

Leadership in the Church

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New Testament Words for Church Leaders

It is my conviction that an authentically Christians should begin our understanding of any doctrinal issue from the conviction that Scripture is our ultimate authority. This paper will, therefore, begin with examining the New Testament words for church leadership. Secondly, I will examine the main theories of church government traditionally followed in different churches. After pausing to consider questions surrounding women in church leadership and how leaders should be treated by those they lead, I will draw some conclusions about a possible way forward for church leadership.

The New Testament says much less about leadership than we might expect coming from a culture where a great deal of emphasis is placed on leaders. This in itself might serve to warn us that we should not place excessive emphasis on leaders or that, at least, we need to define what we mean by leadership according to what Scripture is describing. Seven words are used in the New Testament to describe people we might describe as 'church leaders' and the functions we would associate with '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 *hēgéomai*);
7. Administration (Greek *proístēmi*);

An understanding of the meaning and New Testament usage of each of these words can help us form a clear biblical basis for leadership in the Church.

Apostles

The word *apóstolos* means literally one who is 'sent out', but the meanings of New Testament words cannot be determined based on etymology alone. We need to consider how the word was used in the wider world in which the New Testament was written, what Old Testament background it may have and, most importantly, how it is actually defined in the New Testament. *Apóstolos* was an uncommon word in classical Greek writings, but it was given a special significance by Jesus, who used it to distinguish the Twelve from the other disciples as His special representatives (Luke 6:13; Acts 1:2,26). The meaning of the word as it used in the New Testament is similar to 'ambassador' (which Paul uses, for example in 2 Corinthians 5:20, to describe his function as an apostle), since these apostles were appointed personally by Christ to represent Him and given authority by Him to fulfil that task. We might say, then, that an apostle is an 'authorised representative'.

The apostles were the first leaders of the Church (in Acts 6 they function as leaders in the Jerusalem fellowship) and are described as the foundation of the Church together with the prophets (Ephesians 2:20). Their teaching was the normative doctrine of the Church (Acts 2:8) and Peter and Jude refer to their authority in establishing the foundational truths of the faith (2 Peter 3:2; Jude 1:17). This fulfils what Jesus said to them in the upper room, when He said that the Spirit would guide them into truths they could not receive before Jesus left them (John 16:12-13). In the Gospel records Christ focused much of His time and energy on training His twelve apostles to be future leaders of the Church, teaching them plainly alone truths that were only spoken to the crowds in parables (Mark 4:34). They also spent periods during the forty days before His ascension being instructed by the risen Jesus (Acts 1:1-3). He gave them special authority over His church, using the symbolic language of the 'keys of the Kingdom' (Matthew 16:19), and commissioned them to be His witnesses (Acts 1:4-11). Acts describes their role in authenticating 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 the Church in one locality, but extended over all the churches, or better over the whole 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). This criterion was important to the Church in confirming which books were to be received as Scripture, forming the New Testament.

The Twelve have a symbolic significance, their number paralleling the twelve tribes of Israel. By choosing twelve men (Luke 6:13) Jesus was forming a new people of God, the Church. This new people of God is continuous with Israel through the person of Jesus (He was the true Israel, God's faithful servant) but yet distinct from Israel. It is the new covenant people of God. Ultimately, however, the Old Testament and New Testament peoples of God will be united together as one. The city that is revealed in Revelation 21 has the names of the twelve tribes of Israel on its gates (v12) and the names of the Twelve apostles on its walls' foundations (v14).

The importance of the number twelve is clear from the fact that the remaining eleven appointed a person to replace Judas and "to take over this apostolic ministry" (Acts 1:25). They chose Matthias from among a pool of men who had been with them throughout the whole public ministry of Jesus and who had been a witness of His resurrection (Acts 1:21-22). This fact emphasises that Jesus chose twelve men out of a larger group of disciples who were close to Him rather than the twelve being the only ones who were constantly with him. It also shows that the primary role of the apostles was two-fold. Firstly, they were to be witnesses of the resurrection. The word Luke uses (*martus*) is important, since he uses it in a technical way to describe those who actually saw the risen Christ and were commissioned by Him to bear witness to the world as to His resurrection and what He taught them after the resurrection about the significance of His death. In Luke's use of the word not all Christians are 'witnesses', only those who saw Christ post-resurrection and received His commission. The Twelve are a subgroup of these 'witnesses'. Secondly, the apostles are to keep the Church faithful to Christ's life and teaching. They were to be men who had followed Jesus and learnt His way of life as well as hearing His teaching. The apostles are foundational as both teachers of the Church and models to the Church of a Christ-like pattern of life.

Although the Twelve had a special role as a sign of the reality of the new covenant people of God, they are not the only people called apostles in the New Testament. Luke refers to Paul and Barnabas as apostles (Acts 14:4). Other people who are probably called apostles are Silas (based on 1 Thessalonians 1:1 and 2:6) and James (Galatians 1:19). It has also been suggested that Andronicus and Junia were known as apostles, since Paul says in Romans 16:7 that they are "outstanding among the apostles". This verse is difficult because it could mean that the two had a good reputation with the apostles or that they were particularly outstanding apostles. If the second reading is correct it raises some problems since we don't read of this couple elsewhere and it is difficult to see what it could mean to say that two apostles who were not among the Twelve were particularly noteworthy. There is, however, another possibility which is that Paul was thinking of a different type of apostle. Certainly he uses the word in 2 Corinthians 8:23 to refer to messengers from (NIV "representatives of") the churches and this would appear to be the sense in which he calls Epaphroditus an apostle (NIV "messenger") of the church in Philippi (Philippians 2:25). These apostles of the churches were people commissioned by the churches to represent them as part of Paul's missionary team.

