

Sam Storms
Bridgeway Church / Foundations
The Church (2)

***The Church:
Is it Important and What Difference does it Make?
Part Two***

How is the Local Church to be Governed?

The immediate problem we face in trying to answer this question is the fact that few churches or denominations today seek to reproduce the New Testament pattern for local church government. I realize that many will object to this and argue that the NT doesn't present us with an explicit ecclesiology. I happen to disagree. I believe the NT portrays for us a consistent pattern of governance by a plurality of male Elders.

But before we look at the biblical evidence we need to take note of the fact that historically there have been three primary forms of governance in the local church:

- (1) **Congregational** or democratic government – In this case the final and decisive authority in all church affairs rests with the individual believers who comprise the church's membership.
- (2) **Episcopal** or autocratic government – In this scenario the final and decisive authority in the local church is vested in the ordained clergy: Priests, Bishops, etc.
- (3) **Presbyterian** or representative government – Do not think that only those who are in official Presbyterian denominations embrace this form of church governance. Non-denominational churches, such as Bridgeway, and many others are governed by a plurality of Elders, with varying degrees of congregational participation in the affairs of the church.

Let's begin by noting the texts in which the word "Elder" appears:

Acts 11:29-30 – "And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the relief of the brethren living in Judea. And this they did, sending it in charge of Barnabas and Saul to the **elders**."

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."

Acts 15:1-6 – "Some men came down from Judea and began teaching the brethren, 'Unless you are circumcised according to the custom of Moses, you cannot be saved.' And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, the brethren determined that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and **elders** concerning this issue. Therefore, being sent on their way by the church, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria, describing in detail the conversion of the Gentiles, and were bringing great joy to all the brethren. When they arrived at Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the **elders**, and they reported all that God had done with them. But some of the sect of the Pharisees who had believed stood up, saying, "It is necessary to circumcise them and to direct them to observe the Law of Moses." The apostles and the **elders** came together to look into this matter.

Acts 15:22-23 – "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, and they sent this letter by them, 'The apostles and the brethren who are **elders**, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings.'"

Acts 16:4 – "Now while they were passing through the cities, they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and **elders** who were in Jerusalem, for them to observe."

Acts 20:17 – “And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church.”

Acts 21:17-18 – “After we arrived in Jerusalem, the brethren received us gladly. And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the **elders** were present. After he had greeted them, he began to relate one by one the things which God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.”

1 Timothy 4:14 – “Do not neglect the spiritual gift within you, which was bestowed on you through prophetic utterance with the laying on of hands by the **presbytery** (or **elders**).”

1 Timothy 5:17 – “Let the **elders** who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

1 Timothy 5:19 – “Do not receive an accusation against an **elder** except on the basis of two or three witnesses.”

Titus 1:5 – “This is why I left you in Crete, that you might amend what was defective, and appoint **elders** in every town as I directed you.”

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.”

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.”

1 Peter 5:5 – “You younger men, likewise, be subject to your **elders**; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for ‘God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble.’”

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.”

I don’t find any indication that a local church was to be governed by a single elder or pastor. The consistent NT witness is that each church was under the oversight of a plurality of elders/bishops.

The English word “elder” is the translation of the Greek *presbuteros*, from which we get “Presbyter” and “Presbyterian”. Our English word “bishop” comes from the Greek *episkopos*, from which we get the word “Episcopal” and “Episcopalian”. These two terms are interchangeable in the New Testament. What I mean is that they are two different words that describe the same office or authoritative function. “Elder” focuses on the dignity and gravity of the person who serves while “Bishop” focuses on the practical function of the office (literally, one who exercises oversight). Why do I believe they are interchangeable? There are four passages that justify my conclusion.

First, according to Acts 20:17 Paul called for the **elders** of the church to come to him. But later in v. 28, in referring to these same elders, he says that God has made them **overseers** (ESV) or **bishops** in the church.

Second, Paul left Titus in Crete to appoint **elders** in every town (Titus 1:5). When Paul then turns to list the qualifications for this office he says, “For an **overseer** (i.e., bishop or *episkopon*) . . . must be above reproach,” etc. Clearly these two terms refer to the same office.

