

Reimagining Oversight

Chapter 9

The chapter below should give us pause to realize that we have seriously departed from the teachings and instructions of Scripture. I am amazed that professing Christians don't seem to be bothered that "church" has little to do with the New Testament (e.g., one man alone who is elevated as "pastor," the Lord's Supper as a token meal, financing of church buildings, etc.).

Many claim that the Scripture is their rule of "faith and practice," but yet turn a deaf ear to the undeniable pattern of multiple participation by the body of believers when they assemble together. Instead, we have a "clergy/laity" distinction that cannot be found among the priesthood of all believers.

As Jon Zens remarks,

While the "clergy/laity" is embedded and assumed in religious circles, it cannot be found in the New Testament. Because the New Testament knows nothing of "clergy," the fact that a separate caste of the "ordained" permeates our vocabulary and practice illustrates rather forcefully that we do not yet take the New Testament very seriously. The "clergy" practice is a heresy that must be renounced. It strikes at the heart of the priesthood of all believers that Jesus that Jesus purchased on the cross. It contradicts the shape that Jesus' Kingdom was to take when He said, "You are all brethren." Since it is a tradition of man, it nullifies the word of God. The clergy system stands as a monumental obstacle to genuine reformation and renewal.

It is apparent that the current practice of church totally contradicts the New Testament, yet professing Christians proclaim the Scripture is their infallible guide. When the contradictions are plainly seen, why don't they just admit they don't care what the New Testament says. It appears that the "traditions of man," that nullifies the word of God, is far more loved and held than the words of Jesus and the apostles.

To speak against the falsehood of ecclesiastical traditions and practices will make a lot of enemies to those who are comfortable to remain in their man-made traditions. We will be seen as enemies of the "church," or "trying to divide the church" or "causing division among believers," when that is far from the truth. Those whose spiritual ears and eyes have been awakened to this false religious system, we simply reach out in love to those whom we care about.

If you profess to be a follower of Christ, it would appear that you would have a willingness to put every tradition under Biblical scrutiny and reform where the changes are needed.

Is it hard to break from religious traditions? It certainly is, because we have learned to live in a system (some from birth) that is taken as the normal way of life. We have developed a habit that has nothing to do with the New Testament. Some of us have sold our birthright for a padded pew because, if we are honest, we don't care what the New Testament says. These are hard-hitting truths, but they cannot be avoided.

As you read the following chapter, please consider all that is said and search the Scriptures for yourself.

Chapter 9

The clerical system of church management is exceedingly popular, but the whole thought is foreign to Scripture. In a church all the members are active. He [God] appointed some to take oversight of the work so that it might be carried on efficiently. It was never His thought that the majority of the believers should devote themselves exclusively to secular affairs and leave church matters to a group of spiritual specialists. —Watchman Nee

There is thoroughly entrenched in our church life an unbiblical two-caste system. In this two-caste system there is a clergy-caste which is trained, called, paid, and expected to do the ministering. And there is the laity-caste which normally functions as the audience which appreciatively pays for the performance of the clergy—or bitterly criticizes the gaping holes in that performance (and there are always gaping holes). No one expects much of the lower or laity caste (except attendance, tithe, and testimony). And everyone expects too much of the upper or clergy caste (including the clergy themselves!). The greatest problem in the whole business is the fact that the Bible’s view of ministry totally contradicts this system. —Robert C. Girard

Every church has leadership. Whether it’s explicit or implicit, leadership is always present. In the words of Hal Miller, “Leadership is. It may be good or bad. It may be recognized and assented to or not. But it always is.” Depending on who is doing the leading, leadership can be the church’s worst nightmare or its greatest asset. Because of leadership’s “Jekyll and Hyde” potential, there’s a tremendous need for Christians to take a fresh look at the subject. The New Testament identifies two kinds of leadership: that of oversight, and that of decision-making. In this chapter, we’ll deal with oversight. In the next, we’ll discuss decision-making. Consider the following passages:

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.... Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. (Acts 20:17, 28–29 NKJV)

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away. (1 Peter 5:1–4 NKJV)

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, namely, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. 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. (Titus 1:5–7 NASB)

Elders, Shepherds, and Overseers

In the Greek language, elder (presbuteros) merely means an old man. A first-century elder, therefore, was a seasoned Christian. A senior. One who had experience and wisdom. Elders were also called “overseers.” This is a term that described their function of supervising the affairs of the church. The task of the elders is also depicted by the metaphor of a “shepherd.” This is because they were caretakers. Just as literal shepherds care for literal sheep, elders care for their fellow Christians.

While all elders were “apt to teach” and all had the gift of shepherding, not all who shepherded and taught were elders (Titus 2:3–4; 2 Tim. 2:2, 24; Heb. 5:12). Teaching could come from any Christian who had a word of instruction for the church (1 Cor. 14:24–26).

Consequently, those who provided oversight in the church were called elders, overseers, and shepherds. This is simply because they elder-ed—they acted as seasoned models to the less mature (1 Peter 5:3). They oversaw—they watched out for the spiritual well-being of the church (v. 2). And they shepherd-ed—they cared for the needs of God’s people (v. 2).

That said, equating elders with a sociological slot (an office) can only be done at substantial risk. In order to do so, we have to evacuate “shepherd” of its intended meaning (one who cares for God’s people). We also have to evacuate “elder” from its intended meaning (an old man). Not to mention having to evacuate “overseer” from its native meaning (one who watches out for others).

Elders, then, were overseers and shepherds. The term elder refers to their character. The term overseer refers to their function. And the term shepherd refers to their gifting. Their chief responsibility was to instruct and oversee the church during times of personal crisis.

Our Western obsession with offices and titles has led us to superimpose our own ideas of church order onto the New Testament. Yet the very ethos of the New Testament militates against the idea of a single pastor. It also militates against the idea of officii-elders. (“Offici” is shorthand for official.)

Scripture is equally at odds with the “senior pastor” concept. This is the common practice of elevating one of the elders to a prominent authoritative position. Nowhere does the New Testament sanction the notion of primos inter pares—“first among equals.” At least not in any official or formal way.

The disconnect between the “pastor” and the other elders was an accident of church history. But because it meshes perfectly with our acculturated religious mind-set, contemporary believers have little trouble reading this false dichotomy into Scripture.

While elders provided oversight, they didn't monopolize the ministry of the church gatherings. Nor did they make decisions on behalf of the church. Instead, they superintended the church as it experienced the rigors of community life.

Please note that superintending is largely a passive role. The supervision of the elders didn't stifle the life of the church. Nor did it interfere with the ministry of the other believers. While gifted elders had a large share in teaching, they did so on the same footing as all the other members. They didn't monopolize the meetings of the church.

To be more specific, New Testament elders didn't operate like spiritual CEOs who presided over their spiritual enterprises. Instead, the elders were fully aware that the church didn't belong to them. It rather belonged to their beloved Master—the Lord Jesus. He alone had the right to “walk in the midst of the . . . lampstands” (Rev. 2:1 NKJV). A first-century elder, therefore, would no doubt cringe if you used phrases like “his church” or “his people.”

First-century elders were simply spiritually mature men—exemplary Christians who superintended (not controlled or directed) the affairs of the church.

Elders were not organizational figureheads. They weren't hired pulpiteers, professional clergy, or ecclesiastical chairmen. They were simply older brothers (elders-in-fact) carrying out real functions (elder-ing, shepherd-ing, oversee-ing, etc.).

Their chief task was threefold: to model servanthood in the church; to motivate the believing community toward works of service; and to mold the spiritual development of the younger believers (1 Peter 5:1–3). The elders also dealt with sticky situations in the church (Acts 15:6ff.). But they never made decisions for the church. The New Testament method for decision-making was neither dictatorial nor democratic. It was consensual. And it involved all the brothers and sisters. (See chapter 10.)