So, we have two ways in which the word 'apostle' is being used in the New Testament. In both cases it means an authorised representative, but in some cases it is a representative of a church, authorised and sent out by the church (apostles of the churches), whereas in others it is a representative of Christ, authorised and sent out by Him (apostles of Christ). In which sense, then, was Paul an apostle? We can try to answer this question from two sources – Luke's account in Acts and Paul's own writings. As we have already said, Luke refers to Paul and

Barnabas as apostles (Acts 14:4). These two men certainly had been sent out by a local church, namely the church in Antioch (Acts 13:1-3), but is this all that Luke is referring to when he calls them apostles? A careful study of Acts suggests not. Nowhere else does Luke use the word 'apostle' to refer to someone outside the Twelve. Indeed, he uses it so specifically to mean the Twelve that some scholars have tried to suggest (without any evidence) that Acts 14:4 has been tampered with at a later point. In calling Paul and Barnabas apostles Luke places them on a par with the Twelve. Further evidence that this is what he means comes from his accounts of Paul's commissioning by the risen Jesus, where Jesus calls Paul His witness (*martus*, Acts 26:26). Ananias also uses this word to describe Paul (Acts 22. 15). This is the same word used in Acts 1 to describe the witnesses of the resurrection from among whom Matthias was chosen to replace Judas. Another indicator that Luke intends us to see Paul as an apostle on a par with the Twelve is the way he parallels Paul with Peter. The earlier chapters of Acts focus on Peter's activity as the foremost of the Twelve and the later chapters recount Paul's activity. The episodes Luke chooses to include suggest that he intends us to see Paul as Peter's equal. Paul performs similar miracles to Peter in the same order.

Paul's letters add further support to the idea that Paul is an apostle of Christ in the same sense as the Twelve. Paul became an apostle when Christ appeared to Him specially and appointed him as His apostle to the Gentiles (1 Corinthians 15:7, 9; Romans 1:5, 13; Galatians 2:8) and he 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; 1 Corinthians 1:1, 9:1, 2, 15:9; 2 Corinthians 1:1, 12:11-12; Galatians 1:1). Notably, in 1 Corinthians 15:5-8, Paul refers to the Twelve and to "all the apostles", a group clearly larger than the Twelve. He also acknowledges that he himself was "abnormally born", meeting the risen Jesus not prior to His ascension but through a special appearance, and emphasises that Jesus appeared to him "last of all" (v8), linking this fact to the idea that he is the "least of the apostles" (v9). The indication is that Paul believed himself to be the final apostle of Christ and the only one to be appointed in a special revelation after Jesus' ascension. Paul also received his gospel directly from Christ (Galatians 1:12), although it was important for him to establish that it was the same message preached by the Jerusalem apostles (Galatians 2:1-2).

In conclusion, then, Acts and Paul's writings suggest that there are two types of 'apostles' in the New Testament. Both are 'authorised representatives', but the distinguishing factor is who authorised them to be their representative. The less common use of the word refers to authorised messengers of the churches who represented them in mission. Epaphroditus is one of this group. The dominant usage of the word (and the only way Luke uses it), however, refers to authorised representatives of Jesus who were taught by Him and saw Him after His resurrection and were commissioned by Him to lay the foundation for the church through their witness to Him. In this group were the Twelve, Barnabas and Silas and an unknown number of others who were those from among whom Matthias was chosen to replace Judas. Paul became an apostle in this sense by virtue of Jesus' appearance to Him on the Road to Damascus. To return to the question of Junas and Andronicus, we cannot be dogmatic about which kind of 'apostle' they were, but it seems likely that they were 'apostles of the church', since this makes sense of Paul's claim that they were 'outstanding'.

Based on the above discussion, an apostle of Christ is one of those first generation of Christians who saw the risen Jesus and were commissioned by Him to be His representatives. The apostles' teaching thus became foundational for the Church (Acts 2:42) and in the later New Testament letters the believers are called to remember and remain faithful to the teaching of the apostles (2 Peter 3:2; Jude 17). In Ephesians, Paul describes the apostles and prophets as the foundation of the Church (2:20) since they were the original recipients of the revelation of the gospel (3:5). There can, therefore, be no 'apostles of Christ' in the Church today. The apostolic gospel is recorded in the New Testament and the authority of the apostles as faithful witnesses to Christ is now deposited in Scripture. The church must remain faithful to the apostolic gospel and it does so by reading and obeying Scripture. There can still be 'apostles of the churches' today, but given the dominant use of the word

'apostle' in the New Testament to refer to those with authority to lay the foundations of the faith, it seems best to avoid using the word in that sense to avoid confusion. We might call modern day representatives of the churches simply 'messengers' or 'missionaries'. It is also unhelpful to speak of the 'gift of apostleship', which some use to describe gifted church planters or pioneers, since the New Testament never talks of 'apostleship' as a gift – it rather speaks of apostles as having been given to the church (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11).

In the Church today there is no biblical mandate for leaders such as apostles who have permanent authority extending beyond their own local church in the way the apostles would have had, although some people may be used by God to have influence over many local churches. Individuals such as Timothy and Titus were delegates of the apostle Paul who had responsibility for initiating churches or establishing leadership in existing churches. Significantly, they are never described as 'apostles', since they had now been appointed and authorised by the risen Jesus. 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 (of Christ) in summary:

- Special representatives of Christ personally appointed and authorised by Him to teach the gospel.
- Include the Twelve, Paul, Barnabas, Silas and James.
- Had unique authority to lay the foundations of the faith through their teaching as the Spirit guided them.
- Had unique authority over the whole Church.

Elders

The word *presbúteros* literally means an older person, but is used biblically to describe an office of leadership. The emphasis in this word is on maturity of character that suits the individual for this office. There were recognised elders within the Jewish community (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. Elders are widely recognised in the churches by different New Testament writers – Luke, Paul, Peter and James all refer to them and John calls himself an elder in his second and third letters. Even in Jerusalem, where the apostles were present, elders were recognised and take on responsibility in oversight (Acts 11:30, 15:2,4,6,22,23). Accounts of elders being appointed suggest that they were initially recognised and authenticated by the apostles and their representatives (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), although we cannot say whether this was the case in every situation or how elders after the apostolic era were meant to be appointed. In every case where elders are mentioned it is in the plural. We never read the Church in a locality having only one elder. 1 Timothy 4:14 even speaks of the "body of elders" is spoken of. It is not possible to say, however, whether each house church in a city would have had more than one elder or if the body of elders comprised one or more elder from each house church meeting together to oversee the whole Church in the city. Elders are to be respected and accusations are not to be made against them lightly (1 Timothy 5:19).

