



Eldership in the House God Builds

The following verses represent the majority of what is said regarding Elders in the Church:

Acts 14: 23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

Acts 15: 2 Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Acts 15: 4 And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

Acts 15: 6 Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Acts 15: 22 Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23 They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Acts 16: 4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.

Acts 20: 17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.

Acts 20: 28 “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. 29 “For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30 “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Acts 21: 18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

1 Timothy 3: 1 This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position (function) of a bishop, he desires a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); 6 not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

1 Timothy 5: 17 Let the elders who rule (exercise shepherding care) well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. 18 For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer is worthy of his wages.” 19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. 20 Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

Titus 1: 5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you— 6 if a man is blameless, the husband of one wife, having faithful children not accused of dissipation or insubordination. 7 For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God,

not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, 8but hospitable, a lover of what is good, sober-minded, just, holy, self-controlled, 9holding fast the faithful word as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

1 Peter 5:1The 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: 2Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;

Hebrews 13:7Remember those who rule (exercise shepherding care) over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

Hebrews 13:17Obey those who rule (exercise shepherding care) over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

James 5:13Is anyone among you suffering? Let him pray. Is anyone cheerful? Let him sing psalms. 14Is 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.

Revelation 4:4Around the throne were twenty-four thrones, and on the thrones I saw twenty-four elders sitting, clothed in white robes; and they had crowns of gold on their heads.

Revelation 4:10the twenty-four elders fall down before Him who sits on the throne and worship Him who lives forever and ever, and cast their crowns before the throne,

Revelation 5:5But one of the elders said to me, “Do not weep. Behold, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has prevailed to open the scroll and to loose its seven seals.” 6And I looked, and behold, in the midst of the throne and of the four living creatures, and in the midst of the elders, stood a Lamb as though it had been slain, having seven horns and seven eyes, which are the seven Spirits of God sent out into all the earth. 7Then He came and took the scroll out of the right hand of Him who sat on the throne.

8Now when He had taken the scroll, the four living creatures and the twenty-four elders fell down before the Lamb, each having a harp, and golden bowls full of incense, which are the prayers of the saints.

Revelation 5:11 Then I looked, and I heard the voice of many angels around the throne, the living creatures, and the elders; and the number of them was ten thousand times ten thousand, and thousands of thousands,

Revelation 5:14Then the four living creatures said, “Amen!” And the twenty-four elders fell down and worshiped Him who lives forever and ever.

Revelation 7: 11All the angels stood around the throne and the elders and the four living creatures, and fell on their faces before the throne and worshiped God,

Revelation 7:13Then one of the elders answered, saying to me,

Revelation 11:16And the twenty-four elders who sat before God on their thrones fell on their faces and worshiped God,

Revelation 14:3They sang as it were a new song before the throne, before the four living creatures, and the elders; and no one could learn that song except the hundred and forty-four thousand who were redeemed from the earth.

Revelation 19: 4And the twenty-four elders and the four living creatures fell down and worshiped God who sat on the throne,

The approach I will take, in considering the various passages dealing with the nature of Eldership, is to answer the question: “What was the role and degree of prominence, respect, and honor given to the Church Eldership?” In other studies we have discussed the character requirements, so we will not repeat those here.

Let me begin by saying, when we look at Eldership in the New Testament, we conclude from study

that they did not do the following things:

1. Control the body.
2. Function in hierarchical leadership.
3. Direct, in the sense of make all the decisions for the Church relating to its manner of gathering, such as programs, schedule, direction of finances, who would say or do what, etc.
4. Operate by titles, so as to garner support, respect, and obedience, based on their having a religious title.

I want to say a few words here about the many brethren I have had relationship with in the more traditional or institutional formatted Church, over the years. Many of those who have been led by the Lord to leave the more traditional settings, have tended to treat the majority of those in the traditional settings as if they were essentially Pharisees and worthy of disdain and dishonor. I vehemently protest this approach and attitude. I will go on record here, and in other articles, as saying that I believe the majority of the “Senior Pastors” in the US and around the world, certainly those connected with the Evangelical Church of my experience, are men who sincerely love Christ and His Church, and rather than reflect a desire to abuse or wrongly lead Jesus’ Church, in most cases are simply men who have been taught an errant understanding of Church passed down through centuries of distortion.

