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PLURALITY OF ELDER LEADERSHIP VERSUS ONE-MAN
AUTHORITY IN A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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PLURALITY OF ELDER LEADERSHIP VERSUS ONE-MAN
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To my beloved wife Kathleen Jean Niemeyer

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PREFACE

I have been blessed to have been a part of several Christ-centered churches, from my early life to the present. God called me to Himself when I was a child, and He used the church to love, protect, teach, correct, and mature me in the faith. This project is my effort to give back love and scriptural insight, for the health and effectiveness of the church for the gospel, and her mission to make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and the Son and the Holy Spirit.

I express my gratitude to The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary for being a solid and stable rock for Christ in the rapidly moving stream of culture, and for holding fast to the inerrancy of God's Word and the faithful teaching of its truths. My life has been truly impacted for Christ. Also, my gratitude to Dr. Gregg R. Allison for his writings, his teaching, and his guidance for this project. Finally, I extend my love and gratitude to my beloved wife, Kathy, who has encouraged me in my study at Southern, and who has endured many lonely hours as I have been apart from her, working in my office.

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CHAPTER 1
INTRODUCTION

Opening Statement

Many, if not most, evangelical churches, including the majority of Southern Baptist Convention (SBC) churches, have a man with a title of Senior Pastor who is the primary preaching and teaching elder in the church.

Typically, this same man also leads a hierarchical church pastoral and staff organization for the church to conduct the various church ministries and administrative functions. For the remainder of this project, I will refer to such a Senior Pastor role as the “CEO-Pastor.” In the majority of churches with a position entitled “Senior Pastor,” this kind of CEO-Pastor polity is exercised, even though this model of church leadership is not found in the New Testament.

Thesis Statement

My thesis is that churches should be led, taught, and governed by a plurality of elders, leading the church as a group without a defined single-man authority over them. This position will be grounded in the biblical witness, accompanied by an explanation of the practical considerations of following or not following the scriptural model. I will argue that the preaching and large group teaching roles in an evangelical Christ-centered church should be filled by a group, not just one man, with this group selected from the larger body of elders, who are devoted to preaching and teaching. I will also argue that the other range of church ministries should be led by the rest of the elders, working through deacons and other church staff, who should teach, shepherd, and provide administrative leadership and oversight for these ministries. Together, those elders who

preach and those who lead ministries should lead as a plurality without a formal authoritative head to whom the rest of the elders are accountable.

Discussion of Content

When the decision-making function of the church (elders, deacons, or congregation) calls a gifted man to be the primary preacher and teacher and also asks him to lead the entire staff, this requires one man to exercise a very broad array of spiritual and practical gifts. Individuals who are called to the ministry seldom possess such a breadth of developed gifting and proven competency in sufficient measure. As the church grows, the CEO-Pastor will inevitably need to concentrate on one of these areas of responsibility and as a result, will either delegate or compromise devotion to the other. The spiritual gifting and requisite relational wisdom, organizational skills, and available time is distinctly different for these two callings and roles in the church. Furthermore, the Scripture speaks of a plurality of elders who together lead the church, preach, and teach the church without ever referring to a defined leader of the elder group.

The clear inference and pattern is that a godly division of teaching and leadership roles within this elder plurality is the biblical way to carry out these key responsibilities. Asking too much of one man risks burnout of his energy and passion for the role, can often lead to an unrighteous abuse of power and control in the church, and also denies key spiritual leadership roles to other gifted elders of the church. More importantly, however, the CEO-Pastor role is not found in the many references to church leadership in the New Testament.

Methodology

I will address three areas in support of this thesis and will develop, compare, and contrast leadership perspectives from these areas. First, I will review church history to provide a chronology of the arguments and church traditions for single-man control of

a New Testament church. This history will explain the roots of this form of CEO-Pastor hierarchical government.

Second, I will provide an exegetical analysis of Scripture to expound upon the biblical teaching, wisdom, and patterns for church leadership and governance in the New Testament. In doing this, I will address the organizational concepts reviewed in the first historical section of this paper and comment on the scriptural underpinnings, if any, for these concepts. *Sola Scriptura* will be the basis of this exegetical analysis and will provide the proof of this thesis, not rational human arguments, reasoning, or desired outcomes. Direct commands, synthesized doctrines, and clear patterns in Scripture will comprise the exegetical sections in the defense of this thesis. As part of this analysis, I will bring in the views of noted theologians who have studied and written about this matter.