The role of elders is to lead by way of example in the church and to work hard at teaching the Word. This is emphasised most clearly in 1 Timothy 5:17. Some translations of this verse could appear to distinguish two groups of elders here: all of the elders directing the affairs of the church, while only some have the additional role of preaching and teaching. This interpretation has been popular historically, especially because it was advocated by John Calvin, but most modern commentators believe that these two roles are expected of all the elders. The word the NIV translates as "direct" is *proistēmi*, which is discussed below under the heading 'Administration'. It does not mean to direct in the sense of telling others what to do, but to lead by example and take responsibility for the Church. The elders who preach and teach are not a subgroup of the elders and

the clause “especially those who labour in preaching and teaching” (ESV) does not mean only some of the elders preach and teach, but that those who work especially hard (labour) are worthiest of honour. Teaching is the task of all elders, and it is the means through which they guide the Church. Those who devote greatest effort to it are worthy of greatest honour. Elders have a responsibility to give direction to the church through their teaching of the Word and their example.

Three other passages help to provide further insights into the role the elders should play within the church:

1 Peter 5:1-4

Peter appeals to the elders that they should:

- *Be shepherds of God's flock that is under their care* (v2) – elders are 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 with the gospel), rescues them when they are hurt or lost (elders must care compassionately for people, applying the gospel to their problems) and corrects them when they go astray (elders must also discipline God's people in line with the gospel). The shepherd does all of this with a willingness to sacrifice for the sake of the flock. A faithful shepherd will not be self-protective but willing to lay down his life for the sheep. 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, who is the “Chief Shepherd” (v4).
- *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 office may bring with it (for example respect or status).
- *Be eager to serve rather than lording it over people* (v2-3) – the only biblical pattern for Christian leadership is servanthood. 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

This passage provides a wonderful insight into the responsibility entrusted to the elders by the apostles, as Paul, 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* (v29-30) – 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.

James 5:14

Here the elders are said to 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. Elders should take a particular interest

in praying for the flock, in visiting them when there is a problem and in helping them find forgiveness for sin (v15).

In addition to describing the function of elders, the New Testament also emphasises the kind of character they must display. In Titus 1:6-9, Paul instructs Titus as to what qualities an elder must have:

- a) *Consistent spiritual maturity* – the elder must be “blameless” (v7). This does not mean he is morally perfect, but that he has shown consistent maturity in the faith. This should be evident to everyone – his own family, the Church and people outside both. 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 what elders should aim for and the qualities that must be seen with some consistency before a person is 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.

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 Church in each locality should be overseen by a body 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 Church.

Overseers

The word *epískopos* literally means one who watches over. It was traditionally translated ‘bishop’ in older English versions. It has been suggested on the basis that overseer is in the singular in 1 Timothy 3:2 that there was only one overseer in each church, but Paul wrote to multiple overseers in the church in Philippi (Philippians 1:1). Some Christian traditions distinguish overseers from elders, suggesting that a single overseer should lead over multiple elders, but in several New Testament verses the two words refer to the same people:

- *Acts 20:28* – Paul reminds the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit has made them overseers;
- *Titus 1:6-7* – the overseer of verse 7 is one of the elders in verse 6;
- *1 Peter 5:12* – Peter challenges the elders to serve as overseers.

There is, therefore, no biblical warrant for overseers (or bishops) as a higher level of leadership with oversight over the elders in a region. An elder is an overseer and an overseer is an elder. ‘Elder’ emphasises the maturity of character necessary for the office, while ‘overseer’ refers to the task of watching over God’s flock. ‘Overseer’ seems to be used more in the New Testament of churches in a predominantly Gentile context, where the Jewish concept of elders would have been less meaningful.

In 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Paul writes about the qualities of an overseer. This passage is a close parallel to Paul's words to Titus concerning elders (see above) and focuses largely on the qualities of consistent spiritual maturity the overseer must show. In addition to what Paul said to Titus, he adds that:

- *An overseer must have a track record of being able to manage his own family well* (vv4-5) – this is evidence that he can manage the Church family. Church leadership is much more like leading a family than leading an organisation or business, 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 it 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. The emphasis is, however, on the fact that **if** the man is married or a parent, the nature of his marriage and parenting are important. He must have only one wife, not more than one (he is "a one-woman man"), and any children he has must respect him.

The only ability mentioned in these verses is that an overseer must be "able to teach" (v2). This again emphasises the fact that it is through teaching the Word of God that elder/overseers are to keep the Church faithful to the gospel. All elder/overseers should be able to teach because they have a firm grasp of the gospel and can communicate it clearly and apply it effectively to situations that arise. This does not necessarily imply an ability to 'preach' to large numbers.

Overseers in summary:

- Overseer is another word for elder – it emphasises the role of watching 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 inside and outside the Church.

Pastor-teachers

In Ephesians 4:11, Paul describes how Christ has given people as gifts to the church starting with the apostles, then prophets, then evangelists and then "pastors and teachers". The Greek grammar suggests that there are four groups here, not five. The words "some to be", present before each office, are absent between the words "pastors" and "teachers". In other words, the fourth group are pastors **and** teachers, combining two spiritual gifts in one office. In English we can express this with the hyphenated pastor-teacher. *Poimén* ("pastors") means literally "shepherds", and so tells us that this group of people are to shepherd the flock. The word is not used elsewhere in the New Testament to describe an office in the Church, but it is used in spiritual terms of Christ (e.g., John 10; Hebrews 13:20; 1 Peter 2:25). The related verb *poimainō* ("to shepherd") is, however, used in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:2 to describe the work elders must do. *Didáskalos* ("teachers") is the standard New Testament word for people who teach God's word in the Church (Acts 13:1; 1 Corinthians 12:28, 29; James 3:1). A related word, *didaché* ("able to teach"), is used in 1 Timothy 4:2 to describe an elder's ability to teach, while 1 Timothy 5:17 uses another related word, *didaskalía* ("teaching"), to describe the elders' role as teachers of the Church.

