



Church Leadership: Plurality of Elders

This is the third article in a series on Church Leadership. Part 1 gave an overview of the various forms of church leadership in use today. Part 2 focused on a church's servant-leaders and the three Greek words that describe them. In our previous study, we saw that *episkopos* (overseer/bishop), *presbuteros* (elder) and *poimen* (shepherd/pastor) all refer to the same group of church leaders in the New Testament.

This third article highlights the New Testament pattern of church leadership that involves multiple elders and also lists some of the potential blessings and perceived detriments if this model is followed today. We will call this leadership model a “plurality of elders,” but it could just as accurately be called a “plurality of shepherds/pastors” or a “plurality of overseers/bishops.”

This article highlights various aspects of New Testament church leadership. For a more complete study, you are encouraged to read the free online booklet by Alexander Strauch entitled [Biblical Eldership: Restoring the Eldership to its Rightful Place in the Church](http://www.peacemakers.net/resources/strauch/) at <http://www.peacemakers.net/resources/strauch/>

PLURALITY OF ELDERS IN THE FIRST CENTURY CHURCH

The New Testament describes established churches with church leadership comprised of multiple elders. Even the original apostles ministered in a cooperative manner with a plurality of elders in the Jerusalem church.

In the references listed below, note the mention of a plurality of elders.

- Paul and Barnabas carried an offering from other churches to the elders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30).
- Paul and those accompanying him on his first missionary journey ordained elders in every church they helped to establish (Acts 14:23).
- Paul and Barnabas and others from Antioch brought the question of “circumcision as a condition of salvation” to the original apostles and the elders of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15:2 and 4.
- It was the apostles and the elders who were called upon to decide this question at the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:6).
- In Acts 15:22, it was the apostles and elders who sent Paul, Barnabas, Judas, and Silas back to Antioch with a letter that stated the decision of the apostles and church elders on this matter.
- Paul and his companions delivered the decision of the apostles and elders from the Jerusalem council to churches in other cities (Acts 16:4).
- In Acts 20:17, Paul called together the elders of the church in Ephesus and encouraged them as a group to shepherd those in the local church (Acts 20:28).
- In Acts 21:18, Paul met with James, and all the elders of the Jerusalem church were present.
- When Paul wrote the church in Philippi (Philippians 1:1), he greeted the saints along with the overseers and deacons.
- Elders who rule well are counted worthy of double honor (1 Timothy 5:17).
- In Titus 1:5, Paul reminded Titus to set things in order and to appoint elders in every city.
- James encouraged those who were sick to call for the elders of the church (James 5:14).
- Peter urged the elders to feed (“shepherd”) those under their care and to do so with a willing spirit (1 Peter 5:1-2).

In addition to showing the pervasiveness of a plurality of elders, the above passages also highlight the varied ministry responsibilities of elders.

PLURAL AND SINGULAR CHURCH LEADERS

Throughout the New Testament, leadership in a local church resided with a group rather than one individual. On some occasions, the leaders mentioned are not necessarily overseers/bishops, elders, or shepherds/pastors. Yet, even in those instances, note the consistent use of the plural to describe these leaders.

Acts 15:22, Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13, But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you in the Lord and give you instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

Hebrews 13:7, Remember those who led you, who spoke the word of God to you; and considering the result of their conduct, imitate their faith.

Hebrews 13:17, Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

As seen in these passages, the plural is consistently used in the New Testament with regard to church leaders in a local church. On the other hand, whenever the singular form of overseer (bishop), elder, or shepherd (pastor) is used, it refers to an individual servant leader's life or character. For example:

- The Apostle Peter referred to himself as an elder (1 Peter 5:1) as did the Apostle John (2 John 1:1, 3 John 1:1).
1 Peter 5:1, Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,
2 John 1:1, The elder to the chosen lady and her children, whom I love in truth; and not only I, but also all who know the truth,
3 John 1:1, The elder to the beloved Gaius, whom I love in truth.
- A charge of sin against an elder (singular) is not to be received except on the basis of two or three witnesses (1 Timothy 5:19).
1 Timothy 5:19, Do not receive an accusation against an elder except on the basis of two or three witnesses.
- Each overseer (singular) is to have specific character qualities (1 Timothy 3:1-7). Each elder (singular) is to have specific character qualities as well (Titus 1:6-9). *Remember that overseer and elder are interchangeable terms that describe each church leader.*
1 Timothy 3:1-7, It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer, it is a fine work he desires *to do*.² An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,³ not addicted to wine or pugnacious, but gentle, peaceable, free from the love of money.⁴ *He must be* one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity⁵ (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?),⁶ *and* not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into the condemnation incurred by the devil.⁷ And he must have a good reputation with those outside *the church*, so that he will not fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.
Titus 1:5-9, For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you,⁶ *namely*, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion.⁷ For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,⁸ but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled,⁹ holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.
- An individual elder (this could be either a church leader or an elderly man) is not to be rebuked ("verbally beat upon") but is to be exhorted (called aside to be comforted or admonished) like a father (1 Timothy 5:1).
1 Timothy 5:1a, Do not sharply rebuke an older man, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father . . .

