother of Jesus is easy to overlook. He was not one of the Twelve, and the Gospels do not present him as an early disciple. Yet after the resurrection he appears at the center of the Jerusalem church. His story joins personal transformation, recognized spiritual leadership, shared elder responsibility, and congregational participation. For readers thinking about how a local church should be led, James is therefore more than a biographical curiosity: he is an important New Testament case study.

This handout summarizes the argument developed in the manuscript appendix, “The Leadership Role of James the Just: Have We Missed the Obvious?” It distinguishes what Scripture states clearly from reasonable historical or interpretive conclusions.

1. Jesus’ brother—and initially unconvinced

James was one of Jesus’ brothers, commonly understood as a younger half-brother: a son of Mary and Joseph who shared Jesus’ human family life but not his divine sonship. When people in Nazareth asked, “Is not his mother called Mary? And are not his brothers James and Joseph and Simon and Judas?” they were identifying the household they knew (Matthew 13:55–57). Familiarity did not produce faith. Mark reports that Jesus’ family went out to restrain him because people were saying, “He is out of his mind” (Mark 3:20–21). John is even more explicit: during Jesus’ public ministry, “not even his brothers believed in him” (John 7:3–5). The texts do not tell us every thought James held, so “skeptical” or “unbelieving” is more careful than imagining motives Scripture does not disclose.¹²

Key Scriptures: Matthew 13:55–57; Mark 3:20–21; John 7:3–5.

2. The risen Christ appeared to James

The decisive turning point comes in Paul’s summary of resurrection witnesses: after appearing to Cephas, the Twelve, and many others, the risen Jesus “appeared to James, then to all the apostles” (1 Corinthians 15:7). Scripture does not narrate the meeting, but the placement of James among named witnesses makes it highly significant. The most natural explanation of the later evidence is that this appearance brought James from unbelief to faith. By Acts 1:14, Jesus’ brothers are praying with the apostles, the women, and Mary as part of the believing community awaiting the Spirit. James’s conversion rests finally on an encounter with the risen Lord, not on family privilege.¹³

¹² See the manuscript appendix, “The Leadership Role of James the Just: Have We Missed the Obvious?” including its use of Stephen Davey’s discussion of James’s early unbelief and later conversion.

¹³ See the manuscript appendix, and its citation of Stephen Davey on the resurrection appearance as the likely explanation for James’s conversion and subsequent leadership.

Key Scriptures: 1 Corinthians 15:7; Acts 1:14.

3. A recognized leader in Jerusalem

James soon becomes a recognized leader of the Jerusalem believers. When Paul recalls his first post-conversion visit, he says that he saw Cephas and “none of the other apostles except James the Lord’s brother” (Galatians 1:18–19). Later he names James, Cephas, and John as those “reputed to be pillars” who extended the right hand of fellowship (Galatians 2:9). After Peter’s release from prison, Peter tells the gathered believers, “Tell these things to James and to the brothers” (Acts 12:17). James is not presented as a solitary ruler, yet he is repeatedly singled out as a trusted point of reference.¹⁴

Key Scriptures: Galatians 1:18–19; Galatians 2:9; Acts 12:17.

4. James and the Jerusalem Council

Acts 15 gives the clearest picture of James at work. The question was urgent: must Gentile converts be circumcised and keep the law of Moses in order to be saved? The apostles and elders gathered to consider the matter (Acts 15:6). There was “much debate”; Peter testified to God’s work among the Gentiles; Barnabas and Paul reported signs and wonders; and then James spoke (Acts 15:7–13). He interpreted the testimony in light of Scripture, appealed to the prophets, and offered a concrete pastoral judgment: “Therefore my judgment is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God” (Acts 15:19). The proposal protected the truth of salvation by grace while also calling Gentile believers to practices that would support holiness and fellowship.¹⁵ James guided the council, but he did not act alone. Apostles and elders deliberated; witnesses contributed; Scripture governed; and “the apostles and the elders, with the whole church,” chose representatives and sent the letter (Acts 15:22). The letter itself says, “it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us” (Acts 15:28). This is leadership with real guidance and real participation—not autocracy, but not leaderless consensus either.

Key Scripture: Acts 15:6–22 (see also vv. 23–29).

5. Still central when Paul returned

Years later, Paul returned to Jerusalem. Luke writes that the brothers received the travelers gladly and that, on the following day, “Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present” (Acts 21:17–18). The wording is compact but revealing. James remains the named leader, while the elders appear as a body. Paul reports what God has done among the Gentiles, and the leaders respond together to a difficult pastoral situation. The scene again combines identifiable leadership with plurality and consultation.¹⁶

Key Scripture: Acts 21:17–18.

6. Later historical witness

Early Christian and Jewish historical testimony confirms that James was remembered as a prominent Jerusalem leader and as a martyr. Josephus reports the execution of “James, the brother of Jesus who

¹⁴ See the manuscript appendix. On James’s prominence without solitary rule, see the appendix’s discussion of William Varner’s description of James as a “first among equals.”

¹⁵ See the manuscript appendix. Compare William Varner on James as first among equals and John Painter on the significance of James’s leadership and judgment in Acts 15, both as cited or discussed in the appendix.

¹⁶ See the manuscript appendix, including its use of F. F. Bruce on the significance of Acts 21:18: Paul goes to James, with all the elders present.

was called Christ,” in the first century. A later Christian account preserved by Eusebius and attributed to Hegesippus remembers James for unusual devotion, public witness, and death in Jerusalem. These sources differ in date, purpose, and detail, and they should not be treated as equal to inspired Scripture. Used carefully, however, they independently reinforce the basic historical picture: James was widely known, closely associated with Jesus, prominent in Jerusalem, and killed for his witness.¹⁷

7. Why James matters for church leadership

James supports the leadership model argued in the book when the evidence is held together rather than reduced to a single office or moment.

Pastor-teacher guidance. James speaks with theological clarity, applies Scripture, frames a pastoral judgment, and helps the church move toward faithful action. A congregation benefits from a recognized teacher-shepherd who can guide without claiming personal infallibility.

Plural-elder leadership. James is never pictured as the only leader. Apostles and elders deliberate in Acts 15, and all the elders are present in Acts 21. His prominence operates within a plurality of qualified leaders who share responsibility and accountability. However, his guidance and influence is apparent.

Congregational affirmation. The whole church participates in the resolution and sending of the Jerusalem Council’s message (Acts 15:22). The leaders teach and guide; the congregation does not merely observe. It recognizes, receives, and acts upon the church’s united judgment.

These emphases belong together. James’s example does not prove that every detail of modern church polity is fixed by one narrative. However, it does show that strong pastoral guidance, plural leadership, biblical deliberation, and congregational affirmation can coexist without contradiction. Authority is exercised under Christ, through his Word, for the unity, holiness, and mission of his people.

CONCLUSION

The proposed model seeks to hold together truths that are sometimes separated: **meaningful congregational responsibility, genuine plural-elder leadership, and strong pastor-teacher guidance.**

This biblical model works only when each element remains under Christ’s headship and the authority of His Word. Its aim is not institutional control. The goal is a healthy local church in which qualified leaders shepherd faithfully, members participate responsibly, and the whole body grows together toward maturity in Christ (Ephesians 4:11–16; 1 Peter 5:2–4; Hebrews 13:17).

¹⁷ See the manuscript appendix for its citation and evaluation of Josephus and of Hegesippus as preserved in Eusebius concerning James’s prominence and martyrdom. These are later historical witnesses, not additions to the biblical canon.