

## **Introduction**

As a church, we are committed to organising ourselves according to the clear teaching of Scripture. After careful study of God's Word, we believe the Bible provides a specific model for how local churches should be led. This position paper outlines what we believe Scripture teaches about church leadership and governance.

## **Summary Statement**

Having carefully studied the Scriptures, we believe that:

- There is no evidence of an individual person leading a church anywhere in the New Testament
- The biblical model is a team of equals, called Elders, who meet godly qualifications (1 Timothy 3:1-7, 2 Timothy 2:24-25, Titus 1:5-9)
- These are men who both teach and shepherd the people
- The biblical model also includes Deacons who meet godly qualifications and take on practical, sometimes time-consuming tasks
- Christ alone is the Head of His church, and under His authority, local congregations are to be shepherded by a plurality of qualified elders

## **Why Biblical Titles Matter**

The Bible uses titles to describe biblical roles—not for self-importance, but to define expectations. Terms like 'church leader' or 'pastor' can mean different things and are open to interpretation. When we use biblical titles, we are immediately instructed by the verses that directly relate to these roles, and the congregation can directly connect Scripture about elders to the elders themselves.

For example, James 5:14 instructs: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.' If a church does not use the term 'elders', those who are sick are unlikely to know who to call on to fulfil this biblical instruction.

## **Three Terms, One Office**

Scripture uses three terms interchangeably to describe the same office of church leadership:

1. **Elder** (Greek: *presbyteros*) - the office or position
2. **Overseer/Bishop** (Greek: *episkopos*) - the supervisory role
3. **Shepherd/Pastor** (Greek: *poimen*) - the pastoral function

We see this clearly in several passages:

**Acts 20:17, 28** - Paul summons 'the elders (*presbyterous*) of the church' (v. 17), then tells them: 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has

made you overseers (*episkopous*), to care for (*poimainein*—'to shepherd') the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood' (v. 28). The elders are overseers who shepherd.

**1 Peter 5:1-2** - 'So I exhort the elders (*presbyterous*) among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd (*poimante*—verb form of *poimen*) the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight (*episkopountes*—verb form of *episkopos*), not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly.'

**Titus 1:5-7** - 'This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders (*presbyterous*) in every town as I directed you—if anyone is above reproach... For an overseer (*episkopon*), as God's steward, must be above reproach' (vv. 5-7). The elder and the overseer are the same person.

All three terms describe different aspects of the same office rather than separate hierarchical positions. The title most often used in Scripture when referring to church leadership is 'Elder'.

### **Shepherd-Teachers: One Gift, Not Two**

Ephesians 4:11 lists Christ's gifts to the church: 'And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers.' Grammatically, 'shepherd-teachers' is one combined gift, not two separate ones. This is called the Granville Sharp Rule—when two nouns in Greek are connected by 'and' (*kai*) and share a single article, they refer to the same group or are closely united as one concept.

Why this matters theologically:

- Shepherding without teaching leads people astray
- Teaching without shepherding becomes cold and disconnected

### **The Biblical Pattern: Plural Eldership**

#### **Always Plural, Never Singular**

Throughout the New Testament, elders in a church are **always** referred to in the plural. There is no biblical example of a church being led by one elder.

**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 had believed.'

**Titus 1:5** - 'This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint **elders** in **every town** as I directed you.'

Additional references to plural eldership: Acts 11:30, 15:2, 15:4, 15:6, 15:22, 16:4, 20:17, 21:18; 1 Timothy 5:17, 19; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, 5; Hebrews 11:2

The instruction and example of Scripture is consistently a team of equals who meet godly criteria.

### **Why Plural Leadership?**

The New Testament consistently shows churches led by a group of equal elders rather than a single leader because this model:

- **Balances weaknesses** - No single leader has all gifts or perspectives
- **Lightens the workload** - Ministry responsibilities are shared
- **Provides accountability** - Leaders hold each other accountable
- **Guards against pride** - No single person receives all attention or authority
- **Protects against authoritarianism** - Prevents dictatorships from arising
- **Protects the church** - If one elder fails, the church doesn't collapse

This model guards the church against dependence on one person's gifts whilst fostering mutual accountability, shared wisdom, and dependence on Scripture.

### **The Role and Function of Elders**

According to Scripture, elders are called to:

**Lead the church** - 1 Timothy 5:17: 'Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honour, especially those who labour in preaching and teaching'; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:1-2

**Teach and preach the Word** - 1 Timothy 3:2: 'Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach'; 2 Timothy 4:2: 'preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching'; Titus 1:9

**Protect the church from false teachers** - Acts 20:28-31: 'Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.'

**Instruct and rebuke in sound doctrine** - Titus 1:9: 'He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.'

**Visit the sick and pray** - James 5:14: 'Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.'

**Settle questions about biblical teaching** - Acts 15:6: 'The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.'

Elders shepherd, rule, direct, and manage by means of teaching Scripture. The only authority any elder has is in so far as they are correctly applying the Word of God.

### **Equipping, Not Performing**

Ephesians 4:12 clarifies that elders are given 'to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ'.

These gifted leaders aren't meant to do all the ministry for the church; they're meant to equip believers so that each member can use their gifts. This prevents believers from being 'tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes' (Ephesians 4:14).

