

Only Elders Are Biblical – The Pastor Model Is False

Yves Perriard – June 2025

Elders are the only biblical and therefore legitimate leaders of the local church

Many evangelical churches, like for instance the Baptists or the Pentecostals, have adopted the Congregationalist polity, a system of church governance in which every local church congregation is "autonomous". By refusing the Episcopal and to some extent the Presbyterian model, they have not been plagued with the many problems of having one leader over a whole group of churches.

Unfortunately, if the influence of one bad leader has been limited at the denominational level, it has not been the case at the local level. We all know what happens to a church when one bad pastor is the main decision maker.

This is the main reason why all the restorationist churches¹, some Baptist churches², many Mennonites and most Brethren³ have rejected this model to adopt one in which local congregations are overseen by a plurality of elders. In the last 150 years this form of organization has not only demonstrated that there is strength, unity and wisdom in the council of many, but more than anything else, it has proven its biblical legitimacy.

It is extremely clear, and well documented from history, that in the first century local churches always had a group of elders at their head⁴.

¹ Restorationism is the belief that a purer form of Christianity should be restored using the [early primitive church](#) as the normative model. Usually it is closely associated with the Restoration Movement which includes Churches of Christ, Disciples of Christ and Christian Churches.

² The [Southern Baptist Convention](#) does not prescribe an elder-led pattern, although a number of churches in this convention, and other Baptist branches (including [Reformed Baptists](#)) are governed by a group of elders

³ The Plymouth Brethren (The Open) have spiritual leaders who need no ordination and who are called "elders"

⁴ See the chapter on elders from the church government section that Wayne Grudem has in his Systematic Theology. InterVarsity Press (Great Britain) and Zondervan Publishing House, Grand Rapids, MI, 2000 (p.912-918)

These men were all called with the following 3 interchangeable terms:

- 1) “**Pastors**” (in Greek “poimen”, which literally means shepherd, which in Latin has given us the English word “pastor”)
- 2) “**Overseers**” (in Greek “episkipos” in english episcopos or “bishops”)
- 3) “**Elders**” (in Greek “presbyteros” which has given the English term “presbyter”)

All these appellations corresponded all to one function and not to different responsibilities or positions⁵. We can see this interchangeability in Titus 1 where the term bresbiteros (v.5) and episkopos (v.7) describe the very same function. Acts 20:17 and 28 have all the 3 Greek terms (episkopos, bresbyteros and poimen (as a verb) used to describe what is obviously the very same position. In other words, when a church today sees elders and pastors as two different responsibilities or functions, they are not following the biblical pattern which viewed elders, pastors, shepherds, overseers and bishops all corresponding to the same role.

There is nowhere in the NT this idea that elders and pastors are 2 separate and distinct ministries! The practice of having 2 separate groups, one of elders and one of pastors is a recent invention that has nothing to do with the early church model. In the NT you have only one group over the local church, and the only other group of people working alongside them are evangelists and/or apostles.

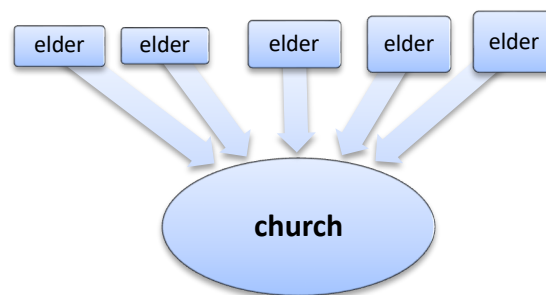
Furthermore, the New Testament not only used different metaphors which all matched one function, but there was always a plurality of elders over a local church. When Paul wrote to the churches, he always addressed it to a group of elders. There is never the concept of one elder representing the whole local church; instead, as a group, they were all responsible to “direct the affairs”⁶ of their own local church.

⁵ There are three Greek words used regarding the overseers of God's people. There is the word presbuterion or presbuteros. From this word we have the English word "elders" and "presbytery" (Tit. 1: 5; I Tim. 4: 14). "Overseer" and "bishop" are derived from the Greek episkopos (Acts 20: 28; I Tim. 3: 1). From poimen we have the English "shepherd" and "pastor" (1Pet. 5: 2, 4; Eph. 4: 11). These three Greek words and the resultant six English words all denote the same function and group of men. Presbuteros (elders/presbytery) suggests one who is mature in age and spiritual development. Episkopos (overseer/bishop) involves ruling ability (Heb. 13: 7, 17, cp. I Tim. 3: 4 and 5: 17), and poimen (shepherd/pastor) indicates the care and watchfulness these men are to give to the flock, the local church.

⁶ 1 Tim. 5:19

In fact, John in his third epistle depicts Diotrephes in negative terms because he seeks preeminence among his brothers. ("I wrote something to the church; but Diotrephes, who loves to be first among them, does not accept what we say").