Third, even though the exegetical content of this project will seek to defend the argument of this thesis from God's Word alone, I will review the practical limitations to single-man authority in church leadership. I will explore the spiritual weight and the unshared burdens placed upon a single man who is expected to perform both theologically rich preaching and also provide effective staff leadership within a church. I will briefly review the problems that may result from placing too much burden upon, or yielding too much authority to, one individual. For this last area, I will consult both Christian and secular literature regarding the fundamentals of how men should effectively exercise leadership in a New Testament church through either: (a) preaching and teaching; (b) leading organized followers to achieve a particular mission.

Finally, I will provide concluding remarks in support of this thesis.

CHAPTER 2

HISTORY OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Opening Questions

For those who look carefully into God’s Word seeking to find a form of church government similar to many evangelical churches today, several questions naturally arise. “How did the early church’s local leadership function?” “Why do I not find today’s form of government in the New Testament and why did it change?” “When did the change to today’s form occur?” “Should today’s church consider following the biblical pattern for government?” The answer is that most current forms of church government are not found in Scripture but have evolved over the millennia starting from a departure from the model and patterns that are clear from God’s Word.

Patristic Era

For help in understanding how the churches in the first and second centuries functioned, and when a shift in the form of government may have taken place, we look first to Scripture and the epistles of Paul to early local churches and groups of churches. We can also find information in the writings of some of the early church fathers, such as Polycarp and Ignatius.

Philippian Church

In roughly AD 60–62, Paul addresses his letter to the Philippians with a greeting that acknowledges two groups, overseers and deacons, all of whom are plural:

“Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (Phil 1:1).¹

Paul’s letter is written directly to the Philippian believers, not to the leaders of the church. These leaders do not function as priests or as the mediators of God’s Word or of Paul’s letters. This provides a strong implication that the overseers and deacons in the Philippian church are a definable part of the church, but not above or outside of it. Within the letter, there is particular mention of Epaphroditus, who was entrusted with the gift for Paul from the church (Phil 4:18). Paul had a very high opinion of Epaphroditus, referring to him as, “my brother, fellow worker . . . fellow soldier, and messenger.” He shared Paul’s spiritual life, labors, and dangers and willingly took the role of a servant to assist Paul. All of this points to Epaphroditus belonging to the group of overseers and deacons in the Philippian church. Later in the epistle, those referred to as *episkopos* or *presbyteros* seem to have the role of preaching, teaching, and shepherding (1 Tim 5:17; Titus 1:9; 1 Pet 5:2). Yet neither Epaphroditus nor any other leader in this church is mentioned or recognized by Paul as its singular head. The opposite is true. In the opening greeting, as Paul refers to two distinct roles in the Philippian church, he refers to them in plurality, not one leader standing at the head of the church with the other leaders being his followers.²

The uniform pattern in the first-century church included only two offices, that of bishop, or elder, and deacon. This was the pattern for much of the next century as well. The historian Edward Gibbon has mentioned in his book that the leaders of the early church were synonymously named bishops or elders or presbyters in the beginning of the church. It was not until the second century that there was a gradual movement away from the clear scriptural description of church offices. This was the beginning of the corruption

¹ Unless otherwise noted, all Bible quotations come from the NASB 1995 Translation.

² Andrew M. Selby, “Bishops, Elders, and Deacons in the Philippian Church: Evidence of Plurality from Paul and Polycarp,” *Perspectives in Religious Studies* 39, no. 1 (2012): 84.

of church leadership.³ This movement will be described in the next section about Ignatius and the first ruling bishop.

Even though the Scripture indicates that elders are plural in a New Testament church, there is no direct scriptural command to have more than one elder in a church. Historically, a church could have as many elders as needed, with men who met the scriptural qualifications for the office. Rex Koivisto has written about how the first-century church operated and how they conducted their worship gatherings. He has noted that the early church met at two different levels for worship.⁴ In some instances, the church would meet in large collective gatherings, during which one elder would teach and preach and the other elders of the collective church would perform other leadership and shepherding tasks. On other occasions, the church would meet in small home-groups. In these instances, there would be one elder per gathering. Each smaller congregation would probably have only one elder whom they would recognize and support as their spiritual leader.