Third, “in 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul says, ‘If any one aspires to the office of bishop/overseer, he desires a noble task.’ Then he gives the qualifications for the overseer/bishop in verses 2-7. Unlike the deacons, the overseer must be ‘able to teach’ (v. 2), and in v. 5 he is said to be one whose management of his own household fits him to care for God’s church. These two functions are ascribed to elders in the fifth chapter of this same book (1 Timothy 5:17) – teaching and governing. So it is very likely that in Paul’s mind the bishops/overseers of 1 Timothy 3:1-7 are the same as the elders of 5:17” (John Piper).

Fourth, 1 Timothy 3:1-13 clearly indicates that there are two primary offices in the NT: Elder and Deacon. Yet in Philippians 1:1 Paul directs his epistle “to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the **overseers** (*episkopoi*) and deacons.” Since Paul’s practice was to appoint **elders** in every church (Acts 14:23) it seems reasonable that the **overseers/bishops** in Phil. 1:1 is a reference to the elders in that city.

The Greek word (*poimēn*) translated "pastor" is used only once in the NT in Ephesians 4:11. The related verb form (*poimainō*) has the meaning "to shepherd" or "to feed" with the idea of nurturing and sustaining the flock of God. When I put together Ephesians 4:11, 1 Timothy 3:2, Titus 1:9, Acts 20:28, and 1 Peter 5:1-2, it would appear reasonable to conclude that all elders exercised pastoral responsibilities. Whether or not one might function in a pastoral capacity without holding the office of elder is another matter. I tend to think the answer is yes, but that need not detain us here (it would obviously depend entirely on how and over whom such a “pastoral” ministry would be exercised).

It would also appear that whereas all elders are to be able to teach, not all teachers are elders. Although being “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9) is clearly a requirement for all elders, it is entirely conceivable that one may be gifted to teach but not qualify for the office of elder (or perhaps they do qualify but have not yet been appointed to that position).

My conclusion is that the local church is to be governed by a plurality of individuals who are described in the New Testament as **elders**, insofar as they hold an office of great dignity and importance (perhaps even with an allusion to age or at least spiritual maturity), or **bishops**, insofar as they exercise oversight of the body of Christ, or **pastors**, insofar as they spiritually feed, care for, and exercise guardianship over the flock of God.

Are All Elders to be Men? Can Women be Elders in the Local Church?

But why do I believe that this ruling or governmental office is restricted to men? I would appeal to three arguments in defense of a male eldership.

First, I appeal to the NT two-fold description of the **function** of elders. (1) They are those who **govern** or **rule** the church (1 Timothy 3:4-5; 5:17; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; Hebrews 13:17). (2) They are those who are primarily responsible for **teaching** the body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11 [assuming the words “pastor” and “teacher” refer to one function or office of “pastor-teacher”; the best grammatical analysis would indicate this is true]; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Since I have determined from 1 Timothy 2:11-15 that Paul restricted teaching and exercising authority to men, it follows that the office of Elder or Bishop is restricted to men.

Second, I would appeal to the qualifications for the office of Elder that are found in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. An Elder must be “the husband of one wife” (1 Tim. 3:2 and Titus 1:6). Note also that an elder “must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?” (1 Tim. 3:4-5).

Third, there is no reference anywhere in the New Testament to a female elder. You may wish to object by pointing out that this is an argument from silence. Yes, it is. But it is a deafening silence, especially when taken in conjunction with the two previous points. The bottom line is that we simply have no biblical precedent for female elders or anything in the text that describes their nature, function, and qualifications that would lead us to believe that this could ever be a possibility.

I agree that women can serve as deacons (1 Timothy 3:8-13; Romans 16:1-2; although this is disputed by others), that they can assist and support, as “co-workers”, someone such as the apostle Paul (Phil. 4:2-3), that they can evangelize, and that they can possess and exercise in biblically appropriate ways every spiritual gift (except that of “apostle,” although I’m not persuaded “apostleship” is a spiritual gift). I also believe that women can serve and minister in virtually every capacity aside from what I call “senior governmental authority”.

If a church is governed by a plurality of Elders, the application of the preceding principles seems clear enough. However, if you are in a church or denomination that is governed by a single Senior Pastor or by a Bishop, you will

need to determine if others who serve in official and governmental capacities, whether a Board of Directors or Deacons or some such equivalent group, are exercising that authority which the NT would appear to restrict to males.