As overseers, the elders supervised the work of others (instead of substituting for it). They were the ones who prayed with their eyes open. They had their spiritual antennae continually raised to check for wolves. As older men, their wisdom was sought after in times of crisis. And when they spoke, their voices possessed the weight of experience.

Perhaps a modern-day example will help to explain how elders functioned in this way. One particular church I was a part of had about thirty people in it. Over the course of four years, three of the more seasoned brothers rose to the surface. Whenever people in the church got into personal trouble, they would naturally go to one of these three men.

The church instinctively trusted these men for their compassion and wisdom. Tellingly, most of their ministry was done outside of church meetings. It happened in private homes, in restaurants over coffee, or on the phone.

These men helped navigate the Lord's people through personal crises. In this particular church, they were never called “elders.” And in the church meetings, they were indistinguishable from the other believers. Visitors could never tell who the elders were. The reason? Because the

meetings of the church belonged to the whole church, never to the elders. Everyone was free to share, minister, and function on equal footing.

In this way, the role of the elders can be likened to the human liver. The liver works invisibly, filtering out poisons and other toxic substances. It resists infections by producing immune factors and removing bacteria from the bloodstream. The liver organically detoxifies the human body, causing it to function properly. But it does so in a quiet and hidden way. In a similar fashion, the elders detoxify the church behind the scenes so that the body can function without hindrance.

Simply put, elders were spiritual facilitators who supplied guidance, provided nurture, and encouraged faithfulness in the church. Eldership, therefore, is something that one does. It's not a slot that one fills. The New Testament bears this out rather clearly. If Paul and the other apostles wanted to paint elders as officers, there were numerous Greek words they could have used to do so. Surprisingly, however, the following Greek terms are missing from the apostles' ecclesiastical vocabulary:

- arche (a rank-and-file leader, head, or ruler)
- time (an officer or dignitary)
- telos (the inherent power of a ruler)
- archisunagogos (a synagogue official)
- hazzan (a public worship leader)
- taxis (a post, position, or rank)
- hierateia (a priest's office)
- archon (a ruler or chief)

The New Testament never uses any of these words to describe leadership in the church. Like that of Christ, the apostles' favorite word to portray church leaders is diakonos—which means a servant or a waiter.

Therefore, the penchant to depict servant-leaders in the church as officers and professional clerics guts the true meaning of the biblical language and cuts the nerve of the believing priesthood.

The Principle of Shared Oversight

The New Testament presents a vision of shared oversight. The apostles always established plural oversight within the churches they planted. There were elders (plural) in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). There were elders in the four churches in South Galatia (Acts 14:23). There were elders (plural) in Ephesus (Acts 20:17). There were elders (plural) in Philippi (Phil. 1:1). There were elders in the churches in Judea (James 5:14). And elders (plural) were to be acknowledged in each city in Crete (Titus 1:5).



In short, the Bible unshakably demonstrates that a plurality of elders oversaw the activity of the early churches. No church in the first century had a single leader.

Consequently, the commonly accepted notion of sola pastora (single pastor) is at odds with the New Testament. The Bible knows nothing of a person who stands at the helm of a local church, directs its affairs, preaches to it every Sunday, conducts its baptisms, represents it in the world, officiates its Communion (or Lord's Supper), blesses civic events, marries the living, and buries the dead. No such person exists in the entire New Testament. (If you doubt that, see if you can find this person in your Bible. I have money hidden in my shoes that says you cannot.)

While the New Testament calls Paul an “apostle,” Philip an “evangelist,” Manaen a “teacher,” and Agabus a “prophet,” it never identifies anyone as a pastor. In fact, the noun “pastor” is used only once in the entire New Testament. (See Eph. 4:11.) And it's used as a descriptive metaphor, never as an ecclesiastical office. It is also plural, not singular.