Ignatius and the First Ruling Bishop

While the first teachings of biblical church offices of elder and deacon appear in the epistles to Timothy and Titus, it is the writings of an early church father that introduced a formalized and modified structure of these biblical offices. In the second century, a highly revered early church teacher, Ignatius of Antioch, began to include comments about church polity in his epistles to various other church leaders.⁵ These writings include his letters to the Ephesians, Magnesians, Trallians, Philadelphians, and Smyrnaeans. Scholars date these letters around the year AD 108 during the reign of the

³ Edward Gibbon, *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire* (1910; repr., Everyman's Library, 2010), 2:419.

⁴ Rex A. Koivisto, *One Lord, One Faith: A Theology for Cross-Denominational Renewal*, 2nd ed. (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2009), 25.

⁵ Selby, "Bishops, Elders, and Deacons," 79.

Roman emperor, Trajan. All were written within a few years of his martyrdom in AD 110. In another of his letters, this one to Polycarp, Ignatius seems to introduce or support the concept that one man was to be elevated from office of elder or bishop, or *presbuteros* or *episkopos*. According to Ignatius, this one man was to be placed above the other elders and alone carry the title of bishop. In Ignatius's writings, bishop was now singular in a church, not plural, and the office was distinctly different and superior to the office of elder.

Until this time, these two Greek words were held to mean the same office; *presbuteros* referring to the function of the office, and *episkopos* referring to the titular position of the office. The Scripture uses these two words interchangeably to describe the same office. Ignatius, however, drew a distinction. In Chapter VI of his letter to Polycarp, Ignatius states, "Pay attention to the bishop so that God will pay attention to you. I give my life as a sacrifice (poor as it is) for those who are obedient to the bishop, the presbyters, and the deacons."⁶ Ignatius clearly is speaking about his concept of three distinct offices, each with different roles in the church.⁷ The source of, and motivation for, Ignatius's ecclesiological view of single-man authority in a church is unknown. Perhaps he provided it to encourage clear and distinct leadership for churches that were under duress during that time in history. Nonetheless, Ignatius's influence on the form of church government was great, extending even to our time.

Polycarp, however, who in many ways was closer in age and actual contact to the apostolic era than Ignatius, did not take up Ignatius's concept of elders and bishops when he wrote to the church in Philippi. Ignatius had asked Polycarp to communicate to

⁶ Ignatius, "To Polycarp," in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 119.

⁷ J. H. Srawley, *The Epistles of St. Ignatius* (London: Society for Promoting Christian Knowledge, 1900).

various churches on his behalf due to his own inability to do so.⁸ However, the concept of a ruling bishop did not find its way into Polycarp's letter.

Polycarp's Letter to the Philippian Church

After Ignatius had written a letter to Polycarp asking him to write letters to various churches, Polycarp did so between AD 115 and AD 138. Polycarp opens his letter with a greeting from himself "and the presbyters with him," making no mention of a separate bishop who ministered above him. There also was no hint that he, himself, was to be addressed as a bishop.⁹ Polycarp addresses several spiritual matters and exhortations in this letter, including in Chapter V, the duties of deacons, youths, and virgins. In Chapter VI, he addresses the duties of presbyters and others.¹⁰ Polycarp finishes his letter commenting on most areas of spiritual leadership and personal virtue that might have been helpful to the church in Philippi. In the entirety of this letter, there is not one mention of the separate office of bishop, nor of any other singular leader who might have been accountable for the spiritual welfare and governance of the church. The reference is only to presbyters (plural) and the congregation as a whole. Polycarp refers to other churches in his letter yet does not refer to the office of bishop. He even mentions the letter from Ignatius asking him to write to the Philippians and provide communication between them and other believers in the region. Again, no mention of the office of bishop which Ignatius was seemingly elevating to a position of significant ecclesiological significance in his epistles.

⁸ Ignatius, "To Polycarp," 120.