A plurality of "equal" elders is the ultimate and supreme authority over the local church. There is never another form of leadership above them, which means that there is never another elder or "pastor" above them. For instance in fifteenth chapter of Acts, the five times when apostles are mentioned, it is always together with elders⁷, which clearly indicates that elders were not "overpowered" by the authority of apostles, but they were responsible for their "own" church. This respect for their local authority is demonstrated as well by the fact that when Peter writes to elders, he does not write to them as an apostle, but as a co-elder⁸, showing his willingness to be aligned at the same level of authority as them.



Qualifications of elders

Of the 24 qualifications⁹ that elders must have, I would like to comment on one obvious one, which unfortunately is not so obvious to many today: Elders are to be men, as there is never a mention of women being elders. The most direct proof of this is not just the silence of the Scriptures on women being elders, or the fact that women are not to take authority over men¹⁰, which is implied in this position of authority, but the obvious fact that the qualifications for elders¹¹ are exclusively addressed to men. ¹²As we see elsewhere in the New Testament, women can be deaconesses, prophets and to some extent teachers and co-evangelist together with their husbands, but women are excluded from this position of leadership.

⁷ Acts 15: 2,4,6,22,23

⁸ 1 Pet.5:1 (a "fellow-elder," (συμπρεσβύτερος))

⁹ For extended details on each one of those qualifications: <http://www.bibletruths.net/archives/BTAR143.htm>

¹⁰ 1 tim.2:12

¹¹ 1 Tim 3:1-7

¹² If "elders are to be the husbands of one wife", this obviously exclude women from being elders unless we accept lesbian elders!

They can definitively co-lead together with men and therefore have a wise and decisive role in debating important issues with elders, but the final decision remains always on the elders, who are men. As I explain in the chapter about women as leaders, the pattern of marriage is the model of leadership in the Church. Women can decide things together with men, just like a wife does this with her husband, but if they have a difference of opinions, the ultimate responsibility falls on men.

Of the many qualities they should display elders are to have such an excellent character that they are blameless both to insiders and to outsiders.

Their marriage should be so irreproachable that nothing bad can be said about their wives and children.

Their faith should be so righteous that when they pray, healings, deliverances and miracles happen¹³!

Their dealing with money should be so exemplary that no one can ever accuse them of greed or financial mismanagement.

Their leadership should be so balanced that they are not perceived as being arrogant and controlling, but on the contrary sensitive, gentle and humble.

Their love for outsiders should be so sacrificial that they are known for their incredible hospitality¹⁴.

In other words, elders should not be chosen mostly because they know their Bibles and can teach well, but mostly because they have spiritual, loving and disciplined characters. The school that prepares them for this task is not academia but life and family.

This is why the main criteria by which they are chosen is how well their children respect and submit to them. Paul draws a very important principle here: a good leader for the church is someone who was a good leader for his family. A man might have been an excellent businessman or a good leader in the world¹⁵, but if he did not “manage his household well”¹⁶ he is not fit to lead the church.

¹³ James 5:14-18

¹⁴ Hospitality in the early church was different than it is today: it was often urgent, sacrificial and risky: urgent because Christians might be forced from homes or jobs with no one to turn to but fellow Christians; sacrificial because material goods were often in short supply; risky because to associate oneself with those who had been forced out meant to identify with their cause

¹⁵ The criteria for ruling is his own house (tou idiou oikou), not other forms of human organisations.

¹⁶ There has been unresolved debates on whether the Greek word pistos (faithful) implies being a Christian or only being faithful and reliable. I would choose first the concept of obedience as it might include being a Christian,

From this “family management” perspective, I believe that the “faithfulness”¹⁷ of his children has more to do with their behavior than it has to do with being Christians or not.

In the same line I believe that having one wife¹⁸ has more to do with faithfulness and not abandoning his wife than it has to do with polygamy or not.

Finally, elders should have children who are old enough so that the church can objectively evaluate if their fathers have led them well or not. If Titus says that children should not be “open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination”¹⁹, it obviously implies that they should be old enough to commit debauchery! This goes in harmony with the fact that elders cannot be young converts²⁰, and this is why they are called “elders”!

How does one become an elder?

- **1. The Personal Aspiration to Oversee the Church:**

This is supported by 1 Timothy 3:1, which emphasizes the importance of having a genuine desire to serve as an overseer. Additionally, Acts 20:28 highlights the responsibility and commitment required for those who wish to lead the church, underscoring the personal motivation needed to undertake such a role.

- **2. Fulfilling the Biblical Standards for Leadership:**

The verses in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-4 outline the specific qualifications necessary for individuals to serve as church leaders. These passages detail the character traits, moral standards, and spiritual maturity that must be present in those who aspire to leadership positions within the church.