This flies in the face of common practice. Today the “pastor” is regarded as the figurehead of the church. His name is exclusively splashed on church marquees all across the Western landscape. (One wonders why other ministries don't appear on these marquees when they are given far more attention in the New Testament.)

In our book, *Pagan Christianity*, George Barna and I demonstrate historically that the modern pastoral office is a post biblical novelty that evokes a tradition of humane (but not so helpful) sacerdotalism. (Sacerdotalism is the belief that priests act as mediators between God and humans.) It's essentially a carryover from the priest of Roman Catholicism. As such, it better reflects the weak and beggarly elements of the Levitical priesthood than anything found in the New Testament.

(Incidentally, those who point to the single leaders of the Old Testament to justify the single pastor system make two mistakes. First, they overlook the fact that all the single leaders of the Old Testament—Joseph, Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, etc.—were types of the Lord Jesus Christ, not a human officer. Second, they typically ignore the pattern for oversight that is clearly spelled out throughout the New Testament.)

First-century elders all stood on equal footing. Perhaps some were more spiritually mature than the others. And they undoubtedly had different giftings. But there was no hierarchical structure among them.

A careful reading of the book of Acts will show that while God often used different overseers as temporary spokesmen for specific occasions (sometimes James, sometimes Peter, etc.), no overseer occupied a permanent position of supremacy above the others.

Consequently, the modern offices of “senior pastor,” “chief elder,” and “head pastor” simply did not exist in the early church. The first-century Christians didn’t mark off one man among the college of elders and elevate him to a superior position of authority. The elders were not part of a chain of command that put them under Christ and over the church. They weren’t part of a hierarchical pyramid. They were simply members of the body of Christ, not an elite oligarchy.

Again, the single pastor system of our day was utterly foreign to the New Testament church. Nowhere in the New Testament do we find one of the elders transformed into the status of a super apostle and accorded with supreme administrative authority.

Such authority was reserved for only one person—the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone was the exclusive Head of the church. As such, only He had the right to command His own sheep. Plural oversight in the church protected the sole headship of Christ. It also served as a check against despotism and corruption among the overseers.

The Public Acknowledgment of the Elders

The oversight of the church was not only shared, but it was indigenous. This means that the elders were local brothers who were spiritually reared within the church. Therefore, the accepted practice of importing a leader (typically a pastor) from another locality to lead a church has no basis in the New Testament. Instead, the elders were resident men whom God raised up from within the existing assembly.

Just as important, the elders always emerged long after a church was born. It took at least fourteen years after the birth of the Jerusalem church for elders to emerge within it (Acts 11:30). A good while after they planted the four churches in South Galatia, Paul and Barnabas acknowledged elders in each of them (Acts 14:23). Five years after Paul planted the church in Ephesus, he sent for the elders of the church to meet him in Miletus (Acts 20:17). When Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, which was twelve years old, he greeted the overseers who were present (Phil. 1:1).

Point: There’s no case anywhere in the New Testament where elders appear in a church immediately after it was planted. As with all spiritual gifts, the church is a spiritual organism that produces elders naturally. They are in her DNA. But it takes time for them to emerge. Consequently, house churches that rush to appoint elders have no scriptural justification for doing so.

In addition, elders never appointed themselves. Scripture consistently shows that traveling apostolic workers acknowledged them after they emerged from within the congregation. The elders didn’t install themselves.

(Before the elders emerged, the oversight of the church was in the hands of the apostolic worker who planted it—1 Thess. 2:7–12. Afterward, the oversight shifted to the hands of the elders.)

The elders’ authority to oversee was tied to their spiritual maturity. It was not tied to a sacerdotal office that was conferred upon them externally through an ordination service.

After the Holy Spirit chose the elders, apostolic workers later confirmed their calling publicly (Acts 14:23; 20:28; Titus 1:5). But the function preceded the form.