It is revealing to observe the context in which references are made to the singular ministry of leaders in the New Testament. When a singular leader is described as making positive contributions to the cause of Christ, it is within the context of being a member of a group of leaders.

Examples from Scripture that illustrate this point include Peter’s sermon on the Day of Pentecost (Acts 2:14), Stephen’s ministry (Acts 6:5, 8), and the ministry effectiveness of Paul, Apollos, and Peter to the Corinthian believers (1 Corinthians 1:12-13; 3:4-6, 9, 22).

Acts 2:14, But Peter, taking his stand with the eleven, raised his voice and declared to them: “Men of Judea and all you who live in Jerusalem, let this be known to you and give heed to my words.”

Acts 6:5, 8, Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word.” ⁵ The statement found approval with the whole congregation; and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas, a proselyte from Antioch. ⁶ And these they brought before the apostles; and after praying, they laid their hands on them . . . And Stephen, full of grace and power, was performing great wonders and signs among the people.

1 Corinthians 1:12-13, Now I mean this, that each one of you is saying, “I am of Paul,” and “I of Apollos,” and “I of Cephas,” and “I of Christ.” ¹³ Has Christ been divided? Paul was not crucified for you, was he? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

1 Corinthians 3:4-6, 9, 21-22, For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not *mere* men? ⁵ What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave *opportunity* to each one. ⁶ I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth . . . ⁹ For we are God’s fellow workers; you are God’s field, God’s building . . . ²¹ So then let no one boast in men. For all things belong to you, ²² whether Paul or Apollos or Cephas or the world or life or death or things present or things to come; all things belong to you,

In addition, individual leaders ministered often as part of a larger ministry group (the example below is the Jerusalem Council—Acts 15).

- Peter reminded those at the Jerusalem Council of the applicability of the Gospel to both Jews and Gentiles (Acts 15:7-11).
- At the same Council, Paul and Barnabas each reported miracles the Lord had worked through them in their ministry to the Gentiles (Acts 15:12).
- James exercised his gifted leadership at the Jerusalem Council by stating his conclusions derived from others’ reports and their corresponding fulfillment of Scripture (Acts 15:13-21).
- The men mentioned above made individual contributions, but the conclusion was reached by the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:22-29).

Paul’s ministry to the Gentiles is sometimes presented as proof there were singular leaders in the New Testament who were, in some way, “above” others. Paul’s initial ministry, however, was authenticated by the apostles. His seeming early “retirement” from public ministry to Tarsus resulted from Paul submitting to the apostolic leaders (Acts 9:27-30).

Paul’s later ministry was always done in the context of either being part of a group of fellow-workers (Acts 11:25-26; 12:25; 13:1; 14:14-28; 15:35; 16:25-32) or being sent out by church leaders as part of a team to accomplish a ministry task. (Acts 11:29-30; 13:2-3; 15:22). Even after many years of fruitful ministry throughout the Roman Empire, Paul continued to submit to fellow apostles (Acts 21:17-26).

In a consistent manner, church leaders ministered in a cooperative and mutually submissive manner with one another. Even though there are references to individual leaders, there is only one situation described in the New Testament in which a solitary leader (Diotrephes) was in charge of a local church; and that situation was a significant hindrance to ministry. This lone situation can only be considered as an aberration to God’s plan for church leadership and is described in the next section. Interestingly, there is no New Testament record of a scripturally qualified leadership group committing sin together, either in their decisions or actions.

THE DANGER OF A LEADER ACTING INDEPENDENTLY

There are some examples in the New Testament of an individual leader’s potential to create problems apart from the insight and accountability of fellow-leaders.