The people Christ has given to the Church as pastor-teachers are exactly the kind of people who should be recognised in churches as elder/overseers. If 'pastor-teacher' or simply 'pastor' is to be used of an office of leadership (which is not its sense in Ephesians 4:11), it would be simply another way to describe an elder or overseer. These three terms describe different dimensions of the same people:

- *Elder* – the maturity of character suiting him for the office;
- *Overseer* – the responsibility inherent in the office;
- *Pastor-teacher* – the gifting that enables him to fulfil the office.

The common practice of designating only one or some of the elders as 'pastor(s)' may create an unhelpful distinction in the minds of people. If a congregation wants to set apart one of the elders by supporting them financially and giving them certain responsibilities (possibly including a larger responsibility for teaching), it may be better to speak of that person as a "staff elder" rather than the pastor. This avoids the common conception that 'pastor' is a third level of leadership with authority over the elders. Similarly, the use of 'Pastor' as a title before a name may be unhelpful. We do not do this with other gifts God has given individuals (when did you last hear of 'Encourager Smith' or 'Helper Jones'?)

Pastor-teachers in summary:

- Pastor-teachers are one group of people who have two gifts – to shepherd and to teach the flock.
- Pastor is a third word to describe the people elsewhere called elders or overseers.

Deacons

'Deacon' is a transliteration of the Greek *diákonos*, which means literally 'servant'. In one sense, every Christian should be a 'deacon', as all should be serving, but Philippians 1:1 separates out the overseers and deacons from the other believers, suggesting that a recognised office of deacon existed (or at least a group of people who could be recognised as 'the deacons'). In 1 Timothy 3:8-13, Paul describes the qualities Timothy should look for in deacons. Most are the same as those expected of elders in verses 2-7, but the notable exception that, unlike elders (v2), deacons are not required to be able to teach. They must, however, be mature Christians with 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 candidates should have served in other capacities and shown their ability to be faithful before being appointed as deacons through a process of seeking approval from the church

Although the word 'deacon' is not used in Acts 6:1-7, the apostles' appointment of seven men in the Jerusalem church to look after the distribution of food to widows is often seen as a model for the respective roles of elders and deacons. The apostles act as elders might (leaders in prayer and the Word) and the Seven act like deacons (leaders in practical ministry). If this is a legitimate parallel to draw, we can draw some conclusions:

- Elders are not intended to be coordinators or activities and programmes and must focus on prayer and teaching the word (v4), deacons should relieve practical responsibilities from them.
- Deacons must be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom (v3).
- Deacons can be chosen by the congregation, but should also be approved by the elders under whose oversight they should work (v6).
- Deacons have specific responsibilities for particular ministries while elders oversee their work.
- The faithful service of deacons is essential to the growth of the Church (v7)

Some churches do not use the title 'deacon' to describe a particular office, but apply these biblical principles to the appointment of people to positions of responsibility as leaders in different ministries.

Deacons in summary:

- Deacons are servants of the Church responsible for practical arrangements.
- Deacons can be appointed by the whole congregation, 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

Hēgéomai is the preferred term in Hebrews to describe the work of the leaders of the church. Chapter 13 uses the word three times (v7,17,24), telling us several things about these 'leaders':

- They taught the word of God (v7).
- They were examples to the other Christians in their lifestyle and faith (v7).
- Church members must submit to them (not to "their authority", which might imply submission because of a position, but "to them", in relationship) and to obey, making their work a joy, not a burden (v17).
- These leaders "watch over" over the church and must give account to God for how they do this (v17).

These verses clearly refer to elders/overseers, since the functions of oversight and teaching are in mind. The writer reminds these leaders of their responsibility before God to watch over the Church and to set an example to its members, but the main focus is on reminding the Christians to respect, obey and submit to their leaders. This important truth must be held alongside Peter's insistence that elders should be servant leaders (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.

Elders find too often find their role a burden because people will not submit and will not be led. A servant leader should be easy to follow, but this still requires humility in others who must follow. It does not mean people should follow their leaders without questioning (in fact a good elder will always be listening), but they should think very carefully and be very sure of their cause before challenging the leaders. It is the responsibility of the elders to discern God's direction for the congregation, to communicate it to the members and to shepherd the flock towards this goal. If elders have no vision or do not communicate it, they cannot expect the flock to follow, and if the flock will not follow the elders' lead, tension will result.

Leadership in summary:

- The term 'leaders' in Hebrews 13 refers to the elders.
- Leaders 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.

Administration

In Romans 12:8, Paul uses the word *proīstēmi* within a list of gifts people have been given. Interestingly, the emphasis in this list is not on abilities given to individuals but the tasks they have been entrusted with. *Proīstēmi* is sometimes translated "leadership" in this verse, but the verb literally means "to place or stand over". This concept is sometimes confused 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 same word is used in 1 Timothy

5:17 (NIV “direct”) to describe the elders’ responsibility to lead the church. The emphasis is on the fact that this person has been placed over certain things by God, given certain responsibilities. Their task, then, is to look after certain responsibilities well – to administer them faithfully. This might refer to any area of responsibility in the Church, including that of elders, who oversee the whole life of the church, and deacons, who have been placed over areas 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:

- Leadership entails a God-given responsibility to stand over certain things in the church.
- Those who are given responsibility must be careful to fulfil it diligently.

Common Models of Church Government

Throughout Church history and across denominations, different models for governance of the Church have developed. In the contemporary world, the traditional patterns are often mixed in new churches, which attempt to take strengths from each of the traditional forms whilst avoiding what they perceive to be weaknesses. It is still worth considering the main traditional forms of church government before identifying the key questions about organising church government they raise. The three main traditional models are:

Episcopalian

Episcopalians follow a hierarchical structure of Church government with three levels of leadership, traditionally called bishops, elders and deacons. This pattern is seen in the writings of Ignatius (c.115 AD) and Polycarp (c.70–160 AD) and it was followed by many churches by the middle of the Second Century. Bishops came to exercise oversight and authority over the Church in one city or region (diocese) and each church had only a single elder. Bishops normally meet together to make significant decisions for the denomination and there may be additional levels of authority, for example archbishops over larger regions.