⁹ Polycarp, "The Letter of Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, to the Philippians," trans. Massey Hamilton Shepherd Jr., in *Early Christian Fathers*, ed. Cyril C. Richardson, Library of Christian Classics, vol. 1 (Philadelphia: Westminster Press, 1953), 131.

¹⁰ Polycarp, "The Letter of Saint Polycarp, Bishop of Smyrna, to the Philippians," 133–34.

From Polycarp's letter, it is reasonable to conclude that the office of bishop was not yet implanted into the governance of local church bodies such as the one in Philippi. This concept of church leadership, however, would soon become the accepted norm in the early church during the second century, a concept which continues to this current age.¹¹

Medieval Era

Historical Context

The medieval era was a period in Europe that commenced with the fall the Roman Empire, sometime around the fifth century. Historians disagree on the precise dating of the beginning of this period. According to the authors of *Norton Anthology*, "Medieval social theory held that society was made up of three 'estates': the nobility composed of a small hereditary aristocracy . . . the church, whose duty was to look after the spiritual welfare of that body, and everyone else."¹² There was no local civil authority in towns and villages. The church filled this vacuum and became the universal European institution of governance. However, this governance was fragmented, with all the power that was expressed by the church's hierarchy in the hands of local bishops. The church viewed itself as set apart from a hostile world, a group in exile, a spiritual community of believers waiting for the day of deliverance.

As the medieval era developed, the Roman Catholic Church gradually and inexorably extended its reach, its spiritual dominance, and its civil and institutional authority across most of Europe.¹³ It was during the last half of this this medieval period known as the High Middle Ages, from about AD 1000 to AD 1300, that the Roman

¹¹ Selby, "Bishops, Elders, and Deacons," 93.

¹² M. H. Abrams, ed., *The Norton Anthology of English Literature*, 6th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 1993), 1:76 (introduction to the work of Geoffrey Chaucer).

¹³ Martin Puchner, ed., *The Norton Anthology of Western Literature*, 9th ed. (New York: W. W. Norton, 2014), 1:155.

Catholic Church became organized into an elaborate hierarchy. The beginnings of this hierarchy can be traced back to the second century when it was accepted by churches that the separation of elder and bishop was valid. So began the establishment and entrenchment of single-man authority in local church bodies, which ultimately led to centralized hierarchical authority among churches, regions, and finally globally.¹⁴

We will now look at the history of the two arguably most important movements in Christian church government since the early church: the polity of the Roman Catholic Church and the polity of the churches of the Reformation.

Roman Catholic Polity

The structure of the Roman Catholic Church is an indication of how extensive the designs of the human spirit can carry an errant doctrine when the instructions and models given in Scripture are not followed. During the medieval era, the entire religious system was controlled and supervised by the churches. Churches looked after the physical and spiritual welfare of the villages and towns, and most people were members and followers of the church. This kind of social influence and political power resulted in a hierarchical system of leadership, and people within this leadership were placed into various ranks and stations. This system grew from the bishops who were the heads of the respective church bodies. Over time, local bishops were organized into regional and geographical heads. The overall leader of the medieval church was known as the pope, the leader of the largest church in Rome. Cascading downward through the church's organization from the pope were various descending ranks of bishops, priests, monks, and nuns.

Not only was the church highly organized, but those in positions of leadership and authority were trained and conditioned to obey utterly. Their life and physical

¹⁴ Herman Bavinck, *Reformed Dogmatics*, vol. 4, *Holy Spirit, Church, and New Creation*, ed. John Bolt, trans. John Vriend (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2008), 479–81.

appearance were identified by adherence and loyalty to the hierarchy, whose head was the pope. This was the epitome of stratification and separation of fellowship within Christ's body, the church, a model which was completely of man's making, with no warrant in Scripture.¹⁵

Reformation Polity

For those whose faith in Christ was based solely upon Scripture, the Reformation was the greatest revolution in history against established human power. Essentially a revolt against the Roman Catholic Church as the global institution of religious authority, knowledge, interpretation and doctrine, the Reformation brought attention back to the Scriptures alone, and salvation of mankind through faith in Christ alone, by grace alone. The contention of Martin Luther and other Reformers was that the Roman Catholic Church and its elaborate system of pope, bishops, and priests, was not God's way of extending saving grace. Salvation and access to God was through faith in Christ, not the church, and available directly to every human soul. In Christ, the believer had direct access to God, empowered by the Holy Spirit. The priest was not only unnecessary, but unbiblical. Man can hear directly from God directly through His Word and respond in saving faith to the call of His Holy Spirit.