It is my firm conviction that if all leaders will sincerely live out Proverbs 2:1-5, in time, they will come forth from the traditions of the elders that have formed over Church history, and lead in entirely new and healthier ways.

Proverbs 2:1 My son, if you receive my words and treasure up my commandments with you, 2 making your ear attentive to wisdom and inclining your heart to understanding; 3 yes, if you call out for insight and raise your voice for understanding, 4 if you seek it like silver and search for it as for hidden treasures, 5 then you will understand the fear of the LORD and **find the knowledge of God.**

It is to this we are called, and when we walk in this wisdom we will find the knowledge of God. May it be so...

If much of what we have experienced in the traditional Church is not a leadership patterned off of the teachings of Christ and His apostles what was their “place” among the body? How are they distinguished from the rest? If their role was not to control the meetings, decide what was going to go on at each gathering, or make administrative and business policies for the Church..., what did they do?

In our day, we have grown to think of Elders or Pastors, as those who are “In Charge of” the Church. They are the Church’s bosses. They decide the Church’s name, hire its staff, set the salaries, define job descriptions, determine the vision and mission statement of the Church, decide what will be preached in each gathering, appoint the various ministries of the Church, determine the programs the Church will develop, fund, implement, and modify those programs, settle on the order of service, including the amount of time for each element of the service, decide how many times per week the Church will gather, stand behind a pulpit while the people sit in pews, function as the primary gateway into heaven via the altar call, settle on how the Church will advertise itself to the community, etc. etc.

These are what we have grown up with, in our understanding of their roles.

They are greeted as “Pastor so-and-so,” given special honor in all gatherings and settings, treated as if they were the personification of Christ Himself, given special privileges, etc., all not necessarily based on their character, their service, their accuracy of beliefs, or their servant’s approach, but rather on their title, charisma, or power of personality.

Yet, when we look into the New Testament, we don’t see any of these functions or roles, in those referred to as “Elders.” How were they distinguished? What did they do?

My goal is not to consider their qualifications, but rather their roles, functions, distinctions, and honors.

1. They were appointed. In other words, they didn’t set themselves into their roles. Apostles determined their suitability for the role and appointed them to service of the body. (Acts 14:23)

Acts 14:23 So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

It is assumed by this, that the body knew who they were, recognized them as their leaders, and related to them according to their spiritual calling.

2. Being appointed implies at least some form of “separation” from the rest of the body. It just doesn’t appear to be an “upward” separation, or an elevation, or a placing in charge, in some sort of hierarchical way. The separation appears to be with a view to the various functions of service to the body they would provide. (Acts 20:17; 21:18)

Acts 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.

Acts 21:18 On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present.

3. From our other studies, they do not appear to function as CEOs, in charge, the bosses of the Churches, etc. (Matthew 20)

Matthew 20:25 But Jesus called them to him and said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. 26 It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, 27 and whoever would be first among you must be your slave, 28 even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

4. They represented the “belief system” of the Church. (Acts 15:2,4,6, 22-23; 16:4). It appears they spent a fair amount of time determining what the Lord was saying to Church, settling how that would be communicated, mentoring the body, defining doctrinal positions, and then communicating those beliefs into each fellowship they had oversight of.

Acts 15: 2Therefore, when Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and dispute with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas and certain others of them should go up to Jerusalem, to the apostles and elders, about this question.

Acts 15: 4And when they had come to Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders; and they reported all things that God had done with them.

Acts 15:6Now the apostles and elders came together to consider this matter.

Acts 15:22Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, To the brethren who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

Acts 16:4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.

5. The doctrinal beliefs, developed by the Apostles and Elders, formed what they termed “decrees,” which were to be “kept.” (Acts 16:4)

Acts 16:4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem.

Vines interpretes this word “decree”: DOGMA (dovgma , (1378), transliterated in English, primarily denoted an opinion or judgment (from *dokeo*, to be of opinion), hence, an opinion expressed with authority, a doctrine, ordinance, decree; “decree,” Luke 2:1; 16:4; Acts 17:7; in the sense of ordinances, Eph. 2:15; Col. 2:14.) And the word, “kept - κρινω to separate, judge, decide, govern.

Combined, the implications of this phrase “decrees to be kept,” indicate when the Apostles and Elders spent time together and before God, to determine the belief system of the Church, they settled on the things they were to believe and then presented them to the Churches as the formed belief system of the Lord. The early Church obviously respected these decrees, and by implication had been taught to respect their leaders’ spirituality and insight. Thus, when the people were taught to obey their leaders, it primarily, if not exclusively, had to do with these doctrinal decrees, I.e. The Word of Christ, rather than as to managers of the Church services or the Church business. Their role lay in these matters, rather than in building a Church business.

