

Leadership in the Local Church

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NEW TESTAMENT WORDS FOR CHURCH LEADERS

Christians should begin our understanding of any doctrinal issue from the conviction that the scriptures are our ultimate authority. The study will, therefore, begin with examining the New Testament words for church leadership. Secondly we will examine the main theories of church government traditionally followed in different churches. After pausing to consider the question of whether women can be involved in church leadership and what the New Testament says about dealing with leaders who sin, we will finally draw some conclusions about a possible way forward for church leadership.

There are seven words used in the New Testament to describe church leaders and leadership:

1. Apostle (Greek *apóstolos*)
2. Elder (Greek *presbúteros*)
3. Overseer (Greek *epískopos*)
4. Pastor-teacher (Greek *poimén kai didáskalos*)
5. Deacon (Greek *diákonos*)
6. Leadership (Greek *hēgéōmai*)
7. Administration (Greek *proístēmi*)

If we are to understand the Biblical basis for leadership of the local church it is important that we understand the meaning and New Testament usage of each of these words.

Apostles

The word *apóstolos* means literally one who is "sent out". It was an uncommon word in classical Greek writings, and was given a special significance by Christ. He chose the word to distinguish the twelve from the other disciples as His special representatives (see Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2, 26). The meaning of the word is similar to the word "ambassador" (see II Corinthians 5:20), as an apostle is appointed personally by Christ to be His representative, and has special authority given by Christ. Paul became an apostle when Christ appeared to Him specially and appointed him as His apostle to the Gentiles (I Corinthians 15:7, 9; Romans 1:5, 13; Galatians 2:8). In his epistles Paul appealed to his apostolic authority as the basis on which his readers should accept His teaching, especially in situations where his authority was under question (Romans 1:1; I Corinthians 1:1, 9:1, 2, 15:9; II Corinthians 1:1, 12:11&12; Galatians 1:1). The apostles were the first leaders of the Church (Ephesians 4:11), and are described as the foundation of the Church together with the prophets (Ephesians 2:20). Peter and Jude also referred to the authority of the apostles as the basis for establishing the foundational truths of the faith (II Peter 3:2; Jude 1:17). In the Gospel records Christ focused much of His time and energy on training the twelve apostles to be future leaders of the Church, and He gave them special authority over His church, using the symbolic language of the "keys of the Kingdom" (Matthew 16:19). The authority of the apostles over the Universal Church is also clear in Acts, where their teaching was the normative doctrine of the Church (Acts 2:8) and where the apostles were called on to authenticate the initial spread of Christianity to different groups of people (see Acts 8:14, 17). The authority of an apostle, therefore, was not confined to one local church but extended over every local church. The New Testament books were written either by apostles (Paul, Peter, John, Matthew) or by people who moved within their immediate circle and knew their teaching (Mark, Luke, James, Jude). Christ predicted the work of the Holy Spirit in leading the apostles further into His truth after He had left them (John 16:12-16) which undoubtedly refers to the process of forming the New Testament scriptures..

There is disagreement among Christians today as to whether the office of apostle still remains in the church today. This is partly because the word is used a few times in the New Testament in a more general sense of all people who bore witness to Christ's resurrection (e.g. Acts 14:4, where Barnabas is called an apostle). However, these rare occasions do not remove the fact that the term is usually used specifically to describe the eleven remaining disciples and Paul as the authoritative representatives of Christ personally commissioned by Him to establish His Church and to write the New Testament. In this sense there are no apostles today (this also explains why the New Testament does not contain any commands to appoint apostles in the churches), and the leadership of the local church has passed to the

other offices of leadership we will examine in this study. It is unhelpful today to speak of the “gift of apostleship”, which some people use to mean a gift of church planting particularly in pioneering situations (effectively a “missionary”) as this is too easily confused with the office of apostle and the authority of that office. In the Church today there is no Biblical mandate for leaders who have authority extending beyond their own local church, although some people may be used by God to have influence over many local churches. Individuals such as Timothy and Titus appear to have been delegates of the apostle Paul who had responsibility for planting churches or establishing leadership in the local church. They would have had authority over those churches for a period of time until elders were appointed and had gained sufficient strength to function without support. The rest of this study will focus on the role of leaders in the local church.

Apostles in summary:

- The special representatives of Christ personally appointed by Him
- Only twelve in number – the eleven remaining disciples and Paul
- Had unique authority to teach the foundations of the faith as the Spirit guided them
- Had unique authority over the Universal Church that extended over every local church

Elders

The word *presbíteros* means literally an older person, but is used biblically to describe an office of leadership. The emphasis in this word is on the person’s maturity of character that suits them for this office. There were recognised elders within the Jewish community (see Matthew 16:21, 26:3, 27:41; Mark 8:31, 11:27, 14:43, 53, 15:1; Luke 9:22, 20:1; Acts 6:12), and the Christian usage of the word follows on from that pattern, describing leaders of the local church who were appointed initially by the apostles and their representatives (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). The role of the elders is to direct the affairs of the church, and some will have a particular role as preachers and teachers in the church (I Timothy 5:17). Even in the Jerusalem church, where the apostles were present, elders were appointed (Acts 11:30, 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23). In every case where the elders of a church are mentioned there is plurality – we never read of a local church that only had one elder (see I Timothy 4:14 where the “body of elders” is spoken of). The elders are to be respected, and accusations are not to be made against them lightly (I Timothy 5:19 – see below for a more detailed examination of this verse in its context).

Elders also have a great responsibility as leaders of the church, as we see in I Peter 5:1-4. Peter appeals to the elders that they should:

- *Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under their care* (v2) – this tells us that the primary role of elders is to care for God’s people as shepherds care for sheep. A shepherd leads the sheep to food (elders must teach God’s word), protects them from harm (elders must counter false teaching), rescues them when they are hurt or lost (elders must care compassionately for people) and corrects them when they go astray (elders must also discipline God’s people). There is a strong reminder here that the church is God’s flock (never the elder’s flock) and that the elder is ultimately accountable to Christ (the “Chief Shepherd” in verse 4).
- *Serve from willingness, not a sense of obligation or because of what they can gain personally* (v2) – the elder should be willing to serve because he recognises God’s calling on his life. Likewise, he must never be motivated by greed for money, or for any other privilege the post may bring with it (for example respect or status).
- *Be eager to serve rather than lording it over people* (vv2&3) – the only biblical pattern for Christian leadership is servant leadership. The elder is not to boss people around but to lead by example and from the credibility of serving others in love.

Peter also speaks of the reward that elders will receive for faithfully fulfilling their role (v4), but the main emphasis here is on the responsibility they have as shepherds and overseers (v2). Acts 20:13-38 gives

us a wonderful insight into the responsibility entrusted to the elders by the apostles, as Paul, very aware that he will not see them again, leaves the elders of the church in Ephesus with some challenging words. He reminds them that:

- *They must keep watch over themselves and the flock as shepherds of the church (v28)* – the elder must watch over the church, but he must also watch over himself first! The first responsibility of an elder is to guard his own spiritual life.
- *It was the Holy Spirit who made them overseers of the church (v28)* – although the appointment of elders may be made by human beings, the gifting that enables them to fulfil the role comes from the Spirit. The church should seek to recognise those people as elders who have already been called and gifted for the office.
- *They must watch out for false teachers (vv29&30)* – Paul pictures these false teachers as savage wolves threatening the flock. Elders must guard the flock against false teaching and the influence of people who try to make disciples for themselves.

One other reference to the role of the elders is found in James 5:14. Here we see that they have a special responsibility in prayer for the members of the church and in visiting the sick. The sick person should actually call for the elders to visit them.