- **3. Undergoing a Thorough Public Evaluation:**

This is derived from 1 Timothy 3:10 and 5:24-25, which discuss the importance of a public examination process for those seeking leadership roles. These verses suggest that

whereas being a Christian does not necessarily imply that the children are obedient to their fathers! I believe this is what Paul meant when he wrote to Titus “faithful children.” In fact, the converse or opposite in Titus 1: 6 is not simply non-Christian but “riot and unruly.” Riot (asotia) means profligacy and unruly (anupotaktos) means not subject to rule (Expository Dictionary of New Testament Words). Riot and unruly describe a person who is out of control and in a state of spiritual prodigality, not just a non-Christian

¹⁷ Titus 1: 6

¹⁸ Titus 1:6

¹⁹ Titus 1:6

²⁰ 1 Tim.3:6

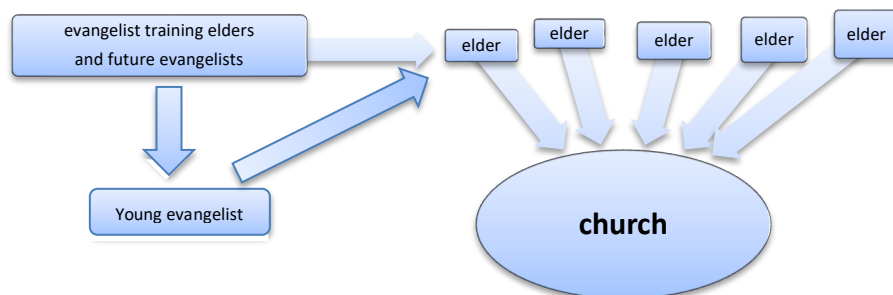
potential leaders should be scrutinized by the church community to ensure they meet the necessary qualifications and are of good character.

- **4. Receiving a Formal Public Recognition:**

The passages in 1 Timothy 5:22 and Acts 6:6 describe the process of public appointment for church leaders. These verses indicate that once an individual has been deemed suitable for leadership through examination, they should be officially recognized and appointed by the church community, signifying their authority and responsibility.

If a pastor gets convinced about the plurality model, what can he change?

He has two options: The first one is to take the role of an evangelist and act accordingly. This means that he will help his church to grow numerically, while he will chose and train potential elders whom he will later appoint with the help of his church²¹. After this, he will leave to plant other churches. If he does not really know how to do this, he should seek the training of a mature evangelist who can train him as the model below shows.



Once he has fully delegated his authority, he can always keep his congregation as his home base from which he was sent and from which he might be financially supported, but he must make sure that he should not interfere from outside, unless he is asked for advice.

Usually evangelists are recognizable as they have the natural ability to numerically grow their churches through evangelism and developing local leaders, while those who are not tend to keep their churches at the same numerical level for years.

If a pastor does not feel called to become an evangelist, and if meets the biblical qualifications of an elder, then he can choose to lead his church together with other elders on

²¹ Evangelists select, train and appoint elders TOGETHER WITH the local congregation. This is in the case that a big numbers of members may clearly oppose the fact that some elders are not blameless. (in other words the evaluation comes both from the evangelist and the whole assembly)

an equal basis. For this to happen he will have to teach his church about elders and their qualifications, select them with the help of his church, and then appoint them officially. Now, this former “pastor” could still keep on working full time and being paid, as some New Testament elders were doing²² or he could take a prominent role as a teacher if he is particularly gifted. In any case, he will have to be humble enough to “reduce” his authority to the same level as all other elders.

If this pastor does not meet the biblical qualifications of an elder, which in most cases is not having grown-up children²³, he could still work as a teacher or as a deacon (as less restrictions are put on the children of deacons²⁴).

Conclusion

Most protestant denominations have a totally wrong view of what a pastor is, and what is role and qualifications are.

First of all, pastors and elders are the very same persons, and not two different roles.

Secondly, elders should be qualified teachers who are blameless in their reputation inside and outside the church. They must have grown up children who respect and obey them. If they do not meet those qualifications they cannot be elders

Thirdly, local churches should always be governed by a plurality of elders, and not just one man over them.

Finally, local churches should keep their own autonomy and this is why they should never have any other leader above them. In its initial stage, a congregation will be led by the evangelists who started the church, but their authority will cease when they appoint elders who will become the sole leaders of the church. After this the church can maintain a friendly relationship of advice and encouragement with their spiritual fathers, as we see Paul doing this with “his” churches.

In other words, if we truly want to obey God we should progressively and completely dismantle the whole denominational system where you have one pastor over one congregation and replace it with a group of elders over one local church.

²² 1 Tim. 5:17

²³ Titus 1:6

²⁴ 1 Tim.3:12