

Who Are the Elders?

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Then and Now

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By John Piper

1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17

The saying is sure: If any one aspires to the office of bishop, he desires a noble task. Now a bishop must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, sensible, dignified, hospitable, an apt teacher, no drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, and no lover of money. He must manage his own household well, keeping his children submissive and respectful in every way; for if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how can he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may be puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil; moreover he must be well thought of by outsiders, or he may fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Today is very important in the history of Bethlehem Baptist Church, because tonight we will act to affirm the first Council of Elders. Up until now the church has been governed constitutionally by a Council of Deacons and a single pastor who may serve *ex officio* on all boards and committees.

This change brings the governance structure of the church not only into closer harmony with Scripture, but also with the historic Baptist understanding of church order.

My aim this morning is to put this historic day into biblical perspective. I want as many of you as possible to have a biblical understanding of how Christ wants his people to function as an organism and as an organization.

Six Statements from Scripture

So I have six statements to make from Scripture and some brief comments about them.

1. The Head of the Church

Jesus Christ is the head of his church.

- Ephesians 5:23, "Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior."
- Colossians 1:18, "[Christ] is before all things, and in him all things hold together. He is the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the first born from the dead, that in everything he might be pre-eminent."
- Ephesians 4:15–16, "Grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body . . . makes bodily growth and upbuilds itself in love."

So the church is like a body that gets its leadership and its nourishment from its head, Jesus Christ. The church is not a mere human organization. It is not a mere organization because it is an organism, a body. And it is not merely human, because its head is divine; the life he gives is supernatural life. So the way a church is run should not simply copy the way a human organization is run. There should be structures and practices that let Christ the head govern, lead, and nurture his church. Jesus Christ is the living head—the leader and the sustainer—of the church, his body.

2. Priests and Ministers

All the members of Christ's body are priests and ministers.

- 1 Peter 2:9, "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, that you may declare the wonderful deeds of him who called you out of darkness into his marvelous light."
- Revelation 1:5–6, "He loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion for ever and ever."

The New Testament knows nothing of a priesthood of the clergy. 1 Timothy 2:5, "There is one God and there is one mediator between God and man, the man Christ Jesus." We all go directly to God through Christ, not through professional priests nor through Mary. Every Christian is a priest under Jesus Christ.

And every Christian is a minister. The word "minister" does not define my pastoral office in the church. It defines my function. And it defines your

function. Ephesians 4:12 says that pastors and teachers exist to "equip the saints for the work of the ministry." You are all ministers (cf. 1 Peter 4:10–11). And you are all priests (cf. Matthew 23:8–11).

3. The Authority of the Local Congregation

Under Christ the local congregation is the final authority in the church.

I don't mean that the congregation is above the Scriptures, because the Scriptures are the word of Christ. We submit to Christ by submitting to his word in the Bible. Nor do I mean that the congregation is above the Holy Spirit, because the Spirit is the Spirit of Christ. We submit to Christ by submitting to his Spirit in the church.

What I mean is that under Christ—his Word and his Spirit—the congregation, and not pastors or elders or deacons or bishops or popes, is the body that settles matters of faith and life. This is not only implied in the priesthood of all believers, but illustrated in Matthew 18:15–17 where the church is the last court of appeal in church discipline:

If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone. If he listens to you, you have gained your brother. But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you, that every word may be confirmed by the evidence of two or three witnesses. If he refuses to listen to them, tell it to the church; and if he refuses to listen even to the church, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector. (Cf. 1 Corinthians 5:4–5.)

So the church—the congregation—is the final court of appeal in matters of church discipline where decisions about membership are made. Since this is the most basic authority in the church under Christ, this shows that the congregation as a body is the final authority in the local church. This does not mean local churches shouldn't form associations and fellowships for mutual encouragement and guidance and ministry. It only means that the local congregation decides its own matters under the Word and Spirit of Christ.

So far then, Christ is the head of the church. All members of his body are priests and ministers. And therefore these members, as a congregation, are the final authority in the church under Christ, that is, under his Word and Spirit.

4. Those Called as Leaders

God calls some members of each congregation to feed and lead the church as servants of Christ and his people.

In other words, even though there is equality before God as children and heirs and priests and ministers, some, and not all, are called by God to serve as leaders. For example,

- Hebrews 13:7, "Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God; consider the outcome of their life and imitate their faith."
- Hebrews 13:17, "Obey your leaders and submit to them; for they are keeping watch over your souls, as men who will have to give account."
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12, "We beseech you, brethren, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work."
- Acts 20:28 (speaking to the elders of Ephesus), "Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God."

So the congregation, under Christ and by his Word and Spirit, uses its authority to recognize and affirm leaders whom God calls. And then the congregation puts those people in positions of leadership and voluntarily supports that leadership by learning from their teaching and following their initiatives.

This may sound to some like a contradiction—to have an authoritative congregation submitting to leaders that it puts in place. But it isn't a contradiction. Because there is a great difference between leadership that inspires and models and mobilizes and teaches and persuades and points the way in ministry and mission, and the corporate authority of the congregation that puts doctrinal and moral boundaries around that leadership and holds it accountable to serve the good of the church. Congregational authority and strong leadership under that authority are not incompatible. They are biblical, and they are vital.

5. The Leadership of Elders

These leaders in the congregations of the early church were elders.

The point here is that the eldership was not one alternative leadership form among many in the early church. It was universal as far as we know, and there were always more than one in each church as far as we know. Consider these texts that show how widespread was the practice of having elders in each church.

- Jerusalem: Acts 15:22, "Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church to choose men and to send them to Antioch."

- Ephesus: Acts 20:17, "And from Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church."
- All the towns of Crete: Titus 1:5, "This is why I [Paul] left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you."
- All the churches James wrote to when he said, "To the twelve tribes of the dispersion": James 5:14, "Is any among you sick? Let him call the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (assuming that there are elders in every church).
- All the churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia that Peter wrote to: 1 Peter 5:1, "So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ as well as a partaker in the glory that is to be revealed."
- Finally, all the churches Paul founded on the first missionary journey (and presumably the other journeys as well): Acts 14:23, "And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they believed."

The universal extent of elders in the early church becomes even more obvious when you realize that the term "elder" is the same person designated by "bishop" or "overseer" (cf. Titus 1:5,7 and Acts 20:17,28) or "pastor" (Eph. 4:11; cf. Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2 where elders are given a shepherding function). It is hard to escape the conclusion that God's will for the local church is that it have a group of elders as its primary leaders.

6. Feeding and Leading

The function of the elders was to feed and lead.

Or to say it another way, the elders are responsible for teaching and governing the congregation. As leaders they give guidance and direction to the church. As teachers they oversee the life of the church to preserve its biblical faithfulness. They are wardens of the Word of God.

Titus 1:9 says that the elder "must hold firm to the sure word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to confute those who contradict it." The elders are the trustees of the truth in the life of the church.

And they are the governing overseers. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, "Let the elders who rule well [or govern or oversee or manage well] be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." So it is clear that

there is a diversity of function among the elders. All must be able to handle the Word of God and be able to recognize false doctrine and correct error; but some "labor especially in preaching and teaching."

Tonight you will meet the nominees for elder at Bethlehem and hear their testimonies and exercise your congregational authority to confirm their call or not. I hope you will pray seriously for the church and the nominees.

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