In Titus 1:6-9 we read Paul's instructions to Titus as to what qualities an elder must have:

- a) *Consistent spiritual maturity* – the elder must be “blameless” (v7). This does not mean that he is morally perfect, but that he has shown consistent maturity in the faith. Paul explains some of the characteristics this will entail: not overbearing (not dominating or bullying others), not quick-tempered, not given to drunkenness, not violent, not pursuing dishonest gain, but rather hospitable, loving what is good, self-controlled, upright, holy and disciplined (vv7&8). This is the target that elders should aim for and these are the qualities that must already have been seen with some consistency in a person before they are appointed as an elder.
- b) *Holding firmly to the trustworthy message (v9)* – an elder must have a firm grasp of truth and be able to teach it in a way that encourages others and that refutes false teaching.

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This balance of character and commitment to truth is vital. If a person has good character but lacks the ability to take a firm stand on the truth he will make a disastrous elder because he will be loving and gentle, but the church will be exploited by the wolves who will attack (see Titus 1:10-16 for a further description of these wolves). On the other hand, a person who is firmly committed to the truth but who does not display Christ-like character will smother the sheep and will run the risk of spiritual abuse – driving people to perform rather than gently leading them. It is vital that our elders maintain a balance of gentle character and firm commitment to truth. They should be at once strong and gentle, powerful and meek.

Elders in summary:

- The local church should be overseen by a plurality of elders
- The elders must show maturity in Christ-like character and a firm commitment to the truth
- The elders are responsible for shepherding the flock – this includes teaching God's word, caring for the weak and sick, correcting those who err and protecting against false teachers
- Elders are gifted by God for their role but are also recognised by the local church

Overseers

The word *episkopos* literally means one who watches over. The word was traditionally translated “bishop” in older English versions. The overseers in the local church are the same people as the elders – this is clear from three passages:

- *Acts 20:28* – Paul reminds the elders of the Ephesian church that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers
- *Titus 1:6-7* – the two terms are used of the same people
- *I Peter 5:12* – Peter challenges the elders to serve as overseers

There is absolutely no Biblical warrant for recognising overseers (or bishops) as a separate office in the local church or as a higher level of leadership that oversees a number of local churches in one region. Biblically, an elder is an overseer and an overseer is an elder. The word elder focuses more on the maturity of character necessary for the office and the word overseer refers to the actual task the person must fulfil, overseeing God's flock. It has also been noted that the term overseer tends to be used more in the New Testament when speaking of Gentile churches, where the Jewish concept of elders would have been less meaningful.

We understand, therefore, that the overseers referred to in Philippians 1:1 are the elders of the church. In I Timothy 3:1-7 Paul writes about the qualities of an overseer. This passage is a parallel to Paul's words to Titus (see above), and focuses largely on the qualities of consistent spiritual maturity the overseer must show. In addition it adds that:

- *An overseer must have a track record of being able to manage his own family well (vv4&5)* – this will be evidence that he can manage the church family. The role of leading the church is much more like leading a family than leading an organisation or business, and so a proven record as a husband and father is a much better indicator of a man's suitability to be an elder than a track record of success in secular management.
- *An overseer must have a good reputation with outsiders (v7)* – presumably because the reputation of the church depends on the reputation of its leaders
- *An overseer must be the husband of one wife (v2)* – this is worthy of further discussion because some people have suggested that this means that elders must be married. If we read it that way, then an elder must also be a parent (v4), so anyone who is unmarried or married without children would be excluded from this office. In fact, these verses should not be read to mean that an elder must be married or a parent, but the emphasis is on the fact that **if** he is married or a parent, the nature of his marriage and parenting are important. He must have only one wife, not more than one (it has been suggested that the phrase could legitimately be translated "a one-woman man"), and if he has children they must respect him.

The only gift or ability that is mentioned in these verses that an overseer must have is that he must be "able to teach" (v2).

Overseers in summary:

- Overseer is another word for an elder – it focuses more on the role of the elder as someone who watches over God's church
- Overseers must show mature Christian character and must be able to teach
- Overseers do not have to be married but if they are married and if they have children they must have shown themselves to be faithful husbands and good parents
- Overseers must also have a good reputation in the community

Pastor-teachers

The word "pastor" only appears once in the NIV translation of the Bible, and yet it is widely used in churches today. In Ephesians 4:11 Paul describes how Christ has given different groups of people as gifts to the church starting with the apostles, then prophets, then evangelists and then "pastors and teachers". There are only four groups here, not five, based on the Greek grammar. The words "some to be" are present between each office, but are absent between the words "pastors" and "teachers". In other words, there is one group of people who are both pastors **and** teachers, combining two spiritual

gifts in one office. In English we can express this with the hyphenated pastor-teacher. *Poimēn* ("pastors") means literally "shepherds", and so tells us that this group of people are to shepherd the flock. Although the word is never used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe an office in the church, it is used in spiritual terms of Christ (e.g. John 10; Hebrews 13:20; I Peter 2:25). However, the related verb *poimainō* ("to shepherd") is used in Acts 20:28 and I Peter 5:2 to describe the work that elders must do. *Didaskalos* ("teachers") is the standard New Testament word for the people who teach God's word in the church (Acts 13:1; I Corinthians 12:28, 29; James 3:1). A related word, *didachē* ("able to teach"), is used in I Timothy 4:2 to describe an elders ability to teach, and another related word *didaskalia* ("teaching") is used in I Timothy 5:17 to describe the function of at least some elders as main teachers of the church.

Based on the above it should be clear to us that the office of pastor-teacher is not distinct from the office of elder or overseer. Pastor-teacher is simply another way to describe an elder, and the word focuses more on the gifting that the person has as a shepherd and teacher to enable them to fulfil their responsibility. The three terms (elder, overseer, pastor-teacher) describe different facets of one office:

- *Elder* – the character of the person to suit him for the office
- *Overseer* – the responsibility of the person in the office
- *Pastor-teacher* – the gifting of the person that enables him to fulfil the office

Of course, I Timothy 5:17 does allow the possibility that within the plurality of elders one or more may have the particular gifting and responsibility to be the teachers of the church, but there is no basis for believing that these teaching elders should have any greater authority in the church than the other elders. The tendency to designate one or a few people as "pastor" is unhelpful, as it tends to make a division between God's people and that person and even between that person and their fellow elders of the church. Personally, I would advise against the use of the word "pastor" as a title, since it also leads to false perceptions. It is better to speak of an elder employed by the church to work full time in the role of pastor-teacher as a "staff elder". Alternatively, their job title may be "pastor" or "pastor-teacher", but they may choose not to use the title. After all, we don't call other people by different titles depending on their gifting!

Pastor-teachers in summary:

- The pastor-teachers are one group of people who have two gifts – to shepherd and to teach the flock
- There is no biblical distinction between the pastor-teacher and the elders / overseers, although some elders may have a particular responsibility for teaching in the local church

Deacons

The word deacon is transliterated from the Greek *diákonos* which means literally "servant". In one sense, every Christian should be a deacon, as all should be serving in church, but in Philippians 1:1 Paul addresses his letter to the whole church and then singles out the overseers and deacons, suggesting that in the early church there was a recognised office of deacon. In I Timothy 3:8-13, Paul tells Timothy about the qualities he should look for in deacons. Most of these qualities are the same as those of elders in verses 2-7, but with the notable exception that elders must be able to teach (v2) whereas there is no such expectation of deacons. However, it is worth noting that deacons are to be mature Christians who also have a good grasp of the truth (v9). There is also a requirement to test deacons before fully recognising them in the office. This suggests that churches who have a recognised office of deacon should ensure that the candidate has served in other capacities and has shown their ability to be faithful and that there is a process of seeking approval from the church before the person is appointed as a deacon.