The development of this pattern of church government has been defended in two ways:

- a) *Apostolic succession* – some argue that bishops are the successors of the apostles, who passed on their authority. In this view, this pattern was God’s intended purpose for the Church and the Holy Spirit led the Church into it after the apostolic era. It is, therefore, the correct form of church government. Supporters of apostolic succession believe that only bishops have authority to ordain leaders in local churches under their authority and that churches following other forms of church government are deficient. In Roman Catholicism, the bishop of Rome (or pope), believed to be the successor of Peter, is an overseer of the whole Church and other bishops are under his authority.
- b) *Expediency* – other episcopalians believe that the office of bishop developed from the role of elder rather than succeeding the role of apostle and was necessary because of the practical challenges of organising a growing number of churches with limited numbers of leaders. Episcopalians who hold this view acknowledge alternative forms of church government as acceptable, although they may claim that the episcopal model is best for the health of the Church.

Episcopalians sometimes claim that a few people in the New Testament who were not apostles were forerunners of the bishops, having responsibility to oversee the Church in a city or region, for example:

- *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 appoint local leaders in Ephesus and Crete respectively.

Some non-episcopalians contend that the development of the third office of bishop was never God’s intention and reflected a compromise, with worldly values influencing a modelling 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 episcopal model is followed by the Roman Catholic Church, the Anglican Communion and American Methodists. Some Pentecostal denominations and new movements also effectively follow an episcopal model, although their regional leaders may not use the title ‘bishop’. Apostolic denominations also follow this model although they refer to the overseers of multiple churches as ‘apostles’.

Presbyterian

In presbyterianism each local congregation is led by a body of elders and the offices of elder and overseer (bishop) are one and the same. Deacons may also be appointed to serve in practical ministries. The congregation is normally be involved in the process of appointing elders and deacons, but the elders are called to to lead the congregation and exercise authority over it rather than simply to follow its wishes. Elders share authority equally. There is no higher office, but congregations in regions are grouped in regional presbyteries or synods and elders of all the congregations meet in assemblies to ensure communication and sharing of resources, to deal with local problems, and to facilitate agreement on matter of doctrine and vision. The decisions of these presbyteries and synods are accepted as authoritative by each local church (the synod of Jerusalem described in Acts 15:6-29 is sometimes claimed as a biblical precedent). The authority of the presbytery or synod over congregations is not given from above, by God, but arises from below because the congregations invest authority in it.

Presbyterian churches often distinguish one 'teaching elder' (often called the 'minister') from the others, who are described as 'ruling elders' (1 Timothy 5:17 is the usual 'proof text'). In practice the minister often has greater authority with the congregation than the other elders, so that there is effectively a three-fold leadership structure of preacher (or minister or pastor), elder and deacon. The presbyterian model was popularised by Genevan Reformer John Calvin (1509-64) and developed further in 17th Century Scotland and England. Presbyterians often insist this model was followed by the New Testament church and merely rediscovered by Calvin. They point to the following biblical supports for their view:

- 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 early decades after the apostolic era was not as uniform as episcopalians often claim. The *Didache* (an early Christian document written around 70-160 AD), for example, uses 'elder' and 'overseer' interchangeably, authority rested in the local congregation (including 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), in which the bishop's authority was still much more limited than in episcopalianism, since it extended only to one congregation (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.

Free Church

The Free Church or 'independent' model of church government agrees with the presbyterian view in rejecting the idea of the office of bishop overseeing the Church in a region but differs from presbyterianism in that it also rejects the authority of presbyteries and synods. Advocates point to the fact that the word 'church' in the New Testament refers either to the whole Church (all believers worldwide) or to a local congregation, never to 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 the association are not binding on the congregations involved, they merely provide guidelines or advice.

Most free churches have traditionally also been congregationalist, authority resting with the members, who vote on major decisions. The authority of leaders is vested in them by the members. In recent years, however, an increasing number of independent churches have been led by a body of elders appointed by the members or by a pastor with support from elders or deacons.

Baptist, Brethren, Evangelical Free and Congregationalist churches generally follow the Free Church model, as do many new independent evangelical churches.

Key issues in church government

Three 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 Church history be taken as normative (episcopalians often believe they should)? A related 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 congregation 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)? Does a leader's authority arise from above (divine calling and gifting) or below (recognition and appointment by the congregation)? This is an important question, and is difficult to answer without being influenced by cultural perspectives on leadership. It could be argued that episcopalianism fitted well with hierarchical government in Rome through to the Medieval period, Presbyterianism suited Calvin's Geneva well, whereas congregationalism appeals more to the modern society with its emphasis on equality and democratic forms of government.

3. Expressing wholeness

How can congregations in one region work together? Should a denominational structure have authority to make decisions affecting a network (episcopalians and presbyterians say yes, while independents say no)? These questions seek to reflect the tension between the truth of the whole Church as the invisible spiritual body of Christ united by the Spirit and the congregation as a gathered body of believers in one locality. How can congregations express their participation in the wider Church, particularly when there are differences of doctrine, style and emphasis?

Women in Church Leadership

In recent decades the question of the role of women in Church leadership has been much debated among Christians. The debate is often framed as being between ‘egalitarians’, who believe in the equality of men and women in every aspect of service of God including leadership positions, and ‘complementarians’ who believe that men and women have distinct roles with eldership being exclusively male. The issue is complicated further, however, by the fact that some churches exclude women from much more than the office of elder, while others allow women to serve fully without calling them elders. The whole discussion is also coloured by the well-recognised fact that some men have historically abused positions of power, resulting in oppression of women (and other men). Space does not permit a full discussion in this paper, but in what follows I hope to give a biblically-faithful outline of the issue:

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

The equality of men and women in their value and status and in relationship to God is clear from the very beginning of the Bible. Genesis 1:27 says that God created humankind, both male and female, in His own image. Both male and female are divine image bearers and, in fact, the image of God can only be perfectly reflected to creation by both male and female in harmony. In Genesis 2, the woman is created from the side of the man to be “a helper fit for him” (v20). She is not inferior to the man, but equal to him in a way that none of the animals were. After the fall, sin damaged the relationship between the sexes, creating a power struggle (Genesis 3:16). Both men and women are marred by sin, but both can be restored in relationship with God through Christ. This principle 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.