Under the extensive polity of the Roman Catholic Church, the place of the average Christian was lost, with respect to their participation in the body of Christ, the church. Local church leaders decided all matters. Bishops soon usurped the powers and prerogatives of the local churches. Finally, the pope grew to usurp the powers and prerogatives of the bishops. In this oppressive culture, the average believer was powerless, totally dependent upon a large, formal pyramid of church authority.¹⁶

¹⁵ "Medieval Church Hierarchy," Hierarchy Structure, May 21, 2015, <https://www.hierarchystructure.com/medieval-church-hierarchy/>.

¹⁶ Robert William Dale, *History of English Congregationalism*, 2nd ed. (London: Hodder and Stoughton, 1907), 34–46.

By contrast, the priesthood of the believer was one of the fundamental principles of the Reformation and its understanding of the church and its function. Calvin mentions this biblical concept several times in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*.¹⁷ This doctrine teaches that all believers in Christ have equal access to God, who is the only High Priest; believers need no earthly priest as mediator between themselves and God. Most scholars agree that the priesthood of the believer was clearly understood by the early church as a biblical teaching and was accepted and uncontested. The early church existed as a pluralistic movement rather than a well-organized structure. However, this teaching and key truth of church life and polity has not been emphasized through the subsequent centuries, and it has become buried in church tradition and other forms of man-devised church government.¹⁸

The Anabaptists and Quakers were sects that were the result of the Reformation, not only in doctrine but in church government. These churches taught against any form of church government and emphasized the inner light and guidance of the Holy Spirit to direct the members of the congregation. Their position was perhaps an extreme overreaction to the tyranny of the State and of the Roman Catholic Church.¹⁹

Two other prominent views of church polity resulted from the Reformation, both of which were centered in England. The Presbyterian form of government was developed and promoted by a disciple of John Calvin; a man named John Knox (1514–1572). Knox’s position is stated as, “The church is to be governed and directed by assemblies of officeholders, pastors, and elders chosen to provide the representation for the church as a whole.” A regional church assembly was called a presbytery and each

¹⁷ John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, trans. Henry Beveridge (Peabody, MA: Hendrickson, 2008), 4.18.17; 4.19.25.

¹⁸ W. A. Dreyer, “The Priesthood of Believers: The Forgotten Legacy of the Reformation,” *HTS Theological Studies* 76, no. 4 (2020): 1.

¹⁹ Nicholas J. Mattei, “Plural Elder Led Congregationalism,” *Defend Truth*, September 9, 2021, <https://www.defendtruth.org/post/plural-elder-led-congregationalism>.

presbytery had charge over a region of local churches. Each church voluntarily submitted itself to the authority of the presbytery.

The other prominent view was Congregationalism or Independency. These churches held not only that the State had no authority over a local church, but that there should be no governing church body with authority over local congregations. This was the position of the Particular Baptists, and their views were taught in the 1689 London Confession of Faith. This document taught a limited form of rule by elders, with a slightly different form called “elder-led Congregationalism.”²⁰ Elders were given the gifts and graces by Christ to perform the duties of the office of elder and the members of the local church recognized and appointed these men to that position. Their ultimate power and authority were limited by the Word of God, to include worship, teaching, shepherding, business meetings, church discipline, and the general direction of the church.²¹

Modern Era

Historical Context

All the Protestant forms of church government in England that were birthed by the Reformation soon came to America. During the seventeenth century and following, Anabaptists, Quakers, Congregationalists, Presbyterians, and Particular Baptists all found their roots in the New World having been transplanted from England. Their form of governance was an important part of their Christian beliefs and was based on their doctrine of the church from Scripture.

²⁰ Bart Barber, “Of Pastors and Presbyters,” SBC Voices, March 5, 2014, <https://sbcvoices.com/of-pastors-and-presbyters/>.

²¹ Mattei, “Plural Elder Led Congregationalism.”