Although the word "deacon" is not used in Acts 6:1-7, the model for the role of deacons is generally accepted to be based on the apostles' appointment of seven men in the Jerusalem church to look after the distribution of food to widows. The parallel in the local church today is between the apostles and

elders (spiritual leaders) and the seven men and the deacons (leaders in practical ministry). We can learn several important truths about the role of deacons from this passage:

- The elders must focus on prayer and teaching the word (v4), and the deacons serve to relieve practical responsibilities from the elders
- Deacons must be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (v3)
- Deacons can be chosen by the whole church but should also be approved by the elders – they serve under the oversight of the elders (v6)
- Deacons have specific responsibilities for particular ministries while elders oversee the whole church
- The faithful service of deacons is essential to the growth of the church (v7)

Some modern local churches do not use the title “deacon” to describe a particular office in the church, but they apply these biblical principles for the appointment of people to positions of responsibility as leaders in different ministries.

Deacons in summary:

- Deacons are servants of the church who have responsibility for practical arrangements in specific ministries of the church
- Deacons can be appointed by the whole church but work under the oversight of the elders
- Deacons must be spiritually mature, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom
- Deacons serve to free the elders to focus on prayer and Bible teaching

Leadership

The word *hēgēomai* is the preferred term for the writer of Hebrews to describe the work of the leaders of the church. In Chapter 13 he uses the word three times – in verses 7, 17 and 24. These verses tell us several things about the “leaders” of the church:

- They taught these Christians the word of God (v7)
- These leaders were examples to the other Christians in their lifestyle and faith (v7)
- Church members are told to submit to the authority of their leaders and to obey them so that their work will be a joy not a burden to them (v17)
- These leaders “keep watch over” over the church and must give account to God for how they do this (v17)

These verses clearly refer to the elders of the church, since the ideas of oversight and teaching are included. The writer reminds the elders of their responsibility before God to watch over the church and to set an example to the church members, but the main focus in these verses is on reminding the Christians to respect, obey and submit to their leaders. This is an important truth that must be held in balance with Peter’s teaching on servant leadership (see above). Leaders must lead by example, being eager to serve and not lord it over others, and those who are not leaders must be careful to obey and to submit to the leadership of their leaders.

Too many church elders find their role to be a burden because of people who will not submit and will not be led. A servant leader should be easy to follow, but this will still require humility on the part of others who must follow. It does not mean that people should follow their leaders without ever questioning (in fact the good elder will always be listening to the flock), but that they should think very carefully and be very sure of their cause before challenging the leadership. It is the responsibility of the elders to discern God’s vision for the church, to cast this vision to the church and to shepherd the flock towards this goal. If elders have no vision or if they do not cast it they cannot expect the flock to follow, and if the flock will not follow the elders’ vision there will be tension in the church.

Leadership in summary:

- The term “leaders” in Hebrews chapter 13 refers to the elders
- Leaders in the church should set an example for all believers

- Leaders will give an account to God for how they lead
- Church members must submit to and obey their leaders – this is essential of the leaders are to fulfil their God-given responsibility and to have joy doing so

Administration

In Romans 12:8 Paul uses the word *proistēmi* to describe a spiritual gift. The NIV translates it “leadership”, but the Greek verb literally means “to place or stand over”. The NIV further confuses this concept by adding another word “govern” where in the Greek there is only the one verb. The phrase should read “if he stands over things, let him do so diligently”. This is the same word as Paul uses in I Timothy 5:17 (NIV “direct”) to describe the elders’ responsibility to lead the church. Perhaps the emphasis should be on the fact that this person has been placed over certain things by God, given certain responsibilities. In other words, this gift is the ability to look after certain responsibilities well – to administer them faithfully. It can be used of any area of responsibility in the church including that of elders, who oversee the whole life of the church, and presumably of deacons who have been placed over a certain area of ministry. As with any gift, it is possible to use it well or not – the leader must seek to lead diligently, fulfilling the responsibility he has been given.

Administration in summary:

- There is a spiritual gift of administration that is useful to all leaders in whatever ministry
- Leadership is a God-given responsibility to stand over certain things in the church
- Those who exercise this gift must be careful to do so diligently

COMMON MODELS OF CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Throughout church history and across denominations different solutions to the question of how local churches should be governed have been proposed. In the modern world there are many varied approaches to church government, and the traditional boundaries have often been blurred in new churches, which have attempted to take strengths from each of the traditional forms whilst avoiding what they perceive to be the weaknesses. It is still worth considering the main traditional forms of church government before identifying the key questions about organising church government that these forms raise. The three main traditional models are:

1. Episcopalian

Episcopalians believe that there are three offices of leadership in the church: bishops, elders and deacons. By the middle of the 2nd Century many churches recognised these three offices. This development can be seen, for example, in the writings of Ignatius (c.115 AD) and Polycarp (c.70–160 AD). Bishops exercise oversight and authority over churches and elders of the churches in one city or region. At a higher level (possibly national) the bishops will normally meet together in a synod, and there may be additional offices of authority, for example archbishops, who oversee the bishops. There are two alternative views about the origin of the role of bishop:

- a) *Apostolic succession* - bishops are the successors of the apostles in having authority over a number of local churches, although their authority is limited to one region rather than being over the Universal Church. In this view the three tiers of church leadership is God's intended purpose for the Church and is, therefore, the only acceptable forms of church government. Those who follow the apostolic-succession theory believe that only bishops have the authority to ordain leaders in local churches under their authority, and that churches following other forms of church government are not therefore true churches. In the Roman Catholic system the bishop of Rome developed a particular significance as an overseer of the Universal Church, following on in apostolic succession from Peter, and other bishops are under his authority. The bishop of Rome became known as the Pope.
- b) *Expediency* – other episcopalians believe that the office of bishop developed from the role of elder rather than succeeding the role of apostle. This development was necessary because of practical challenges in organising a growing number of churches with limited numbers of leaders. Episcopalians who take this view are happy to accept that other forms of church government may be acceptable, although they may claim that the episcopalian model is the best one.

Episcopalians claim that biblical support for their view can be found in a few people in the New Testament who were not among the twelve apostles, yet appear to have functioned in leadership positions that were not merely confined to one local church:

- *James, the Lord's brother* – seems to have had a special status in the church at Jerusalem
- *Timothy and Titus* – were sent by Paul to establish churches and ordain local church leaders in specific regions (Ephesus and Crete respectively).

Some non-episcopalians contend that the development of the third office of bishop in the early church was never God's intention and that it reflected a compromise of the church with worldly values and a modeling of church government along the lines of the hierarchies of secular government in the Roman Empire. The development of centralised authority in the Church is often blamed, at least in part, for the movement away from Biblical truth in the Roman Church. The episcopalian model is followed by the Roman Catholic Church, churches of the Anglican Communion and American Methodists. Some Pentecostal denominations also effectively follow an episcopalian model, although their regional leaders may not use the title "bishop", and apostolic denominations also follow this model although they believe that the office of apostle continues today and that apostles have authority over many local churches.

2. Presbyterian

In this model the local church is led by a plurality of elders, and the offices of elder and overseer (bishop) are one and the same. Deacons may also be appointed to serve in practical ministry. The congregation will normally be involved in the process of appointing elders and deacons, but the elders are not merely called to reflect the views of the membership but to lead them and exercise authority over them. All elders have equal authority in the local church and the elders together form the governing body. There is no higher office of authority over more than one local church, but local churches in regions group together in regional presbyteries or synods to ensure communication and sharing of resources between local churches, to deal with local problems, and to seek agreement between local churches on matter of doctrine and vision. The decisions of these presbyteries and synods are accepted as authoritative by each local church (the biblical case study for this is the synod of Jerusalem – Acts 15:6-29). The authority of the presbytery or synod is not based in a special divine authority over local churches, but is because the local congregations invest authority in it.