It's a tragic mistake, therefore, to equate the public endorsement of elders with the establishment of a separate class system like the clergy profession of our day. Acknowledgment of elders by apostolic workers was no more than the public recognition of those who were already "elder-ing" in the church. (See Num. 11:16 for this principle.) It was not "ministerial ordination" as we know it today. The church simply trusted those who it recognized to be "elder-ing."

Unfortunately, the Western penchant for "offices" and "positions" has caused many Christians to bring these ideas to the biblical text and view elders as official. But such thinking confuses the oversight of the early church with modern social conventions. It also strips the leadership terminology found in the Bible of its native meaning.

Again, "elder" means mature man. "Shepherd" means one who nurtures and protects a flock. And "overseer" means one who supervises. Put plainly, the New Testament notion of oversight is functional, not official. True spiritual authority is rooted in spiritual life and function, not title or position.

In other words, New Testament leadership can best be understood in terms of verbs rather than nouns. Recall that our Lord Jesus rejected the authoritative pecking orders of His day (Matt. 20:25–28; Luke 22:25–27). In His eyes, spiritual authority was found in a towel and a basin, not in an external post (Matt. 23:8–12).

Character vs. Gifting

The elders mentioned in the New Testament were men of trusted character, not extraordinary gifting (1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9). They were leading-servants, not slave drivers (Matt. 20:25–26). They were faithful brothers, not high-powered administrators.

The elders were examples to the flock, not lords over it (1 Peter 5:3). They didn't do the work of others; they supervised others as they worked. They functioned as bond-slaves, not as spiritual Caesars (Luke 22:24–27). They were facilitators, not tyrants. Fathers, not despots (1 Tim. 3:4; 5:1).

The elders were persuaders of the truth, not ecclesiastical autocrats whose egos thrived on power (Titus 1:9). They were nurturers, not brow beaters. Spiritual superintendents, not professional pulpiteers (Acts 20:28–35).

The elders were kingdom seekers, not empire builders. They were ordinary Christians, not multitalented, ultraversatile, superhuman, iconized, celebrity-like performers. They were servants, not dictators. They didn't control, manipulate, or terrorize the people of God. (Regrettably, I've met many Christians who were hurt by elders who acted in ways that are reflected in the above sentences. On the other hand, I've met many who fit my description of first-century elders.)

The elders' training was not academic, formal, or theological. Instead, it was cultivated within the context of organic church life. Their qualification came not from professional schools or licenses, but from the Spirit of God (Acts 20:28). They didn't deem themselves qualified to oversee by acquiring a blend of accounting, public speaking, and amateur psychology skills. Their oversight was an organic, natural outgrowth of their life in the church.

The elders were not regarded as religious specialists, but as faithful and trusted brethren. They were not career clergy, but self-supporting family men with secular jobs (Acts 20:17, 32–35; 1 Tim. 3:5, 7; Titus 1:6; 1 Peter 5:2–3).

Because of their tireless labor, some elders received double honor from the church. But double honor is just that—extra respect.

On that note, some have tried to argue for a professional clergy from one isolated text in 1 Timothy, which says,

The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, “Do not muzzle the ox while it is treading out the grain,” and “The worker deserves his wages.” (1 Tim. 5:17–18)

However, the context of this passage reveals otherwise. First, the specific Greek words that the New Testament uses for “pay” or “wages” (*misthos* and *opsonion*) are not used to refer to what the elders are due. The Greek word for “honor” in this passage is *time*, and it means to “respect” or “value” someone or something.

The same word is used four times in 1 Timothy. In every case, it means respect. God is to receive honor from man (1:17; 6:16), elders are to receive honor from the church (5:17), and masters are to receive honor from slaves (6:1). Another form of the word is used when Paul says that widows are to be honored by the church (5:3). (Note that *time* is never used in first-century literature to refer to “honorarium.”)

