

Response to Strauch and Piper presentation on Biblical Eldership

by Alex Chediak

“To our minds, the Scripture seems very explicit as to how this Church should be ordered. We believe that every Church member should have equal rights and privileges; that there is no power in Church officers to execute anything unless they have the full authorization of the members of the Church. We believe, however, that the Church should choose its pastor, and having chosen him, that they should love him and respect him for his work's sake; that with him should be associated the deacons of the Church to take the oversight of pecuniary matters; and the elders of the Church to assist in all the works of the pastorate in the fear of God, being overseers of the flock. Such a Church we believe to be scripturally ordered; and if it abide in the faith, rooted, and grounded, and settled, such a Church may expect the benediction of heaven, and so it shall become the pillar and ground of the truth.” --C. H. Spurgeon, "The Church Conservative and Aggressive," Metropolitan Tabernacle Pulpit, volume 7, pp. 658-659.

Practical Theology

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The New Testament describes the roles and qualifications of elders¹ and instructs churches to (a) be governed by a plurality of elders, (b) recognize that some elders are to be especially set apart for preaching and teaching, and (c) acknowledge that ultimate authority, under Christ, resides in the membership of a local church.

God gives elders to local churches to shepherd the flock of God in their midst, for teaching and exercising oversight—not under compulsion, but willingly; not for financial gain, but for joy; not in a domineering manner, but by a humble, tender demeanor. Such men are eager to impart not only God’s word, but their own lives also. These elders must be *qualified* men – men who display a contagious affection for Christ, who demonstrate spiritual maturity and an exemplary level of godliness, and whose stewardship of time, money, and family reflect the eternal priorities of God’s kingdom. In addition, qualified men are *gifted teachers* of God’s word, so that those influenced are nourished by a healthy diet of the whole counsel of God—made practical and accessible for them in personal relationships and small group settings, as well as in the larger, weekly congregational gatherings. Each elder must be *male*, so that leadership in the household of faith reflects God’s design for individual marriages and families.

The responsibilities of elders are delineated in Scripture as “ruling/oversight” and “teaching/preaching.” I Timothy 5:17 notes that elders who *rule* well are to receive double-honor, especially those who labor in *preaching and teaching*. I Tim. 3:4-5 (“manage”), I Peter 5:2 (“shepherd”), I Thes. 5:12 (“over you”), and Heb. 13:17 (“leaders”) all speak to oversight. Ephesians 4:11-12 brackets “pastors and teachers” into one office, I Tim. 3:2 notes that overseers must be apt to teach, and Titus 1:9 complements I Tim. 5:17 in referring to teaching/preaching.

¹ There are several Greek words variously translated pastor, elder, presbyter, and overseer with no semantic difference—they refer to the same office in the New Testament.

We see a *plurality* of elders throughout the New Testament—in Jerusalem (Acts 15:2), in Ephesus (Acts 20:17), in Crete (Titus 1:5), and in the churches Paul founded in general (Acts 14:23). Peter and James also speak of elders in the plural in their letters (I Pet 1:1; 5:1 and James 1:1; 5:14). But Paul’s recognition that there would be elders who “especially” labor in preaching and teaching says, at least, that not all elders need to labor equally in preaching and teaching. Indeed, several arguments for a “first among equals” among a plurality of elders can be made. Firstly, I Tim. 5:18 gives the context of the “especially” clause at the end of verse 17: Paul anticipates that financial remuneration would be appropriate for some (cf. I Corinthians 9:3-11). Secondly, many churches cannot afford to financially support more than one man. It makes sense that a particular man would be selected for his preaching and teaching gifts, and that his call to a particular church might legitimately be recognized by the provision of monetary compensation. In larger churches, having one main preacher, particularly recognized for his gifts, helps bolster unity and vision among the congregation as seasons of expansion or crisis inevitably arise. Additional pastors are freed to give oversight to increasingly burdensome areas of ministry (missions, child discipleship, adult education, small groups) for which they may be especially gifted. Paul’s letters to Timothy and Titus suggest that each man held “first among equals” roles at Ephesus (I Tim. 1:3; Acts 20:31) and Crete (Titus 1:5), respectively.

While a plurality of elders and a “first among equals” bear a special leadership role, the New Testament places the final authority, under Christ, of any local church in the congregation itself. The final step in the accountability process Jesus outlined in Matt. 18:15-17 is to bring the matter to the ἐκκλησίᾳ —the church. This Greek term occurs 114 times in the New Testament and almost always in a context that suggests it means either the universal or local church, not a particular elder board or ecclesiastical body. In Acts 6:1-5 we see the apostles also

acknowledging congregational authority. There was a problem with food distribution in the Jerusalem church in that some widows were being neglected. The apostles propose a solution: pick out from among you seven men who exhibit certain qualifications. While the apostles both set the criteria and did the appointing, “the full number of disciples” (vs. 2) put forth the candidates. In I Cor. 5:4-5 Paul exhorts the *whole assembly* to hand a man over to Satan for persistent, blatant, publicly shameful sin. In II Cor. 2:6 we’re told, “the punishment *by the majority* is enough.” The latter is a clear reference to a congregational deliberation (no doubt led by elders) that resulted in a judgment being rendered.

There is a glorious harmony between congregationalism and elder-led governance with a “first among equals.” The “lead elder” is blessed by the wisdom of his fellow elders, who invaluablely sharpen his (and each other’s) gifts. Personally, their involvement guards him from pride and self-sufficiency; professionally, their input refines his vision for the church. Likewise, congregationalism recognizes that a good pastor (and godly elders) inevitably will cultivate godly and discerning church members. Elders lead not by coercion, but by humbly persuading their congregations from the Scriptures regarding the truthfulness of their doctrines and the suitability of their ministry plans (e.g., budget increases, major staff changes). Congregations should generally love, trust, and respect their leaders, and leaders should patiently teach their people so that the church can move forward *together* into the opportunities God grants, with every member empowered to serve wholeheartedly as the church’s impact expands into a community and around the world through foreign missions and partnerships. A healthy church displays, in ever-increasing measure, God-glorifying unity and member-to-member edification throughout its corporate community. Both the leadership and the membership play a vital role (I Cor. 12:12-26), and unbelievers who visit sense the manifest blessing of God.