It is also worth noting, that just because the Elders in Jerusalem, or anywhere for that matter, decreed certain beliefs, this did not guarantee accuracy of doctrine, or that the entire Church would adhere to it. As we know, from a study of Acts, the first Jewish believers decreed circumcision for all new Gentile believers, and it wasn’t until Paul received more accurate insight on God’s will for them, and fought this decree vehemently, that this decree was rescinded. Paul did not adhere to this decree, and he taught others not to also. Therefore, we learn, that while the Elders may have decreed certain beliefs, which they believed represented the mind of Christ, and the Church showed great respect for these, nevertheless, the individual believers understood that first and foremost their walk with Christ must ultimately dictate whether they would obey those decrees or not.

Such decisions to counter the beliefs of the Elders would not have been rendered capriciously or disrespectfully. But the early Church understood their highest responsibility was to obey Christ, and not their Elders. (See Acts 15 & Galatians 1)

The people knew, in obeying these authoritative opinions, they were honoring Christ.

6. They were called to oversee (look out for the spiritual interests of) the flock, and to function as shepherds (guides, feeders, care givers, protectors) to them. We have considered the meanings of these words in previous articles, so I will not go into those again here, in much detail. It simply needs to be said that they were not business managers, according to these words, but guardians of the spiritual well being of the flock. (Acts 20:28-30; Hebrews 13:17)

Acts 20: 28"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. 29"For I know this, that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. 30"Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away the disciples after themselves.

Hebrews 13:17 Obey those who rule (exercise shepherding care) over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.

As the writer of Hebrews emphasizes, their role/function, was a “watching out for their souls.” They did this through teaching right doctrine, protecting them from false doctrine, and living in accordance with the things they taught, so that their example would form a protective hedge around them.

7. He carried out a “function or role,” not an “office” or “position,” as is often inaccurately translated in many versions. Such translations are not exegesis but eisegesis - a reading into the passage based on a predetermined belief not based on accurate biblical analysis. “Positions” imply right to control, “functions” communicate responsibility to serve. Authority rests in character and faithful transmission of the Word of Christ, not in titles. (1 Timothy 3:1-7)

1 Timothy 3:1 This is a faithful saying: If a man desires the position (function) of a bishop, he desires a good work. 2 A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach; 3 not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous; 4 one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence 5 (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?); 6 not a novice, lest being puffed up with pride he fall into the same condemnation as the devil. 7 Moreover he must have a good testimony among those who are outside, lest he fall into reproach and the snare of the devil.

8. Respect was to be given to all Elders, and special honor to those who worked hard at teaching right doctrine. (1 Timothy 5:17-20) Notice, their respect was connected with their service, not that they had a seminary degree, a title, a position, an office, strong charisma, or great intellect. (Hebrews 13:7)

1 Timothy 5:17 Let the elders who rule (exercise shepherding care) well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. 18 For the Scripture says, "You shall not muzzle an ox while it treads out the grain," and, "The laborer is worthy of his wages." 19 Do not receive an accusation against an elder except from two or three witnesses. 20 Those who are sinning rebuke in the presence of all, that the rest also may fear.

Hebrews 13:7 Remember those who rule (exercise shepherding care) over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct.

9. Those who labored in communicating truth were to be the recipients of living support from the body. Nothing is implied as to regular wage, or that they were to become professional ministers. It was all about “blessing,” their efforts, not professionalizing their call. (1 Timothy 5:17-19)

This is not to say that a leader could not receive a salary, of a consistent monthly amount, but such would be the result of the consistent gifts of the body, led by the Spirit, rather than the result of negotiating for a set salary from a group of people and regular pressure from the leadership for it. They appear to have avoided anything that would have cast them into the role of an hireling.