Objections Answered

(1) Some have argued that since Euodia and Syntyche (Phil. 4:2-3) were “co-workers” with Paul, women were in positions of leadership and should thus be considered as viable candidates for the office of Elder. But the Greek word *sunergos* (“co-worker” or “fellow-worker”) is used of numerous individuals (e.g., Romans 16:9; Phil. 2:25; Col. 4:10-11; Philemon 24; etc.), as well as anyone who supports traveling missionaries (3 John 8). But this in no way implies that such people exercised ruling authority in the local church. Whereas all Elders would certainly qualify as “co-workers,” not all “co-workers” would qualify as Elders. Their “work” in support of the gospel, whether as those who provide financial aid, or those who evangelize, or those who intercede in prayer, or those who serve in any number of capacities, does not in and of itself indicate they were invested with governmental authority or were even qualified to serve in such a capacity (cf. Romans 16:1-2).

(2) Contrary to what some have suggested, the reference to “older women” in Titus 2:3 does not support the notion of female Elders. Paul concluded his discussion of church offices in 1:5-9. In chapter two he focuses on a variety of individuals classified according to their age: “older men” (v. 2), “older women” (v. 3), “young women” (v. 4), and “younger men” (v. 6). Furthermore, the word in v. 2 translated “older men” (*presbutēs*) is different from that used of the church office (*presbuteros*). Likewise, the word in v. 3 translated “older women” (*presbutis*) specifies age, as is evident from the contrast with the “young women” whom they are to teach (cf. 1 Timothy 5:1-2 for a similar emphasis).

(3) Hebrews 11:2 uses the plural of *presbuteros* and applies it to such women of the OT as Sarah, the mother of Moses, Rahab, and others. But clearly the author of Hebrews is using the word to refer to “a person who lived long ago,” i.e., “ancestor” or “ancient” (it is translated “people of old” in the ESV). There is not the slightest indication that the author is thinking of ecclesiastical office in the NT, nor would any reader have thought that people like Abel and Enoch and Noah (vv. 4-7) were the equivalent of those who served in senior governmental authority in the NT church. One must always be careful not “to import one meaning of a word into a context where a different meaning is the one the author clearly meant” (Grudem, 253).

(4) The epistle of 2 John is addressed to “the elect lady and her children” (v. 1). Some have seen here a reference to a woman who exercised authority in the body of Christ. However, it is far more likely that “elect lady and her children” is a metaphorical way of saying “the church and its members” (cf. v. 13; see also 2 Cor. 11:2 and Eph. 5:22-32 where the church is portrayed as a “bride” betrothed to Christ; note also how Peter refers to the church in 1 Peter 5:13 – “She who is at Babylon, who is likewise chosen, sends you greetings, and so does Mark, my son”).

(5) An appeal has also been made to 1 Timothy 5:3-16 where Paul discusses how “widows” should be treated. But simply being an “elderly” person, in this case over the age of 60, does not make one an “Elder” with ecclesiastical authority! Besides, the word *presbuteros* doesn’t even occur in this passage. Contrary to the claims of some, the qualifications for “widows” and “elders” are not the same (see Grudem, 256-57) and the “widows” were not remunerated for ministry but were supported because they had no believing relatives on whom they could rely for financial assistance.

(6) Finally, what about those women in whose homes churches would meet, such as Mary (Acts 12:12), Lydia (Acts 16:15), Prisca (Romans 16:5), Chloe (1 Cor. 1:11), and Nympha (Col. 4:15)? Does this imply that they exercised spiritual authority over the congregation in their midst? Of course not. Hosting a church in one’s home does not justify ignoring the qualifications for elders (1 Timothy 3; Titus 1). Are we actually to believe that Lydia, a new convert, was appointed as a local church Elder simply because she opened her home to Paul and his associates?

Discussion Questions

(1) What are the primary differences between a church that is governed by a plurality of Elders and one that is governed by a single Senior Pastor or Bishop?

(2) How would you go about defending the notion of governance by a plurality of Elders? Are there any biblical texts or arguments that would give a person justification for embracing a different model of local church life? If so, what are they?

(3) What biblical reasons do we have for believing that the word for “elder” and the word for “bishop” are interchangeable and refer to the same office?

(4) Many churches today are installing women in the office of Elder. What reasons do they give for this? How would you respond to this development?

(5) What is the difference between rule by the congregation and rule by Elders? Which do you think is biblical, or is there a mixed form of governance that embraces elements of both? If the latter is true, on what sort of decisions should the members of a congregation be consulted and given the right and authority to vote, and on what sort of decisions should it be left to the board of Elders?