Often presbyterian churches distinguish between one “teaching elder” (usually called the “minister”) and the other elders who are “ruling elders” (I Timothy 5:17 is the usual proof text for this distinction), although in practice this can lead to a situation where the minister has greater authority than the other elders. In effect, therefore, many presbyterian churches tend to operate a three-fold leadership structure of preacher (or minister or pastor), elder and deacon. The presbyterian model of church government was popularised by Genevan Reformer John Calvin (1509-64) and developed further in 17th Century Scotland and England. However, presbyterians believe that this model was followed by the New Testament church and that Calvin merely rediscovered it. Presbyterians claim that New Testament support for their model can be found in the following:

- a) In the New Testament the words *elder* and *overseer* (or *bishop*) refer to only one office of leadership.
- b) The model of leadership in the local church followed on from the model of leadership in the Jewish synagogues where there was a plurality of elders.
- c) The supposed New Testament examples of an office similar to that of bishop are really nothing of the kind. The special position held by James in the Jerusalem church was probably because of his own personal qualities and relationship with Jesus rather than a special office he held. He was simply one of the elders, even if he may have functioned as a leader amongst them. In the case of Timothy and Titus there is no reason to believe that they held any special office. They were simply church planters, working under the direction of the apostle Paul, who were commanded to hand over leadership of each local church to the elders once the church was established. Any authority they had over the churches was only temporary.

Presbyterians also argue that the situation in the very early church was not so uniform as episcopalians often claim. For example in the *Didache* (an early Christian document written around 70-160 AD) the office of elder and overseer was still one and the same, authority rested in the local congregation (including the power to appoint overseers) and there are only two offices of leadership (overseers and deacons). Presbyterians also point to the writings of Ignatius (d. 98-117 AD) which show that although the office of bishop had developed by this time it was still much more limited in its authority than in the episcopalian view, as the bishop’s authority seems to have extended only to one local church (not across a region) and he was answerable to the congregation. The presbyterian model is followed today by Presbyterian denominations (including the official Church of Scotland), some Pentecostal denominations and British Methodism.

3. Independent (including congregational)

The independent model of church government agrees with the presbyterian view in rejecting the idea of the office of bishop overseeing several local churches in a region, but disagrees with presbyterianism in that it also rejects the legitimacy of presbyteries and synods. Advocates of independency point to the

fact that the word "church" in the New Testament is used either of the Universal Church (all believers worldwide) or of the local church, and never of a regional or national church. Independent churches may form associations with like-minded churches to discuss issues relevant to all churches, but the decisions of these associations are not authoritative for the local churches involved – they merely provide guidelines or advice. Most independent churches have traditionally also been congregationalist, meaning that they are governed by the members of the church themselves (authority rests with the congregation, and the authority of the leaders is vested in them by the members). In practice this means that decisions will be made by a general meeting of the church membership. However, in recent years an increasing number of independent churches have followed a pattern of being governed by a body of elders who are appointed by the members but once appointed function as genuine leaders. Baptist, Brethren, Evangelical Free and Congregationalist churches generally follow the independent model, as do many of the new independent evangelical churches.

Summary – key issues in organising church government

Three key issues stand out from the above discussion of alternative forms of church government:

- 1. The basis for the pattern** – Is the New Testament the only basis on which we should determine the organisation of church government (presbyterians and independents generally believe that it is) or can later developments in the early church be taken as normative for today (episcopalians generally believe that they should)? Essentially the question is whether the New Testament actually establishes a normative pattern for church government or leaves it open to be determined on practical grounds.
- 2. The seat of authority** – To what degree should authority in the local church rest with its leaders, and to what extent should it rest with the congregation (ranging from the episcopalian model in which it rests entirely with the leaders to the congregationalist model in which it rests entirely with the congregation)? This is an important question, and is difficult to answer without being influenced by the prevalent view in the society we live in. For example, it could be ordered that the episcopalian view fitted well in Medieval society, which was highly hierarchical with government arranged along feudal lines, whereas independent appeals more to the modern society with its emphasis on equality and democratic forms of government.
- 3. The need to network** – How can local churches in one region work together? Should there be a denominational structure with authority to make decisions affecting a network of local churches (episcopalians and presbyterians say yes, while independents say no)? These questions seek to reflect the tension between the truth of the Universal Church as the invisible spiritual body of Christ united by the Spirit and the local church as a gathered body of believers in one locality. How can local churches express their part in the wider Universal Church, particularly when there is diversity of doctrine, style and emphasis across local churches?

We will return to these questions in due time when we come to consider a proposed model for church government, but we must first consider an important issue: what role do women have in the leadership of the local church?

CAN WOMEN BE LEADERS IN THE LOCAL CHURCH?

The question of the role of women in the local church has caused a great deal of discussion amongst Bible believing Christians in recent decades. The quest to establish a Biblical framework for answering the question has been made infinitely more difficult by the many examples of abuse of authority by men in the past and the tendency to exclude women not only from positions of leadership but from any meaningful participation in the life of the church. In our modern society there is a very strong emphasis on equality, which has been a necessary redress to the oppression of the past, but this has also made it difficult for those who believe that equality does not always mean that there is no distinction in roles. Space will not permit us to discuss these issues fully in this study, but I will attempt to draw some conclusions about the core issues:

1) Men and women are equal in status before God in Christ Jesus

This must be the starting point of our discussion. The fact that all people can have equal status in relationship to God through Christ is a bedrock principle of the Christian faith. It is most clearly and succinctly stated by Paul in Galatians 3:28:

There is neither Jew nor Greek, slave nor free, male nor female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus.

There has been a tendency in every culture throughout history to stratify society on different bases, including race, social status and sex. In this one verse Paul declares that these distinctions are overcome in Christ. Every person who has received the justification that comes through faith in Christ has the privilege of standing as an heir of God (see the preceding verses in Galatians chapter 3). The picture is that our status before God is found in Christ – when God sees us He sees His beloved Son as we have “put on Christ” (v27). As Christians we must boldly proclaim that an equal privilege and an equal relationship is available through Christ whatever a person’s race, culture, social standing or sex. This New Testament principle is really the continuation of a Biblical principle that begins with Genesis 1:27, where we read that God created mankind, both male and female, in His own image. Both male and female are created in the image of God, both are marred by the effects of sin, and both can be restored to relationship with God through Christ.

2) Men and women have distinctive roles in God’s created order

When Paul declared the equality of men and women in Christ he did not remove all differences between them, just as he did not remove the distinctions between Jew and Greek or slave and free. The fact is that there are differences between men and women that are part of God’s created order. At a physical level these differences are quite obvious – women have the fantastic privilege of child-bearing, while men generally have the dubious distinction of greater physical strength and stature. This difference extends to the genetic level, where men and women have a different complement of chromosomes. Psychologists continue to determine an increasing number of ways in which men and women tend to think differently and react differently to situations. Some of these distinctions are due to nurture (the social expectations of what it is to be male or female and the way in which our parents raise us) but many are also deeply embedded in our nature (genetic factors that determine how our brains function). There are fundamental differences between men and women, and, while there are exceptions to every principle, the fundamental distinctions remain. This is how God has created us – with different strengths and weaknesses that complement each other. Genesis 2 focuses more on this distinction of roles as it describes the order in which God created us – the man first and the woman second, created out of the man to be “a helper fit for him”. The reason why God created the woman was because no animal was the equal of Adam. Woman was fully his equal, and complemented him. However, as the Old Testament unfolds we see that the roles of men and women were distinct within marriage and within the God-ordained Old Testament system of worship. There is no contradiction between diversity of roles and equality of status in God’s created order.