Early America

A frequently used foundational scriptural text for those in early America who contended for a single pastor to lead a church is found in the book of Revelation. In his book, *Systematic Theology*, published in 1907, Augustus Hopkins Strong explained this position based on Revelation 2:1, which states, “To the angel of the church in Ephesus write: The One who holds the seven stars in His right hand, the One who walks among the seven golden lampstands, says.” Strong and other theologians of his day contended that the “angel of the church in Ephesus” refers to a solo pastor, the leader and head of the church. In his *Systematic Theology*, Strong writes,

In certain of the New Testament churches there appears to have been a plurality of elders (Acts 20:17; Phil. 1:1; Titus. 1:5). There is, however, no evidence that the number of elders was uniform, or that the plurality which frequently existed was due to any other cause than the size of the churches for which these elders cared. . . . So, too, in Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18 and 3:1, 7, 14, “the angel of the church” is best interpreted as meaning the pastor of the church; and, if this be correct, it is clear that each church had, not many pastors, but one.²²

Many congregations and their senior pastors have used Strong’s argument for support for a single head of a local body of believers. An analysis of Strong’s view will be included in the exegetical section of this thesis document.

Presbyterian Church in America

The Presbyterian form of church government is perhaps the most systematic of the Protestant denominations. The church was formed in the United States of America in 1788. Today, it is best represented in evangelical circles by the Presbyterian Church in America (PCA). The PCA is an evangelical denomination in the Reformed, Calvinistic tradition. The ecclesiology of the church is documented in the church’s *Book of Church Order (BCO)* while the theology of the church is formulated in the *Westminster Confession of Faith (WCF)* of 1643–1649. The PCA is guided by the Bible, the

²² Augustus Hopkins Strong, *Systematic Theology in Three Volumes*, vol. 3, *The Doctrine of Salvation* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1909), 916.

constitution of the PCA, the *WCF*, and the *BCO*. All church documents, theology, and practice are subject to, and subordinate to, the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments. The Scripture alone is the inspired and inerrant Word of God.²³

The *BCO* of the PCA summarizes the offices within the church. Chapter 7.2 of the *BCO* reads as follows:

The ordinary and perpetual classes of office in the Church are elders and deacons. Within the class of elder are the two orders of teaching elders and ruling elders. The elders jointly have the government and spiritual oversight of the Church, including teaching. Only those elders who are specially gifted, called and trained by God to preach may serve as teaching elders. The office of deacon is not one of rule, but rather of service both to the physical and spiritual needs of the people. In accord with Scripture, these offices are open to men only.²⁴

The PCA has several distinctives incorporated into their form of government. It is biblical because it is based on scriptural directives and principles drawn from both the Old Testament and the New Testament. Both the government and the theology of the PCA are based on the entire Bible. The PCA is also representative because the people choose their own spiritual leaders to govern the church. Members and officers are chosen by the congregation, and the church practices mutual accountability and discipline through representative government. Finally, the PCA is connectional because the local churches see themselves as part of the larger church, the complete body of Christ. All local churches hold to a common, binding, doctrinal, and confessional standard of the Reformed faith, the *WCF*. All churches also practice mutual accountability and discipline, with cooperative ministry. The PCA believes that local churches, no matter their size, do not minister best alone, but in cooperation with the larger church.

²³ Presbyterian Church in the U.S., preface to *The Book of Church Order of the Presbyterian Church in the United States: Adopted 1879* (St. Louis: Legare Street Press, 2022).

²⁴ Presbyterian Church in the U. S., *The Book of Church Order*, 7.2.

Collectively, PCA churches work together to carry out the Great Commission that Christ gave to the church.²⁵

Southern Baptist Convention

Since the beginnings of the SBC in 1845, the consistent polity in the convention has been for a Baptist church to have only two church offices. These offices are pastors and deacons. Although in early America, Baptist churches sometimes had ruling elders, there was no discussion of this office after 1845. This is evidenced by church constitutions, SBC association records, and church manuals and books on the distinctive practices and confessional documents of the SBC churches.²⁶ The SBC has consistently recognized that the terms “elder” and “pastor” refer to the same man and to the same office. This man is typically the sole leader of the church, with deacons filling their scriptural serving role, or in some cases, serving the pastor with spiritual advice and counsel.