Cultures throughout history have tended to stratify society on different bases, including race, social status and sex. In this 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 same privilege of standing as an heir of God (read the context of the verse). Our status before God is found in Christ. When God sees us, He sees His beloved Son as we have “put on Christ” (v27). Christians must boldly proclaim that an equal privilege and an equal relationship with God is available through Christ whatever a person’s race, culture, social standing or sex.

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

Galatians 3:28 is sometimes quoted by advocates of woman in Church leadership, but that is not the purpose of the verse. Paul does not say that all differences between the classes of people he lists are removed. The distinctions between Jew and Greek or slave and free do not disappear simply because they are in Christ and nor do the differences between men and women. The fact of two distinct sexes is 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 and psychologists continue to discover an increasing number of ways in which men and women tend to think differently and react differently to situations. Some of these distinctions may well be 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 and hormonal 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 his helper. He is incomplete without her, but she is made to complete him, not the other way round. As the Old Testament unfolds, we see distinct roles for men and women 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) Eldership is male

Two New Testament passages discuss the role of women in the church. When examining these verses, we must consider the cultural setting into which they were written. Both the Jewish system of worship and society in the Greco-Roman world ascribed different roles to women than men. In the Temple 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 more distant from the Most Holy Place where God's presence resided. In the synagogue, women's role was restricted. During His public ministry, Jesus maintained a clear distinction between the sexes in only choosing men to be apostles, despite the fact that his most devoted followers were women. There is no doubt that the New Testament describes women playing a greater part in the life and worship of the Church than they did in Israel, but as we consider the two passages below, we must ask whether they are intending to overthrow the limitations on the role of women altogether. If they are, we should expect this to be quite clear. Another question to ask as we consider these passages is whether they are intended to apply to the whole Church across all contexts or only to the specific context to which they are addressed.

1 Corinthians 14:33-35

1 Corinthians 14 is concerned with order in meetings of the Church, especially in the way the gifts of tongues and prophecy operate. As he approaches his conclusion, Paul says that women should remain silent in the churches and that they are not allowed to speak. At first reading, this may appear to be prohibiting women from contributing verbally to the gatherings, but that cannot be the meaning, since in 1 Corinthians 11:5 Paul has already referred to women praying and prophesying. How, then, are we to understand Paul's prohibition on women speaking? The answer must lie in the context. In verse 29, Paul says that the messages brought by prophets should be weighed by "the others", which could refer either to all the other believers or to the other prophets. It is in this context of discussing and applying a message that has been shared that women are to be silent.

It seems that the problem with the conduct of women in the church in Corinth was that they were asking questions about the application of prophecies in ways that did not reflect the principle of submission to their husbands. Paul, therefore, says that they should ask their own husbands at home. The unity of the couple under the headship of the husband (a principle Paul establishes in Chapter 11) is paramount and by asking questions in the church gathering some women were not respecting this. It should be noted that Paul puts no restriction on how men and women discuss the messages shared in the Church gatherings when they are at home. It is perfectly legitimate for a couple to have a vigorous discussion and for the wife to correct her husband in private. This may even mean that the man when he engages in the weighing process in Church or in teaching shares truths he learned from his wife. It is, however, his responsibility to bring the knowledge and insights the couple together have gleaned to others in the fellowship.

We may be tempted to think that this ruling by Paul was only because of the way some women in Corinth were behaving. Yet he does not tell the women to ask questions and contribute to the weighing process in a more

orderly way. Rather, he tells them to be silent because this reflects the divinely ordered headship of the husband. Two other indicators in the text show that the application is universal – for the whole Church in every context. Firstly, Paul says it applies in “all the congregations of the saints” (v33b), which goes against the idea that he is simply accommodating to the situation in Corinth. Instead we must read this as meaning that he is pulling a wayward congregation back into line with the rest. Secondly, Paul says the submission of women is “as the Law says” (v34). Much has changed in the New Testament about the participation of women in the worship of God’s people – to be able to pray and prophesy is a new privilege – but the basic principle of male headship is consistent. The equal status of men and women declared in Galatians 3 does not remove this distinction in roles within God’s order.

1 Timothy 2:11-15

1 Timothy 2:11 restates what Paul wrote to the Corinthians, that women should learn in quietness and full submission. The opportunity to learn may seem obvious to us, but again this is liberating compared to the way women were often treated amongst the Jews and the Romans. Both men and women should be growing in their knowledge of God. The following verses go further, however, than 1 Corinthians 14. Verse 12 states, “I do not permit a woman to teach or to have authority over a man; she must be silent”. The connection between teaching and authority over men is important to note. This verse does not prohibit women from teaching other women or children and it does not mean that a woman cannot speak in a gathering where men are present, but that she should not be teaching them with authority. As in Corinth, a woman may be permitted to pray and to prophesy, but she should not be involved in the process of determining what God’s truth is or how it applies to the Church.

It is sometimes suggested that Paul’s prohibition in this passage on women teaching was an adaptation to a situation in the congregation where Timothy was serving, which is generally believed to be the church in Ephesus. Perhaps there were some women who were not educated and so were sharing in unhelpful ways. Might Paul be saying that the women should become educated before they teach men? Even a plain reading of the text should make us question this idea. If Paul intended this prohibition to be only for a time, he was very careless in not making that clear. Similarly, if Paul intended it only for Ephesus, why does he not specify that? After all, Timothy is described as serving churches in multiple cities in various places in Acts and Paul’s letters and the apostle’s instructions to him should be read as setting a standard for his ministry throughout a lifetime.