3) The role of authoritative teacher (and therefore elder) is reserved for men

There are two key New Testament passages that discuss the role of women in the church. Before examining these passages we must start with an understanding of the cultural setting into which they were written. In both the Jewish system of worship and the society of the Greco-Roman world the

role of women was different from that of men. In the Temple of God in Jerusalem, women were not allowed to progress beyond the outer court, which was physically lower than the Court of Israel where men prayed and also more distant from the Most Holy Place where God's presence resided. In the synagogue, women's role was severely restricted. This is worth noting because if the apostles had intended to reverse this cultural trend entirely they would surely have done so in clear terms. As it is, we see women playing a much greater role in the life of the early church than they had ever done in Israel, but we still have two passages that seem to emphasise a difference of roles between the sexes:

- a) ***I Corinthians 14:33-35*** – this chapter is concerned with orderly worship in the meetings of the church, and in particular with the use of the spiritual gifts of tongues and prophecy. As he approaches his conclusion Paul adds these words about the role of women, which he says apply in "all the congregations of the saints" (v33b). This phrase is important because it clearly tells us that Paul's commands here are not limited only to the situation in the church in Corinth or to the particular cultural context it was in, but are a general principle for all Christian churches. Paul says that women should remain silent in the churches and that they are not allowed to speak. It seems that the particular problem with the conduct of women in the church in Corinth was that they were causing disturbance by asking questions, and so Paul says that they should ask their own husbands at home because "it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church". The Greek word used for "to speak" in these verses refers not to ordered speech but to disorderly speech. Hence it seems that the particular problem here was women causing disorder by speaking over others or shouting out questions while someone else was preaching. The issue of submission "as the Law says" (v34) is most probably not the submission of women in general to men in general but the submission of wives to their husbands (this fits with the following verse). These verses cannot be used to prohibit women from making any verbal contribution to the church meetings. Hence, this passage does not answer the question of whether women are permitted to be leaders in the local church; it simply tells us that any contribution made by women (and, by extension, by men) to the meetings of the church must be orderly and must also reflect the submission of wives to their husbands (see I Corinthians 11:3-16 for Paul's teaching to the Corinthians about the headship of men and the importance of women reflecting this reality through covering their heads for prayer).
- b) ***I Timothy 2:11-15*** – verse 11 of this section restates what Paul wrote to the Corinthians – that women should learn in quietness and full submission. However, in the following verses Paul goes further than this. In verse 12 he clearly states "I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent". There are no qualifications to this restriction. Paul does not say (as some people suggest) that this is a specific issue for some women in the Ephesian church that Timothy was working with. We must accept it as a general statement that has universal applicability. Furthermore, as a basis for this restriction Paul appeals to the order of creation (v13) and to the Fall (v14). These two events (creation and the Fall) apply to all of humanity, not simply to the church in Ephesus. Paul does balance his restriction on women from teaching men with a comment on the significance of child-bearing as a great privilege and responsibility for women. Just as women have the responsibility of bearing children, which is a role that is uniquely reserved for them, so men have the responsibility of being the authoritative teachers in the church, a role that is uniquely reserved for them. I cannot see any reason within this text or in the context of I Timothy to limit this restriction, and must conclude that this is a general principle for all churches in all times. Based on our discussion above of leadership in the local church it should be clear that if women are prohibited from authoritative teaching then they cannot function as elders in the church, since elders must be able to teach and have the responsibility to lead the church through teaching God's word.

4) Women should still have a full role in the life and ministry of the local church

So, does this mean that women cannot have a full role in the life of the church? No! Women can serve in every other capacity in the church other than as elders or pastor-teachers. This includes teaching in any setting where men are not present (including Sunday School and women's meetings – for example Titus 2:3&4 envisages older women teaching younger women) and teaching men in the home setting under the authority of their husband (as Priscilla did for Apollos together with her husband Aquilla in Acts 18:26). Women can also function as leaders in the church in the role of deacon (in Romans 16:1 we read that Phoebe was a "servant" of the church in Cenchrea – the Greek word is deaconess). They can pray audibly, lead in praise, report on missions and share their personal experiences as well as serving in the full range of less visible roles. The only role that is restricted from them is that of elder / overseer / pastor-teacher. To forbid women this role is not to deny them equality in status with men. In fact, the majority of men are also not called or gifted to be elders, yet no one would suggest that this means they are of lower status with those men who are, and no men have the privilege of childbirth, yet this surely does not mean they are inferior to all women. Unfortunately, some churches have gone far beyond scripture in restricting the role of women to a point where they are not allowed to have any verbal role in church meetings. This is, I believe, a distortion of the passage from I Corinthians 14 discussed above, and has led to a reaction from that has gone too far in the other direction in seeing women appointed as elders and pastors.

HOW SHOULD ELDERS BE TREATED?

Elders have authority in the church, and believers are challenged in the New Testament to respect them and to submit to their authority. This is necessary so that the elders can serve with joy and not be unnecessarily burdened (Hebrews 13:17). In I Timothy 5:17-25, Paul gives extended teaching to Timothy about how elders should be treated by the church. He has three main concerns in this passage:

1) Payment for elders (verses 17-18)

This command probably related to specific circumstances in Ephesus where there was debate about whether or not it was appropriate for elders to be remunerated. The commands in these verses may be surprising to some modern Western Christians who probably assume that it is normal for churches to have paid staff, but this idea was new in the first century. Those who were unsure about the idea may have pointed to the example of Paul, who had refused to accept any financial support while he was in Ephesus, preferring to use his skills as a tentmaker to cover his living costs and those of his companions. Paul had specifically reminded the elders in Ephesus of this when he parted from them (Acts 20:32-35), encouraging them to follow his example in providing for the poor. Perhaps some people had used Paul's example to suggest that it would never be appropriate for a Christian worker to be paid by the church. Whatever the circumstances, though, Paul is very clear in his teaching here that it is perfectly appropriate for elders, especially those who have the responsibility of teaching God's word, to be salaried by the church. This is undoubtedly the meaning of the phrase, "worthy of double honour" (v17) – the first honour meaning the respect of the congregation and the second the financial recompense they receive. The Scriptures Paul quotes in v18 to support this statement make it even clearer that payment to cover living costs is in mind. The first is from Deuteronomy 25:4, the principle that an ox should be allowed to eat to feed itself as it pulls the plough in order to produce food for others. The second is a quote of the Lord Jesus saying that a labourer is worthy of his hire.

So, then, Paul sets a precedent that it is normal for churches to employ one or more elders in salaried positions to free them to devote their time more fully to teaching the word and directing the church. This does not mean that churches must do so – the decision to have one or more paid staff will depend on the financial circumstances of the church and the elders – or that elders are free to line their own pockets at the expense of the church – elsewhere in this letter Paul is scathing of those who see godliness as a means to financial gain (6:5) and describes love of money as inappropriate for an elder (3:3). It would presumably be normal for a local church to have a team of elders some of whom are paid staff while others fund their living costs from other sources. The level of remuneration for staff elders (and other staff in a local church) will depend on the circumstances of the church and individual, but Paul's words here leave no doubt that it should be sufficient for the elder (and dependents) to live comfortably. Sadly it seems that many churches fall into one of two extremes – either paying too low a wage so that financial worries burden their staff or allowing staff to become rich through ministry. Both of these extremes are explicitly unbiblical. I would argue that staff elders should not be neither wealthier nor less well off than other church members (although this statement raises interesting questions about what level of wealth is appropriate for a believer which cannot be discussed further here).