The first president of the SBC was William Buelin Johnson. Johnson did have elders in his church, but he used the term “overseers” for those who performed shepherding and ministerial duties. Johnson asked his elders to regulate the affairs of the church by giving discipline, advice, and admonitions to the congregants. The elders also would teach Scripture and give exhortations. Others would lead the Sunday school program, while others would preach the gospel. Johnson saw elders as being plural in a New Testament church, but he saw a distinction between the ruling ministers of the church and laymen.²⁷ In theory, a layman could be an elder, but in practice, Johnson

²⁵ L. Roy Taylor, “The Uniqueness of PCA Polity,” Docslib, accessed April 5, 2023, <https://docslib.org/doc/4246383/the-uniqueness-of-pca-polity-l-roy-taylor-stated-clerk-pca-church>.

²⁶ Robert Allen Wring, “Elder Rule and Southern Baptist Church Polity,” *Journal for Baptist Theology and Ministry* 3, no. 1 (Spring 2005): 201.

²⁷ William Bullein Johnson, *A Church of Christ, with Her Officers, Laws, Duties, and Form of Government* (Edgefield, SC: W. F. Durisoe, 1844), 15.

argued in favor of only vocational ministers in the office of elder. Johnson's elders were a team of career ministers who had been called into the ministry of preaching, teaching, and shepherding. This is the pattern of the present day, that of a pastor, or rather the CEO-Pastor, and his church staff. According to Johnson, elders are pastors and pastors are elders.²⁸

Baptist churches, and specifically SBC churches, prize their autonomy from each other and from the SBC itself. Every local church understands and is affirmed by the SBC to be complete in its ministry, convictions, principles, membership, and governance.²⁹ This includes the polity of the church, whether the church uses elders, and how their role is defined. Given this freedom and autonomy, many SBC churches are moving toward an "elder-led" form of governance. This topic does not appear on the agenda of the annual meetings of the SBC, but this elder-led movement has been underway for at least the past ten years. The congregational form of church government has held sway over SBC life for a century and a half, but churches are strongly considering the pluralism of the biblical model and the leadership that should be coming from elders. Inconsistencies between what SBC churches have been saying about the office of deacon and what the deacons actually have been doing in their role is part of the energy behind the movement. Other significant factors are voices such as Mark Dever, whose IX Marks concept of polity is still baptistic, yet has clearly moved toward the presbyterian system.³⁰ There is a strong correlation between the revival of the Reformed theology of Calvinism, the soteriology of a number of well-known Presbyterian or presbyterial voices such as John Frame, John Piper, and Wayne Grudem, and the

²⁸ Wring, "Elder Rule and Southern Baptist Church Polity," 203.

²⁹ R. Albert Mohler Jr., "Baptist Polity and the Integrity of the Southern Baptist Convention," *Albert Mohler* (blog), June 19, 2014, <https://albertmohler.com/2014/06/19/baptist-polity-and-the-integrity-of-the-southern-baptist-convention>.

³⁰ Barber, "Of Pastors and Presbyters."

ecclesiology of pluralism that is found everywhere in Scripture. While a strict adherence to Scripture clarifies one's doctrines of grace, that same adherence also leads to a refreshed understanding of the most biblical form of church government. Although for many Baptist churches the vector of change is pointed in the direction of the Presbyterian model, at this point in history, the majority of SBC churches still follow the traditional SBC model of governance.³¹

View of Selected Authors

In recent years, several authors have taken up the subject of church leadership. These literary works are based primarily on scriptural teaching, with some practical arguments, human reasoning, and historical traditions also finding footholds in the overall formation of polity. Most authors find the Scripture to be sufficiently clear in the pattern and model of church leadership. Others, however, find the area unclear enough so as to permit much broader latitude.

Alexander Strauch writes in his book, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, "According to the New Testament concept of eldership, elders lead the church, teach and preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers and exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine."³² Elders also shepherd the flock, visit the sick and pray, and conduct church discipline when necessary. Elders are to primarily be the shepherds, pastors and leaders of a flock, not corporate executives, CEOs, or advisors to the lead pastor. A biblical elder is not a modern board elder who simply attends monthly elder meetings, reviews a dashboard of key church metrics, and opines on various matters. A biblical elder must be able to teach (1 Tim 3:2), protect the doctrines of the church, and be visible in their ministry.