Second, all believers are called to honor (*time*) one another (Rom. 12:10). It would be absurd to take this to mean that all believers are to receive payment from one another. Again, those elders who serve well are to receive more honor—or greater respect.

Third, the fact that respect is what Paul had in mind is borne out by verse 19. Paul goes on to say that the elders are not to be accused (dishonored) unless there are two or three witnesses to confirm the accusation (1 Tim. 5:19).

Granted, double honor may have included freewill offerings as a token of blessing from time to time (Gal. 6:6; 1 Tim. 5:17–18). But this was not the dominating thought. It is honor (respect) that elders deserve, not a salary. Consequently, 1 Timothy 5 is perfectly consistent with Paul's words to the Ephesian elders recorded in Acts 20:

I have not coveted anyone's silver or gold or clothing. You yourselves know that these hands of mine have supplied my own needs and the needs of my companions. In everything I did, I

showed you that by this kind of hard work we must help the weak, remembering the words the Lord Jesus himself said: “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:33–35)

Paul told the elders in Ephesus to follow his example. That example was not to take money from God’s people, but instead, to work for a living and give to their needs.

Note that 1 Timothy 5:17–18 and Acts 20:33–35 were addressed to the same group of people—the elders in Ephesus. Thus there is no contradiction. Paul’s argument in 1 Timothy 5:17–18 is simply this: Just as the working ox deserves food and the working employee deserves payment, the elders who serve well should receive double respect.

That said, the elders of the early church were not dependent on the church. Instead, they made sure that they were in a position to give to it. They certainly didn’t receive a fixed salary like that of today’s professional pastors. Nor were they biblically sanctioned to receive full financial support like itinerant apostles who traveled to plant churches (1 Cor. 9:1–18).

Because Paul was an itinerant apostolic worker, he had a legitimate right to receive full financial support from the Lord’s people. But he intentionally waived that right whenever he worked with a new church (1 Cor. 9:14–18; 2 Cor. 11:7–9; 12:13–18; 1 Thess. 2:6–9; 2 Thess. 3:8–9).

Paul waived this right because he didn’t want to burden any church financially while he served it. Thus the Pauline principle regarding financial support can be summed up in the phrase “When I was present with you ... I was chargeable to no man” (2 Cor. 11:9 KJV).

Again, the New Testament church knew nothing of a resident, hired clergy. Because they were simply brothers, the elders didn’t stand over the flock. Nor did they stand apart from it. Instead, they served the church as those who were among the flock (1 Peter 5:1–3).

The Dramatic Lack of Attention Given to Leadership in the New Testament

Paul’s letters make a lot of noise about exemplary action. And they show no interest in titular or official position. Consider this: Every time Paul wrote to a church in crisis, he always addressed the church itself rather than the elders. This is consistent from Paul’s first letter to his last.

Let me repeat that. Every time Paul wrote a letter to a church, he addressed the whole church. He never addressed the elders. Here’s the record:

Paul, an apostle ... To the churches in Galatia. (Gal. 1:1–2)

Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians. (1 Thess. 1:1)

Paul, Silas and Timothy, To the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. (2 Thess. 1:1)

Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and our brother Sosthenes, To the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ—their Lord and ours. (1 Cor. 1:1–2)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia. (2 Cor. 1:1)

Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God... To all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints. (Rom. 1:1, 7)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, To the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse. (Col. 1:1)

Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, To the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus. (Eph. 1:1)

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. (Phil. 1:1)

More striking, every church that Paul wrote to in the New Testament was in a crisis. (The exception was the recipients of the Ephesian letter.) Yet Paul never appeals to or singles out the elders in any of them.

Take for instance Corinth, the most troubled church mentioned in the New Testament. Throughout the entire Corinthian correspondence, Paul never appeals to the elders. He never chastises them. He never commends obedience to them. In fact, he doesn't even mention them.