2) Discipline of elders (verses 19-21)

Paul now turns to the question of how accusations against an elder should be dealt with. In the context of v17-18, which are concerned with financial matters concerning elders, the accusations that he anticipates in v19 may also be of a financial nature. However, the principles he uses undoubtedly apply to any accusation of sin or failing on the part of an elder. As we begin to look at these verses we must remember that Paul is writing to an individual, Timothy, who had an authority over the church in Ephesus that would not normally rest in one person today. The situation is one where Timothy, as Paul's deputy, hears an accusation against one of the Ephesian elders. In the modern church setting it will presumably be the other elders who take Timothy's place as the proper authority

to which accusations are addressed (although these verses merit careful attention from any missionaries or church planters who may here accusations against elders in a church with which they were previously involved). There are a number of significant points to be made about these verses:

- **There must be two or three witnesses (v19)**

An accusation against an elder should not be believed on the basis of the word of one person. It is inevitable in any church that accusations WILL be brought against the elders, but those responsible for oversight must be wise in how they respond, and those a church must never allow itself to get into the situation where people are routinely attacking and undermining the elders. Accusations against people who have already displayed the character that Ch 3 describes (and the accusation would most likely be that they have displayed some of the negative traits that Ch 3 says elders are expected not to display) should not be accepted lightly but should be verified. The NIV is misleading in using the verb "brought", which would appear to suggest that if one person brings an accusation they should be ignored until someone else comes along with the same accusation. Rather, the accusation should be considered and (unless it is deemed to be completely without ground) investigated by speaking to others and, in most cases, to the elder who has been accused. If he is a godly man of humility and transparency he will agree to the investigation since he realises that not only his own honour but the reputation of the church and the honour of Christ are at stake. If the accusation brought by one person is of a serious nature in terms of impact on the reputation of the church (e.g. sexual impropriety, abusive behaviour, embezzlement, bad business practices) then I would suggest that it behoves the elders to investigate it further. Paul's point is that if there is substance to the accusation then more than one individual (and probably individuals from more than one group within the church) will have observed it. There are unspoken questions here about the reliability of the witnesses as well, and this is not simply a mandate saying that any two or three people form a quorum that should force the elders to act on their accusation. Likewise, these verses do not remove the need to respect the authorities in how accusations of a potentially criminal nature are dealt with. Church discipline does not transcend the Law of the land, as evidenced by Romans 13, I Peter 2:13-17, Matthew 22:21 etc. There are, of course, many accusations against an elder that would not trouble our current authorities but that would compromise his example or bring him under reproach (3:2) – adultery, lack of self-control, inappropriate use of alcohol, being argumentative, loving money, bad parenting (falling short of neglect or abuse) being examples. In matters where there is possible illegality, however, the elders surely have a responsibility to report the matter to the police. This is particularly important in any case where there is an accusation of abuse of children

- **When an accusation is substantiated the elder must be rebuked publicly (v20)**

The fact that elders who sin should be rebuked publicly, and that there is no mention of an initial step of rebuking him privately first (as in Matthew 18 where Christ speaks about dealing with a brother's sin) emphasises the seriousness of the sin of elders. Elders lives are never private, and part of the responsibility that comes with taking on the role of eldership is surely the commitment to the life of the church that ties ones own reputation to its reputation (hence 3:7). Perhaps in our individualistic 21st Century Western culture we have not emphasised enough the need for elders to live lives of openness in every aspect of life as an example to the flock (as Timothy is charged to in 4:11-16). There is, it seems, a higher standard for elders than for other believers. Since the role of elders is public and they represent Christ, the Great Shepherd, their sins reflect on the witness of the church, and in these verses Paul is speaking of sins that are public knowledge anyway (known to at least a small number of people). There must never be an attempt to hide the failings of church leaders, as this will only cause greater damage to the reputation of the church and of Christ amongst outsiders if it is later revealed. The idea of rebuking does not necessarily mean removal from office as an elder or expulsion from the fellowship, but rather the hope will be that the rebuke would be met with repentance and restoration. The church must extend grace to the elder who has stumbled but been

restored. There will, however, be certain situations where the elder must be removed from office (even if he has repented) or where excommunication is appropriate (for example the situations in which Paul mandates it for other believers), and the elders must exercise wisdom in knowing when these steps should be taken. If the church members are approaching the issue in a godly mindset then their respect for the elders collectively will surely be increased by seeing how seriously failure is taken and the humility that is displayed by the elders in their attitude. Furthermore, Paul says, the other elders will also be reminded of their responsibility. This is a high standard, and may seem very strict to us, but I would suggest that that is because we have lost something of the Biblical principle of submission, and that we have neglected humility and godly character in our admiration for ability or strong personalities.

- **Favouritism and prejudice should never influence the judgement (v21)**

It is no wonder, given the strictness of Paul's approach to the discipline of elders (and perhaps in light of Timothy's timidity of personality), that Paul makes such a strong charge here to keep these commands. His charge is before God, the Lord Jesus and the elect angels. In other words, there is a higher court. Timothy, or in our case the other elders, must make a fair and just judgement because the judge of all mankind is watching on and He is fair and just. The twin wrongs that must be avoided are prejudice, which may lead to an unfair acceptance of an accusation, and favouritism, which is more likely to lead to an unjust acquittal. Based on the need to maintain these principles it would seem wise that any family members of the accused person should not be part of the investigation or the final decision.

3) Further advice about appointing elders (verses 22-25)

In these verses Paul returns to the beginning with further advice about how elders should be appointed. He warns Timothy that he must keep himself pure, and that this includes being careful not to share in the sins of others. This means upholding righteousness in judgements about the sins of elders, but, more importantly, it means being very careful about who is appointed as an elder in the first place. The phrase "lay hands" refers to the process by which people were recognised as elders or placed in other positions of authority. Paul warns Timothy never to be hasty in associating himself with a person by laying hands on them. It is vital that people show themselves above reproach before being appointed to eldership, or other positions of leadership in the church, and that if they are subsequently found to be reproachable this is not ignored or covered over. In verse 23 Paul takes a moment to remind Timothy to look after his own health, which would surely have been adversely affected by the stress of such responsibility. This short aside from the apostle to his younger colleague is touching. In verses 24 and 25 Paul continues in the theme of the sins of others. Timothy must keep himself pure as far as possible by not sharing in the sins of others, but the problem is that some people's sins do not show up at first, but reveal themselves later. The same is true of good deeds. This is the reason why Timothy must not be hasty in appointing people to positions of authority. First impressions are not always accurate, and it takes time to really see the character of a person and the results that flow from it, either of good deeds or sin. There may also be some reassurance for Timothy here. When a person has been found above reproach and appointed as an elder but they are subsequently found to fall short, those who appointed him are not necessarily at fault as the persons sin may have been well hidden. They must, however, deal with the problem appropriately and openly.

CONCLUSIONS – SUGGESTIONS FOR IMPLEMENTATION

In this section I will first summarise what we learned from our word study of New Testament terms for church leaders before considering answers to the three key questions we identified during our review of the traditional models for church leadership. Next I will propose a model for church leadership, and finally I will give suggested answers to some questions that remain outstanding. Finally, I will end with a challenge on the goal of Christian leadership.