There is no question, in Paul’s teaching, that he believed they deserved to be supported by the body, and the body would be blessed for having done so. The modern House Church most often fails in this ministry. Because their leaders no longer take titles, or function as salaried professionals, the body tends to fail to bless them financially and in other material means. Paul indicates to the Church that there will be great blessing that comes to the

body, when they properly provide for and bless their leadership. (Philippians 4, 1 Corinthians 9)

10. They carried an esteem and honor, and as such the body was taught to be cautious about leveling accusations that were not true, or treating them with disrespect. In this sense, we see them accorded a treatment that separates them from the rest of the body, but once again, it was for their service and wisdom, not other superfluous reasons. (1 Timothy 5:17-19)
11. They were held to a higher accountability to the body than the rest of the body. (1 Timothy 5:17-19; James 3:1)

James 3:1 Not many of you should become teachers, my brothers, for you know that we who teach will be judged with greater strictness.

Note, we don't see any kind of modern notions of accountability, that it was a hierarchical form, or anything like that. Their accountability was not first and foremost to some Apostle, but rather, to the entire body of Christ.

12. Titus 1:9 says something extremely important, in terms of the authority they wielded.

Titus 1:9 **holding fast the faithful word** as he has been taught, that he may be able, by sound doctrine, both to exhort and convict those who contradict.

Their authority lay in their faithfulness to communicate the Word of God to the people. As they walked in sound doctrine and character they had spiritual authority to exhort and convict the body. Their authority did not lie in a title, position, or office. When they walked in agreement with the Word, then their authority was powerful, and God backed up their Words by His Spirit. This completely opposes all notions of hierarchical authority.

When they walked in this manner, the body was taught to carefully obey this spiritual authority. They were recognized as those who bore spiritual authority. It made them distinct in the body. Distinction should never be in a title, and should only exist as a reflection of divine agreement. (James 5:14)

13. Peter tells us they functioned as shepherds, in the sense of guiding, feeding, and protecting. We can also envision discipline, in the sense of holding the body closely to the teachings of Christ, and reproving those who deviated. (1 Peter 5:1-3)

1 Peter 5:1 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: 2 Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;

Their leadership was to be given away free, and not for "dishonest gain." Dishonest gain was understood to mean a charging of the body of Christ for the things being taught and ministered, as was the case with roving Judaizing teachers. Paul confronted their errors, arrogance, and entitlements, in Galatians and 2 Corinthians. It appears it was their approach that all the more urged Paul to minister with no requirement of payment. (1 Peter 5:1-3). This does not mean they were not to receive financial and material blessings, but simply that they were not to require it or pressure the body for it.

Rather than appear as bosses, or those "in charge," they were to serve as examples to the body. Nothing, that would in any way appear to the body as "lording it over them," was to

be manifest from an Elder. (1 Peter 5:1-3). If just this principle, of non-hierarchical leadership, had been maintained in the Church, we would never have seen an institutional Church develop. This principle, as expressed by Jesus in Matthew 20, and here by Peter, was universally violated by the leadership of the Church, after the death of the Apostles, and has continued in violation to this day. Virtually every single Pastor and Elder in the institutional Church, whether they admit it or not, in operating in hierarchical authority, have violated this clear word from Peter. This is not to say that all leadership in the modern Church is accurately defined as “abusive,” but it is clear how God intended leadership to function, and much reformation is needed.

14. In the book of Revelation we see the Elders as those distinctive in their spiritual authority and worship. As they handled their spiritual authority well on earth, they were given distinction in heaven, as those who served the Lord for all eternity.

I believe the book of Revelation’s strongest testimony, about the nature of true Elders, is their singular focus on Jesus. When they get to heaven, because on earth they were not building their own kingdoms, promoting their own will, filled with human ambitions, and self exalting, but rather, were focused on the centrality of Christ, worshipped Him, honored Him, lead the body to Him and His Lordship, etc., they will spend eternity focused on Him.

If the Elders of the Churches do not manifest this sort of focus on Christ, and do anything that distracts the body from Jesus, then we can know their Eldership is about something other than Jesus, and is thereby invalid.

We live in a day, where the Lord is calling His people out of the institutional Church, in large numbers, and as such there is a general disillusionment with all forms of leadership in the Church. Terms such as pastor, shepherd, elder, and bishop, have negative stigmas attached to them, and for this reason there has been little emphasis in the House Church on officially setting in elders/overseers in the body. As time goes by, and healing takes place, it will become important for the body to return to recognize leadership roles, with all that is attached to them.

It is a blessing from God, to have godly leaders, gifted in wisdom and spiritual insight. Without them the body will go astray. This is the clear teaching of the New Testament, and we will do well to honor the Lord in this important area of body life.