Church is not a one-man performance. It's a body where every member works properly, where leaders equip rather than dominate, and where Christ Himself remains the Chief Shepherd who leads us all.

## **Qualifications for Elders**

Scripture provides clear qualifications for elders (1 Timothy 3:1-7; 2 Timothy 2:24-25; Titus 1:5-9). These qualifications focus primarily on character before gifting.

## **Clear Disqualifications**

Some things clearly disqualify a person from serving as an elder:

- Recent convert (1 Timothy 3:6)
- Poor reputation with outsiders (1 Timothy 3:7)
- Cannot teach (1 Timothy 3:2)
- Enslaved to wine (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7)
- Violent or quick-tempered (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7)
- Loves money or dishonest gain (1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7)
- Household is out of control (1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6)
- Not husband of one wife (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6)

The biblical standard is high but not perfection. Elders must be men of proven character, growing in godliness, able to teach, and managing their households well.

## **The Role of Deacons**

1 Timothy 3:1-8 gives two titles for church governance: overseers (elders) and deacons. Both roles have distinct criteria that focus primarily on character.

The main distinctions between elders and deacons are:

- Deacons are not required to teach
- Elders have a call to 'rule/direct/manage' (1 Timothy 5:17), which is never mentioned of deacons in Scripture
- Deacons take on more practical and sometimes time-consuming tasks, freeing elders for prayer and ministry of the Word (cf. Acts 6:1-6)

Both offices are essential for healthy church function and require godly character (1 Timothy 3:8-13).

## **Addressing Common Objections**

### **'What about Pastor?'**

The word 'pastor' as it's commonly used today creates significant confusion about biblical church leadership. Here's why:

**The word 'pastor' doesn't exist in the original languages of Scripture.** The Greek word is *poimen*, which means 'shepherd'. This word appears approximately 18 times in the New Testament and is consistently translated as 'shepherd' everywhere—except in one instance in some English translations.

The Geneva Bible of the 16th century first translated *poimen* as 'pastor' in Ephesians 4:11. The Latin Vulgate used *pastores*, which is simply Latin for 'shepherds'—there's no distinction in Latin between 'pastor' and 'shepherd'.

**Why does this matter?** By translating *poimen* as 'shepherd' 17 times but 'pastor' once, English Bibles created a false distinction. Over centuries, 'pastor' has taken on a technical meaning in many church traditions—referring to a full-time, employed church leader, distinct from elders. This distinction does not exist in the New Testament.

The inconsistent translation has created or reinforced confusion about how churches should be led, suggesting that pastors and elders are two different things when Scripture makes no such distinction.

### **'What about the Jerusalem Council in Acts 15?'**

The Jerusalem Council demonstrates corporate elder leadership rather than individual pastoral authority. When the critical question of Gentile circumcision arose, 'the apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter' (Acts 15:6). The decision-making process involved collective discussion with 'much debate' (v. 7), followed by testimonies from multiple leaders.

When James spoke, he was not issuing a unilateral decision but summarising the consensus: 'Therefore my judgement is that we should not trouble those of the Gentiles who turn to God' (v. 19). The final decision was explicitly corporate: 'Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas' (v. 22), and the letter they sent stated: 'For it has seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us' (v. 28).

James did not rule as a singular pastor but facilitated the group's consensus, demonstrating that even in this foundational church decision, leadership functioned through a plurality of equals working together under the Holy Spirit's guidance.

### **'Weren't there solo leaders in the New Testament?'**

Jesus is uniquely the Head of the universal church (Ephesians 5:23). Apostles like Paul possessed special commissioning to establish churches and appoint elders—a role that ceased with the apostolic era (Ephesians 2:20). When we examine local church governance specifically, we find no examples of individual pastors exercising sole authority over congregations. The consistent pattern shows teams of elders governing together.

### **Our Church's Autonomy**

We recognise that not all churches interpret these passages the same way. As an independent church, we maintain full freedom of deliberation, decision, and direction under God. We are completely autonomous and self-governing, and we have chosen to follow what we believe is the biblical pattern of plural eldership.

## **Conclusion**

The consistent New Testament pattern is that Christ is the sole Head of His church (Ephesians 1:22-23; Colossians 1:18). Under His authority, local congregations are to be shepherded and governed not by a solitary leader, but by a plurality of qualified elders who together oversee, teach, and care for God's people (Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17, 28; 1 Peter 5:1-2; Titus 1:5-7).

Alongside elders, Scripture establishes deacons as those who meet godly qualifications (1 Timothy 3:8-13) and serve the church in practical matters, freeing the elders for prayer and the ministry of the Word (cf. Acts 6:1-6).

This model guards the church against pride, authoritarianism, and dependence on one person's gifts, whilst fostering mutual accountability, shared wisdom, and dependence on Scripture.

Ultimately, biblical eldership is not about human hierarchy but about Christ ruling His church through His Word, by means of a plurality of godly men who shepherd His flock with humility, vigilance, and love.

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*This position paper reflects our understanding of Scripture and our commitment to organising our church according to biblical patterns. We welcome questions and conversations about these matters as we seek together to honour Christ in all things.*