Plurality of elders

Although we identified seven words used of church leaders in the New Testament, as we have seen these words describe only three offices, or positions:

- a) **Apostle** – the initial leaders of the church appointed by Christ with authority to establish the foundational doctrine of the Church and to authenticate the spread of the faith to different groups of people
- b) **Elder** – five of the seven words refer to this group of people who are the overseers of the church gifted as shepherds and teachers. The elders are the spiritual leaders of the church with the God-given responsibility to administer its affairs, giving spiritual direction and caring for the members.
- c) **Deacon** – leaders with responsibility for practical arrangements in a particular area of ministry within the church.

So, in today's church only two positions of leadership remain: elders and deacons.

It is true that in any group of leaders, one person will often emerge as a "leader among leaders" (or "first among equals"). This person will often have greater respect because of their greater knowledge of Scripture, wisdom, experience or gifting in leadership. In such a situation this person's views may carry greater weight in the group than other elders. This may be entirely healthy and appropriate, but I would argue that it does not warrant a special office to be created for that individual. The fact that this individual has greater influence than others in discussions about an issue does not necessarily mean that they must have greater authority than any of the other elders. In fact, the plurality of elders should function as a very helpful check against that individual exercising their influence in an unhelpful way. If this leader is a godly man he will also be content to submit in humility to the team of elders in the final decision.

Elders should strive to have full and honest discussions about issues on which they must rule, and they should approach all decisions prayerfully. I suggest that significant time should be spent in every meeting in prayer and in studying the word of God together. Decisions should be made by a simple majority decision, and although consensus will always be sought, it should not be essential or forced. There must be space for elders who disagree to do so with grace, as long as the issue is not one of core theological importance. However, it is vital to the operation of a plurality of elders that once decisions are made the team exercises corporate responsibility. Those who disagreed in the meeting must become advocates of the final decision to the congregation. There is too much danger of factions forming if elders ignore this and speak to other church members about their personal views when they differ from the team's decision. If an elder feels so strongly about the issue that they cannot speak for the team's decision then they should be honourable enough to resign their position. This should, however, be a last resort, and should be expected only where matters are of a serious doctrinal nature or have potentially serious implications for the health and direction of the church.

Plurality of eldership is God's pattern for the church, revealed and taught in Scripture. It is also a wise pattern for a number of reasons:

- It reflects the reality that Christ is the Chief Shepherd and Head of the church and that He is present with His people and with the elders as they meet. The elders are simply under-shepherds.
- The practice of working together as a team helps to develop and mature the elders in love, humility and servanthood.

- It helps to limit the danger of one dynamic leader with false teachings or ungodly character leading the flock astray. The elders must keep watch over the flock, and this begins with keeping watch over themselves and one another.
- It provides a dynamic example of how the whole congregation is to live and work together in harmony.

The key questions addressed

We must now return to the three key issues identified earlier:

- 1. The basis for the pattern** – I believe that the New Testament does reveal a pattern for church government which includes the two offices of elder and deacon, and that this was God's intended pattern for the local church. Within the New Testament we see the progression from the apostles as leaders of the Universal Church to local congregations where elders and deacons were appointed to lead. We do not see any indication of a third office of leadership. To add to the authority of Scripture the precedent of the early church is dangerous as it could lead to the inclusion of many errors that gradually crept into the church. The principles of church leadership should never be modelled on societies current thinking on leadership as the basis for church leadership is fundamentally different – it is servant leadership! That is not to say that we cannot learn anything from leadership theories in society but that the biblical pattern will be the healthiest pattern for any local church to follow. Local churches should strive to follow God's revealed pattern as far as possible.
- 2. The seat of authority** – The New Testament speaks clearly of elders who have real authority in the church in matters of doctrine, vision and discipline. A completely congregational approach to church government will risk having weak leaders. On the other hand, a model where elders have no accountability to the congregation is at risk of producing a dictatorship. In actual fact, the authority in the church rests with the word of God rather than with the leaders or congregation. The elders' responsibility is to lead the people of God under the authority of His word, while the members are responsible to submit to and obey their leaders as they are called by God to be the under-shepherds of Christ. By following their leaders they are following Him so long as the leaders remain faithful to the word of God. Therefore, I would propose a combination of leadership by a team of elders, with consultation of the church membership on issues of great significance, including the discipline of unrepentant members, changes to the constitution of the church and the appointment of elders and deacons. The leaders must be trusted with the authority to lead that comes from the office as appointed by God, but God's will will often be discerned by the whole congregation as they prayerfully seek God's direction for the church.
- 3. The need to network** – Local churches must seek to find ways to express the reality of the Universal Church which transcends their own limited scope and membership. Whilst the office of bishop is not biblical and the synods or presbyteries are unlikely to be helpful (in fact they may be dangerous, as a wrong decision will become binding for all churches – there is a key difference between synods today and the synod of Jerusalem in Acts 15, the fact that the apostles are no longer present to preside over it and decide on the authoritative outcome), evangelical local churches must cooperate wherever possible. This will mean cooperation between evangelical churches in one locality that transcends denominational divides (especially in evangelism), and may also include church leaders from like-minded churches in a region or nation meeting in an association to learn from and support one another. Such an association may also help to pool resources for training and missions. Leaders of local churches should take initiative in forming networks with leaders of other churches. However, they should resist any move to form additional organisational structures or to bring unity with non-evangelical leaders.

A proposed model for church leadership

Based on the Biblical record I believe that an independent model of church government with leadership by a team of elders but including input from the congregation in major decisions is most biblical and therefore best for the local church. The model which I propose for leadership of a local church follows:

a) Body of elders

Meetings: the elders (who may also be called overseers) should meet regularly as a team to pray for the church and to discuss their vision for the direction church (the vision will flow from prayerfully seeking God's will) as well as discussing specific issues that have arisen. Decisions should be made by all the elders acting together and no one elder should dominate over the others.

Responsibilities: Elders oversee the whole church and are its spiritual leaders with roles including:

- (i) Clearly communicating their agreed vision to the church and leading towards it by example.
- (ii) Discipline of church members who have erred (including excommunication from the church fellowship in extreme cases).
- (iii) Pastoral care for the ill and spiritually weak (including prayer for and with them).
- (iv) Resolving doctrinal disputes.
- (v) Teaching – one or more of the elders who have particular gifting in teaching will be the recognised teachers of the church, but all the elders will be involved in teaching in various settings. It is no mistake that the New Testament unites the roles of teacher and leader of the church in one office of elder. It is through teaching God's word that the elders should lead the church. In leading the church through the authority of scripture the elders are leading God's flock into greater obedience to and dependence on Him. Faithful, applied Bible teaching should be a major feature of every New Testament church. The teachers in the church should not only teach principles from God's word, but should teach the word itself, helping the flock to see how they reached their conclusions and how to correctly handle the living word of God.

Appointment: The New Testament does not give any specific instructions as to how elders were to be appointed after the apostolic age, and many different church traditions have found different ways to do this. However, the means adopted by a local church should include the recognition that it is God who gifts and calls people for eldership but also that the elders must be recognised by the church membership, who will agree to follow their leadership. Eldership should be restricted to men.

b) Deacons

Responsibilities: Each deacon will have responsibility for practical arrangements in a particular area of ministry. They must always take guidance from and be accountable to the elders, who should also determine the limits of their responsibility. They should be leaders within their own field of ministry who can form a team to carry on the ministry and train up new leaders. They should show initiative in relieving the elders of practical responsibilities, and the elders should also trust the deacons to carry on their ministry faithfully without being overly controlling.

Appointment: Can be either male or female. Their appointment must be under the authority of the elders and must include a process of testing to show their suitability for the office.

Meetings: The deacons may meet together as a team to discuss larger issues affecting the church.