- Peter enjoyed fellowship and ate with the Gentile Christians at Antioch until other Jewish believers arrived from Jerusalem. At that point, Peter began to practice hypocrisy, leading even Barnabas astray, by eating only with Jewish believers. Only after Paul publicly admonished Peter was this sin dealt with (Galatians 2:11-21).

- While making plans for a second missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas had such a sharp disagreement over whether or not to take John Mark that they parted company (Acts 15:36-40). The word for “departed” that is used to describe their split is used only one other time in the New Testament. It is used to describe the violent split of the heavens in Revelation 6:14 when mountains and islands will be moved from their places.
- The only New Testament reference that seems to indicate a singular leader “ruled” a church concerns a man named Diotrephes. He loved to have preeminence in the church. He lorded his position over others, spoke against the Apostle John and other Christians, disallowed fellowship to some believers, and expelled some from the church (3 John 1: 9-10).

These examples do *not* prove that every leader who, for a time, ministers alone will publicly sin or create problems. However, there is a greater danger of sin being committed and problems developing when one church leader is the acknowledged hierarchical authority figure who is set apart from mutual submission to and with other leaders.

BENEFITS OF A PLURALITY OF ELDERS

One of the primary benefits of having a plurality of elders is to avoid the possibility of having a man like Diotrephes in leadership. Other benefits are:

- The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church, not only in word but also in reality.
- A church with a plurality of elders is following the leadership plan that is indicated in the New Testament.
- There is protection for a church family when all major decisions of ministry are made in unanimity by a plurality of scripturally qualified elders.
- The spiritual giftedness of each elder is blended with fellow-elders and other believers for the benefit of the entire church.
- There is a mutual accountability of fellow-elders toward each other’s spiritual growth.
- A plurality of elders helps to lessen the possibility of moral corruption and false teaching in the church because of spiritual accountability that can develop between elders.
- Discipleship of potential elders greatly increases when a plurality of elders are available to mentor potential leaders.
- A plurality of elders increases the possibility of providing greater personalized care (shepherding/pastoring) of other believers in the church in addition to encouraging effective evangelism outside the church.
- A church receives the benefits of each elder’s leadership abilities and spiritual giftedness according to the task or ministry that is needed. In other words, one elder may be more prominent than another in a given situation (as was Peter on the Day of Pentecost, James in the Council at Jerusalem, and Paul on his missionary journeys).
- In a church’s varied ministries, different aspects can be coordinated and maintained by having elders with appropriate giftedness available to provide personalized oversight for each of them.
- However, as in the early church, even a more visible or accessible elder will not have supremacy over any other elder. An elder who may be more prominent or visible for a period of time is typically due to his giftedness that applies to a particular situation or need.

PERCEIVED DETRIMENTS OF A PLURALITY OF ELDERS

In spite of benefits provided by a plurality of elders, there are predictable concerns with regard to this leadership plan. For example:

- There may be a perception that “no one is in charge.” On the other hand, Scripture reminds us that Jesus is the Creator of the world, Sustainer of the universe, and the Head of His Church in every dimension.

Colossians 1:16-18, For by Him all things were created, *both* in the heavens and on earth, visible and invisible, whether thrones or dominions or rulers or authorities—all things have been created through Him and for Him. ¹⁷ He is before all things, and in Him all things hold together. ¹⁸ He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.

- Decisions are too slow. Of course, “slow” is a relative term. From a spiritual perspective, what may be perceived as “slow” can actually be of great benefit. Any “slowness” that a plurality of elders may have in decision-making can be used by the Lord to unite the leaders and church family around God’s plans and timetable.
- Some might think that a plurality of elders does not work because it is supposedly impractical, inefficient, and too difficult to implement. Sadly, the “seven last words of the church”—We’ve not done it that way before—is often the response to a different or new approach to ministry, even one that is biblically based.

Not surprisingly, the world has no counterpart to a plurality of elders. The world also has no counterpart to the reality that Jesus Christ, our living Lord and Savior, is the Head of His Church. As a result, practicality, as defined by today’s management techniques, is not the issue. Management, as defined by a today’s corporate business structure, is also not the issue. The preeminent issue is to determine whether or not a church’s leadership plan is based solidly on Scripture.

LOOKING AHEAD

In Part 4 of this series, we will review “Singular Leaders in the Bible” as well as the origin of the concept of a “singular human leader” over a church.