Not only is there no hint in the passage of a limited application, but there are several indicators that the application is intended to be universal – for the whole Church everywhere and in all times. This section of teaching about the behaviour of men and women opens in verse 8 with the phrase, “I desire then that in every place”, indicating a relevance beyond one context. Furthermore, Paul grounds the restriction on the order of creation (v13) and to the Fall (v14), events that apply to all of humankind. The mention of creation is especially important as it means the different roles for men and women cannot be only a result of sin’s effect, in which case we might argue that it is reversed in the Church. Finally, Paul balances his restriction on women teaching men with a comment on the significance of child-bearing as a great privilege and responsibility for women. This suggests that the different roles are grounded in our essential created nature. Just as women have the responsibility of bearing children, 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. Not all women will have children and not all men will teach but these are distinctive roles.

There is, then, no apparent reason within this passage or the wider context of 1 Timothy to limit this restriction and we must conclude that this is a general principle for the Church in all times. Based on the earlier discussion

of leadership in the Church, it should be clear that if women are prohibited from authoritative teaching 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. This also makes sense within the context as it is the next chapter in 1 Timothy that describes the qualifications of an overseer, including ability to teach.

4) Women should use their gifts fully

I have argued that the New Testament does not permit women to be elders/pastor-teachers or authoritative teachers in the Church. Does this mean they cannot have a full role in the life of the church? No! Women can serve in every other capacity in the Church. 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), 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) and possibly even speaking to men in the Church so long as this is clearly under the authority of the elders. Women can also use leadership abilities 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 or to prevent them using their gifts (a common argument for opening up eldership to women). 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 I Corinthians 14 that does not take account of the context. It is also worth noting that restricting eldership to men only does not necessitate restricting women from non-teaching roles. If certain tasks like presiding at the Lord's Supper or baptising are restricted to the elders, then women would be prohibited, but Scripture does not limit these functions in this way. Perhaps the issue of women in eldership would not be so great if the distinctive responsibilities of elders were limited only to what Scripture reserves for them, which is to keep the Church faithful to the gospel by teaching, evaluating prophetic messages, correcting falsehood, praying for God's guidance for the flock and caring for its members.

Appropriate Treatment of Elders

Elders have authority in the Church and believers are challenged in the New Testament to respect them and to submit to them so that the elders can serve with joy and not be unnecessarily burdened (Hebrews 13:17). In 1 Timothy 5:17-25, Paul gives extended teaching to Timothy about how elders should be treated by the church. He has three main concerns:

1) Payment for elders (vv17-18)

This command probably relates to a debate about whether it was appropriate for elders to be remunerated. The commands in these verses may be surprising to some modern Western Christians who assume 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 work hard in teaching God's word, to be salaried by the church. This is almost certainly 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 verse 18 to support this statement strongly suggests 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 for congregations to provide financial support to one or more elders to free them to devote their time more fully to teaching the word and shepherding the flock. This does not mean that congregations **must** do so – the decision to have one or more paid staff will depend on financial circumstances and the elders discernment of needs – or that elders are free to line their own pockets at the expense of the others – 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 congregation to have a team of elders some of whom are paid 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 congregation and the needs of the individual, but Paul's words 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 explicitly unbiblical extremes – either paying too low a wage so financial worries burden their staff or allowing staff to become rich through ministry. Staff elders should 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) Disciplining elders (vv19-21)

Paul now turns to the question of how accusations against an elder should be dealt with. In the context of verses 17-18, which refer to financial matters concerning elders, the accusations that he anticipates in verse 19 may also be of a financial nature. The principles he presents, however, 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 temporary 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). A number of significant points may 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 likely in any congregation that accusations **will** be brought against the elders, but those responsible for oversight must be wise in how they respond and a congregation 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 Chapter 3 describes (and the accusation would most likely be that they have displayed some of the negative traits Chapter 3 says elders are expected not to display) should not be accepted lightly but should be verified. It is not that one person bringing an accusation 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 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 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, 1 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 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 a commitment to the life of the church that ties one's 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 be open 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.

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 be increased by seeing how seriously failure is taken and the humility that is displayed by the elders. 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 perhaps that is because we have lost something of the biblical principle of submission and have neglected humility and godly character in our admiration for giftedness and personal charisma.

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 issues such a strong charge (before God, the Lord Jesus and the elect angels) to keep these commands. 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 (vv22-25)

In these verses, Paul returns to 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 includes upholding righteousness in judgements about the sins of elders but, more importantly, it also 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. 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, only revealing 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 person's sin may have been well hidden. They must, however, deal with the problem appropriately and openly.

Suggestions for Implementation

This section 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 it will propose a model for church leadership, and finally it will give suggested answers to some questions that remain outstanding. Finally, I will end with a challenge concerning the goal of Christian leadership.

Plurality of elders

We identified seven words used of church leaders in the New Testament, but these words describe only three offices, or positions, two of which exist in the Church today:

- a) **Apostle** – the initial leaders of the Church appointed by Christ with authority to establish foundational doctrine and to authenticate the spread of the gospel 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.

In any group of leaders, one person will often emerge as a “leader among leaders” (sometimes unhelpfully spoken of as the ‘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 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. Furthermore, no one person within a plural team of leaders will be the ideal person to give a lead at all times and in all situations. The most prominent leader must step back and allow others to take the primary lead on issues or in the face of needs that he is not ideally suited to meet.

Elders should strive to have full and honest discussions about issues on which they must give direction and should approach all decisions prayerfully. 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 (the 'senior pastor'!) 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 about church governance addressed

I must now return to the three key issues identified earlier in my discussion of patterns of church government:

1. The basis for the pattern

The two New Testament offices of elder and deacon represent God's intended pattern for the local church. Developments towards a third tier of leadership drew too heavily on influences from the surrounding culture and reflected a failure to develop up new leaders as the overall size of the Church increased. Church leadership should never be modelled unquestioningly on society's current thinking on leadership as the basis for church leadership is fundamentally different – it is service according to God's gifting! 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 congregation to follow.