Questions of a practical nature

Obviously, within this very general framework there is a great deal of scope to vary the structure depending on the size and needs of the church. Some other key questions remain:

- ***How should leaders be appointed?***

I would suggest that elders should be nominated by the existing body of elders on the basis of the biblical requirements for an elder and that the church members should be asked to approve this

nomination. The proposal should be announced to the church and a period of time given to allow members to respond if they have any concerns. If valid concerns are voiced and cannot be resolved then the nominee should not be appointed as an elder. In the case of deacons, the church members or a team who are involved in the ministry area the deacon is to serve in should propose candidates to the elders. The elders should then approve those candidates who meet the requirements for deacon and should propose these approved candidates to the church. The church will then have the opportunity to raise concerns as with elders before the candidates are finally appointed. I believe that congregational votes (which are used in some churches in appointing leaders to office) can be unhelpful as they are at risk of becoming popularity contests or sources of division. If a vote is to be used it is best not to have more candidates than posts, so that it does not become a competition, and not to publicise the details of the numbers for and against, so as to minimise the risk of division.

- ***How many elders should there be?***

In practice having less than three elders can be problematic as two elders cannot form a consensus. However, there may be situations in a young church where this is unavoidable. As soon as an additional person is identified who could serve as an elder they should be appointed. On the other hand, there may be an upper limit to how many elders can function together as a team, as too large a group will find it difficult to discuss issues and reach a decision.

- ***How many of the elders should be involved in preaching?***

I am using the word "preaching" here as opposed to "teaching" to refer to the authoritative proclamation of God's word. It is possible to be a gifted teacher but not to be gifted to preach. All elders must be able to teach in the sense that they can pass on the faith to others (as Timothy was to pass on the truth to the reliable men in the church in Ephesus – see II Timothy 2:2), but, according to I Timothy 5:17, some will have a particular calling to teach. The number of elders who preach may range from one to several. It is probably better to develop a preaching team who can share responsibility for the main teaching in the church as this encourages the development of gifts and ensures a plurality of leadership in practice as well as theory, although one of the elders in this team may be the main preacher. So, then, not all elders will necessarily preach, although all will teach in some capacity (perhaps one to one or in small groups), and all will be involved together in resolving doctrinal disputes in the church.

- ***Should people who are not elders of the local church preach?***

It is acceptable to have people who are not elders preaching occasionally (in fact this is desirable in terms of developing gifting in younger people) and to invite speakers from outside the local church for special teaching series or few dates in the year. However, the mainstay of the teaching in the local church should be by the elders of that local church as this is the responsibility God has entrusted to them. They are the shepherds of that flock. It is not healthy to have a situation where external speakers are too frequent as they will never understand or care for the flock in the same way as those elders to whom God has entrusted it. The hireling will run away if the sheep are attacked, but the true shepherd will lay down his life for the sheep (see John 10:11-13). For an elder the mission of caring for and building up the local church is not something to take lightly or to abandon easily – it is something he has invested his life sacrificially in.

- ***How many deacons should be appointed?***

This will depend on the specific needs of the church and the gifting of the people involved. In general, each important area of ministry should have a deacon providing leadership and coordinating practical arrangements.

- ***Should the elders and deacons meet together?***

It may be valuable for the elders and deacons to meet together some times to ensure good communication between them (this body may be called the "Church Council" or "leadership team"), but the elders must avoid being drawn into practical arrangements and there must therefore be meetings of only the elders where issues of discipline and vision are discussed. It may be preferred to have the elders meeting together regularly and the deacons meeting regularly but with each

deacon meeting one to one with an elder who oversees the spiritual direction of their specific ministry. Either way there must be good communication between deacons and elders, and deacons must always work under the authority of the elders.

- ***What age should an elder be?***

The English term *elder* implies an older man, and the Greek word can also mean an old man. This does not necessarily mean that only old men should be elders. In fact, the question is one of maturity – does he show evidence of consistent Christian maturity as evidenced by Christ-like character? This may be true of relatively young men, while some older men may not show it at all! In practice, a team of elders will probably consist mainly of men who are middle aged or older, but some men may be ready for eldership in their 30s or even 20s. Age itself should not be a criterion for deciding. Likewise, there is no retirement age for elders, although as men grow older they should also be aware of the need to bring on younger men and the danger of holding on too long, especially if their ability to function in the role is decreased because of failing health or loss of mental faculties.

- ***How long should leaders hold office?***

In some churches elders and deacons are appointed for life. In others they serve for a limited term before having to seek reappointment or take a sabbatical break. Although there are practical benefits in having a limited term of office, there are also disadvantages in terms of continuity of leadership, and, in the case of elders, this restriction is difficult to square with the biblical perspective on the calling and gifting to be a shepherd of the flock. Personally I would suggest that deacons can serve for a limited term, perhaps of three years before seeking reappointment, but that the term of service of an elder should not be limited. However, it may be wise to have a mechanism through which the church regularly reaffirms its confidence in the elders as this will also provide a mechanism for the removal of an elder who has erred or who is no longer capable of fulfilling his responsibilities. It is a dangerous thing when elders can continue on without any need to receive the approval of the church as this can lead to dictatorships and elderly men who cannot pass on responsibility to younger leaders. I would suggest that at intervals of three to ten years (depending on the maturity of the church and the elders) the church members should be asked to reaffirm the position of an elder and that if significant concerns are raised and cannot be resolved the elder should be expected to step down from his office. Sabbaticals should be available to all leaders who need a break for family or other reasons, but it is preferable if they are not required. If there are people in the congregation who have previously been recognised as elders but are not currently serving in the office of elder, they should be consulted on major issues affecting the church (e.g. doctrinal disputes or major disciplinary issues) when the body of elders are discussing them.

- ***Is there ever a role for individuals with authority over the elders?***

As mentioned earlier, there are New Testament examples of church planters other than the apostles who appear to have had authority over churches. Timothy and Titus are key examples. They were appointed by Paul as His representatives in Ephesus and Crete respectively and were charged with appointing elders and deacons in the churches. Timothy also had authority to hear accusations against the Ephesian elders, although even he had to do so carefully, without prejudice and only on the evidence of at least two or three people. Although Titus and Timothy are different from any individual today in that they were under the direct authority of the apostle Paul, a similar situation may be envisaged today where a church has been planted by an individual missionary. There may be a period of time during which the missionary has authority over the church (or group of churches), but the aim should be to appoint elders and hand over the government of the church to them. The church planter must exercise great wisdom by passing on authority. When he or she moves on to another location it must be clear to the church that his or her authority over the church has passed to the elders. There may also be situations where a church is struggling and the elders decide to bring in an individual to advise them. Normally this person will not actually have authority over the elders, but in extreme situations the church may agree that they should. This should be a temporary arrangement until new elders can be appointed or the elders can be reinstated.

A LAST WORD – THE GOAL OF LEADERSHIP!

Above all, in the detail of how leadership in the local church works, the principles of the distinctive roles of elders and deacons and the primacy of servanthood must not be forgotten. Let those who lead do so with diligence, and may those who submit to their leadership obey gladly, so that the elders (pastor-teachers) can:

*prepare God's people for works of service,
so that the body of Christ may be built up
until we all reach unity in the faith
and in the knowledge of the Son of God
and become mature,
attaining to the whole measure of the fullness of Christ
(Ephesians 4:12-13)*

RECOMMENDED READING

Getz, Gene A. 2003, *Elders and Leaders: God's plan for leading the church*, Moody Publishers, Chicago

Generally very good, but goes beyond Scripture in chapter 26 (*The Need for a Primary Leader*)

Strauch, Alexander 1986, *Biblical Eldership: An urgent call to restore Biblical church leadership*, Lewis & Roth, Littleton

An excellent book that is thoroughly biblical and highly practical