Instead, Paul appeals to the whole church. He shows that it's the church's responsibility to deal with its own self-inflicted wounds. Paul charges and implores the "brethren" more than thirty times in 1 Corinthians. And he writes as if no officers exist. This is also true for all his other letters to churches in crisis.

If church officers did exist in Corinth, surely Paul would have addressed them to solve its woes. But he never does. At the end of the letter, Paul tells the Corinthians to subject themselves to the self-giving Stephanas and his household. But he widens this group to others, saying, "And to everyone who does likewise."

Notice that Paul's stress is on function, not position. His instruction is placed upon the shoulders of the whole church. The entire book of Corinthians is a plea to the whole assembly to handle its own problems.

Probably the most acute example of the absence of officii-elders in Corinth is found in 1 Corinthians 5. There Paul summons the whole church to discipline a fallen member by handing him over to Satan (1 Cor. 5:1ff.). Paul's exhortation clearly runs against the grain of current understanding. In today's thinking, only those possessing "ecclesiastical clout" are regarded as qualified for such weighty tasks.

The difference in the way Paul thinks of elders and the way most modern churches think of them could hardly be more striking. Paul doesn't utter a whisper about elders in any of his nine letters

to the churches. This includes his ultracorrective treatise to the Galatians. Instead, Paul persistently entreats the “brethren” to action.

In his last letter to a church, Paul finally mentions the overseers in his opening greeting. But he does so in a fleeting way. In addition, he greets the overseers only after he greets the whole church. His letter opens with: “Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons” (Phil. 1:1). This is a rather strange order if Paul held to the idea of church officers.

Following this greeting, Paul talks to the church about its present problems. And he never again mentions the overseers. This trend is highlighted in the book of Hebrews. Throughout the entire epistle, the writer addresses the entire church. Only at the very end of the letter does he offhandedly ask the believers to greet their overseers (Heb. 13:24).

In sum, the deafening lack of attention that Paul gives to elders demonstrates that he rejected the idea that certain people in the church possessed formal rights over others. It also underscores the fact that Paul didn’t believe in church officers.

Peter’s letters make similar noise. Like Paul, Peter writes his letters to the churches—never to their leaders. He also gives minimal airtime to elders. When he does, he warns them against adopting the spirit of the Gentiles. In fact, he makes the specific point that the elders are among the flock, not lords over it (1 Peter 5:1–2).

The elders, says Peter, are not to “lord it over [katakuriuo] the people” (1 Peter 5:3 NLT). Interestingly, Peter uses the same word that Jesus used in His discussion on authority in Matthew. The Lord’s exact words were “You know that the rulers in this world lord it over [katakuriuo] their people... But among you it will be different” (Matt. 20:25–26 NLT).

This same emphasis is found in the book of Acts. There Luke tells the story of how Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to “be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers” (Acts 20:28 NASB). Notice that the elders are “among,” not “over,” the flock.

James, John, and Jude write in the same strain. They address their letters to churches and not to overseers. In fact, they all have very little to say about oversight. And they have nothing to say about official eldership.

It’s quite clear, then. The New Testament consistently rejects the notion of ecclesiastical officers in the church. It also greatly downplays the role of elders.

Eldership vs. Brotherhood

It would serve us well to ask why the New Testament gives so little airplay to elders. The oft-ignored reason may be surprising to institutional ears: The bulk of responsibility for pastoral care, teaching, and ministry in the ekklesia rests squarely upon the shoulders of all the brothers and sisters.

In fact, the richness of Paul's vision of the body of Christ stems from his continual emphasis that every member is gifted, has ministry, and is responsible in the body (Rom. 12:6; 1 Cor. 12:1ff.; Eph. 4:7; 1 Peter 4:10). As a consequence, ministerial responsibility is never to be closeted among a few.