2. The seat of authority

The New Testament speaks clearly of elders who have responsibility 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 fact, 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. Perhaps the best balance is 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 new elders and deacons. The leaders must be trusted to lead according to God's leading, but God's will must be discerned by the whole congregation as they prayerfully seek His direction for the church.

3. Expressing wholeness

Congregations must seek ways to express the reality of the Church which transcends their own limited scope and membership. Whilst authoritative synods or presbyteries may help at times, they may also be dangerous,

as a wrong decision will become binding for all churches and they may not fully appreciate the cultural or contextual uniqueness of an individual congregation. 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. Local congregations must, however, cooperate wherever possible. This will mean cooperation between churches in one locality which are united in the gospel that transcends denominational divides (especially in mission) 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 congregations should take initiative in forming networks with leaders of other churches. They should, however, resist any move to form additional organisational structures or to bring unity with non-gospel leaders.

A proposed model for church leadership

I have argued that the best way to express church is a Free Church model of church government with each congregation led by a team of elders who seek input from the whole congregation in major decisions but also part of strong local partnerships and a wider association that can facilitate cooperation and mutual advice and support. In terms of practical arrangements for elders and deacons, we may suggest the following:

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 congregation and leading towards it by example.
- (ii) Giving a lead in discipline of members who have erred (including excommunication from the fellowship in extreme cases).
- (iii) Care for the ill and spiritually weak (including prayer for and with them).
- (iv) Resolving doctrinal disputes by recourse to Scripture.
- (v) Teaching. Elders who have particular gifting in teaching will be the main teachers, 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 under 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 feature of every congregation. 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 congregation should include the recognition that it is God who gifts and calls people for eldership but that this must be recognised. Eldership should be restricted to qualified men.

b) Deacons

Responsibilities: Each deacon will have responsibility for practical arrangements in one or more areas 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.

Practical Questions

Within the very general framework outlined above there is a great deal of scope to vary structures of leadership depending on the size and needs of the congregation. Some other questions remain:

How should leaders be appointed?

Given the requirement for elders to demonstrate godly character and ability to teach it seems sensible for the existing body of elders to nominate new elders since they will be best placed to recognise those who are suitable for the role. Members can then be asked to approve this nomination. To ensure transparency, 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 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 congregation which 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 there is no way to reach an agreed position if the two disagree. There may, however, be situations in a young church where this is unavoidable. If there is only one or two elders then it would be wise to include other mature believers in decision making, at least by way of offering advice. It is also advisable where there are particularly major decisions to be made to seek advice from an experienced elder external to the congregation. As soon as an additional person is identified who qualifies as an elder they should be appointed. The general principle should be that people are only recognised as elders when they qualify according to the biblical requirements. Rather than setting a number and either appointing people who are not qualified or excluding those who are qualified it would be best to recognise all men who are biblically qualified as elders. 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. It could be argued, though, that if the number of elders becomes so large the congregation ought to be in a position to plant a new congregation.

How many of the elders should be involved in preaching?

Defining 'preaching' as the public proclamation of the Word of God, we might recognise that 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 2 Timothy 2:2), but not all will necessarily be able to preach, at least according to our usual understanding of a long monologue presented to a large number of people. The number of elders who preach may range from one to several but the aim should always be 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. 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.

Should people who are not elders preach?

It is good to have people who are not elders preaching and teaching (this allows the gifting of younger people to develop) and to invite speakers from outside the congregation for special teaching series or a few dates in the year. Having said this, the mainstay of the teaching should be by the elders of the congregation as this is the responsibility God has entrusted to them. They are the shepherds of that flock. It is not healthy to have external speakers too frequently 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 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 although individual deacons may have responsibility for more than one ministry area.

Should the elders and deacons meet together?

It may be valuable for the elders and deacons to meet together at 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 purely practical arrangements as this will distract them from their core function of prayer, shepherding and teaching. There must, therefore, be meetings of only the elders where issues of discipline and vision are discussed. Rather than a combined meeting of all elders and deacons it may be preferable 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. It may be wise to introduce a need for an elder's office to be reaffirmed regularly.

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. One practical solution may be for deacons to serve for a limited term (for example three years) before seeking reappointment, but for the term of service of an elder to be unlimited. It may, however, 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 risky when elders can continue indefinitely without any need to receive the approval of the congregation as this can lead to dictatorships and elderly men who will not pass on responsibility to younger men. One mechanism may be for the members at intervals of three to ten years (depending on the maturity of the church and the elders) to be asked to reaffirm each elder in their office. 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, unless they were removed for reasons of personal failing or theological error, they should be consulted by the body of elders on major issues (e.g., doctrinal disputes or major disciplinary issues).

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

As mentioned earlier, there are New Testament examples of people 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. Although Timothy and Titus were in Ephesus and Crete at the time when Paul wrote to them they are unlikely to have remained in these places long term. There are numerous references in Acts and Paul's letters to Timothy having been sent by Paul to different places. He is an itinerant worker who visits different places to establish and support local congregations under local leadership.

A Last Word – The Goal of Leadership!

Above all, in the detail of how leadership in the congregation works, three principles must be preserved:

- *The distinctive roles of elders and deacons* – the elders must not be distracted from the task of shepherding and should keep their focus on keeping the church faithful to the gospel both in terms of holding firmly to the truth and in terms of keeping the church missional.
- *The primacy of servanthood and character* – leadership must be motivated by service of Christ and therefore of others in love. Christ-like character is essential if this motivation is to be pure and if leaders are to set an example and model the gospel in action as well as teaching it.
- *The headship of Christ* – Christ is the Head of the Church and He rules it through His Word and by His Spirit. Leadership must call people to faithfulness to the Word and free them to follow the Spirit's leading rather than controlling or dictating. Hierarchies or titles that imply a human head should be avoided.

So, 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)

The goal of all leadership is to make Christ known through the church as the whole body grows to maturity and every part serves as God has gifted it to do. Leaders must be equippers and releasers of God's people – preparing them for all that God wants them to do in all of life.

Recommended Reading

Getz, Gene A. 2003, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church*. Moody Publishers.

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.

An excellent book that is thoroughly biblical and highly practical