This explains why the word *adelphoi*, translated "brethren," appears 346 times in the New Testament. It appears 134 times in Paul's epistles alone. In most places, this word is Paul's shorthand way of referring to all the believers in the church—both women and men. By contrast, the word "elders" appears only five times in Paul's letters. "Overseers" appears only four times. And "pastors" appears only once.

The stress of the New Testament, then, is upon corporate responsibility. It's the believing community that is called to carry out pastoral functions. To be more specific, all the Christians in a local assembly are called to:

- be devoted to one another (Rom. 12:10)
- honor one another (Rom. 12:10)
- live in harmony with one another (Rom. 12:16; 1 Peter 3:8)
- love one another (Rom. 13:8; 1 Thess. 4:9; 1 Peter 1:22; 1 John 3:11)
- edify one another (Rom. 14:19; 1 Thess. 5:11b)
- accept one another (Rom. 15:7)
- instruct one another (Rom. 15:14)
- greet one another (Rom. 16:16)
- agree with one another (1 Cor. 1:10)
- discipline fallen members (1 Cor. 5:3–5; 6:1–6)
- organize the church's affairs (1 Cor. 11:33–34; 14:39–40; 16:2–3)
- care for one another (1 Cor. 12:25)
- prophesy one by one (1 Cor. 14:31)
- abound in the work of the Lord (1 Cor. 15:58)
- serve one another (Gal. 5:13)
- bear one another's burdens (Gal. 6:2)
- bear with one another (Eph. 4:2)
- be kind and compassionate to one another (Eph. 4:32)
- speak to one another with psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs (Eph. 5:19)
- submit to one another (Eph. 5:21)
- forgive one another (Col. 3:13)
- teach one another (Col. 3:16)
- admonish one another (Col. 3:16)
- encourage one another (1 Thess. 5:11)
- warn the unruly (1 Thess. 5:14)
- comfort the feeble (1 Thess. 5:14)
- support the weak (1 Thess. 5:14)
- exhort one another (Heb. 3:13; 10:25)
- incite one another to love and good works (Heb. 10:24)
- pray for one another (James 5:16)
- confess sins to one another (James 5:16)

- offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9)
- be humble toward one another (1 Peter 5:5)
- fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7)

With dramatic clarity, all of these “one-another” exhortations incarnate the fact that every member of the church is to share the responsibility for pastoral care. Leadership is a corporate affair, not a solo one. It’s to be shouldered by the entire body.

Consequently, the idea that elders direct the affairs of the church, make decisions in all corporate matters, handle all of its problems, and supply all of its teaching is alien to New Testament thinking. Such an idea is pure fantasy and bereft of biblical support. It’s no wonder that in elder-led churches spiritual maturity atrophies and members grow passive and indolent.

Stated simply, the New Testament knows nothing of an elder-ruled, elder-governed, or elder-directed church. And it knows even less about a pastor-led church. The first-century church was in the hands of the brotherhood and the sisterhood. Plain and simple.

Elders are organic to the church. They exist within her DNA. Like fingernails and eyebrows on an infant, they develop organically as the child grows up. Any church that’s properly planted and is living by the life of Christ will naturally produce elders. By the same token, elders should emerge out of brotherhood. For when they do, they will become overseers rather than overlords.

In the final analysis, the leadership of the church really boils down to one basic issue—the headship of Christ. It rests upon the thorny question of who will be Head: Jesus Christ or human beings?

Questions That Must Be Faced

- Why do you believe we’ve made something normative that has no scriptural support (the modern pastor and official elders) and neglected that which Scripture teaches in abundance (plural elders who are part of a functioning Christian community)?
- What model of leadership do you believe best reflects leadership in the triune God: the single pastor, official elders, or the community of believers under the Spirit’s guidance? What is your church’s model?
- Can you discern the wisdom of God in designing the church to organically produce a group of elders to oversee it rather than a single pastor (or an imported minister) to run it? Explain.

This book may be purchased at [Amazon.com](https://www.amazon.com)

Is it the sequel to [Pagan Christianity](#)