³¹ Barber, "Of Pastors and Presbyters."

³² Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 15.

Elders are also called overseers in the Bible. They supervise, lead, and manage the affairs of the church. They do not simply provide general direction, but actively lead the ministries of the church. They are to do this by employing plurality of leadership. Jesus did not appoint one man to lead His church. He personally appointed and trained His disciples, the twelve men with whom He spent many years. Jesus gave the concept of shared leadership to His new church at Pentecost.³³ According to Strauch, the New Testament model of an elder structure of government is a collective form of leadership. In this concept, each elder shares the position, responsibility, and authority of the office.³⁴ In a New Testament church, a lone leader atop an organizational pyramid is abnormal and corrupting. Any person in such a position no longer has colleagues, only subordinates. This is the CEO-Pastor spoken of earlier, and Strauch does not find even a hint of this position anywhere in Scripture. The concept of a pastor who unilaterally controls the church's elder group and also leads the entire staff organization is someone who can never truly become a part of the congregation; this position is utterly unscriptural.³⁵

Author J. R. Miller has written in his book, *Elders Lead a Healthy Family*, that although the Scripture is not absolutely clear on the form of church government and models of ministry are time and culturally specific, leading with a plurality of elders is timeless and cross-cultural. Beginning in the Old Testament synagogues, elders ruled the people with a plurality. But unlike the synagogue elder, church elders in the New Testament are not chosen based on their social status, family position, political connections, or material wealth. The church must reject the norms of the culture and follow the instructions from God's Word. The apostles taught that elders who lead and

³³ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 35.

³⁴ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 39.

³⁵ Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, 43.

teach a church should be chosen based on their moral character, their ability to teach, their sound leadership of their wives and families, and their desire to shepherd the flock of Christ.³⁶ These qualifications are listed in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9.

Based on several proofs, Miller writes that the term “elder” is also synonymous with “overseer,” “bishop,” and “pastor.” Scriptural proofs for his position will be presented later in this paper, but for now, the assumption will be that these terms describe the same office in the church. Elders are worthy of honor, and elders who devote themselves to preaching and teaching are worthy of double honor, an even higher regard from the church than for those elders who rule well.³⁷

Miller also reminds us that elders are always addressed in the New Testament as a plurality, and never as individuals. Biblical eldership is a Spirit-led demonstration of peacemaking, love, mutual respect, and collaboration. The definition of the “wisdom from above” in the book of James best describes true elder wisdom, working in a plurality: “But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, reasonable, full of mercy and good fruits, unwavering, without hypocrisy. And the seed whose fruit is righteousness is sown in peace by those who make peace” (Jas 3:17–18).

Finally, Miller states that no distinction either in form, language or theory can be found between clergy and laity in the New Testament. There is no hierarchical structure of any kind, either between Christian brothers and sisters who are vocational or not, or who are in leadership or not. Elders are servants of the Lord and of the church. They are shepherds and teachers, and lead by caring and providing instruction for the flock. Each elder is responsible for teaching and mentoring the next generation of elders and leaders.³⁸

³⁶ J. R. Miller, *Elders Lead a Healthy Family: Shared Leadership for a Vibrant Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 10.

³⁷ Miller, *Elders Lead a Healthy Family*, 14.

³⁸ Miller, *Elders Lead a Healthy Family*, 100.

In *The Plurality Principle*, Dave Harvey states, “The New Testament terms for pastor, overseer, or elder are never used to talk about a single leader ruling or governing the church alone. Instead, they are used to reference plural leadership.”³⁹ Harvey still makes the case, however, for a Senior Pastor as a clear “first among equals” relative to the rest of the elders. Harvey’s definition of “plurality” includes a lead or Senior Pastor that has authority over the rest of the elders. Presumably, this Senior Pastor also leads the entire church staff, not just the group of elders. His case is built on his personal reasoning which includes protection and expansion of the ministry, avoiding churches within a church, and offering an elder with the right gifting to have a clear leadership role.

Gene Getz also presents a case for the Senior Pastor, or CEO-Pastor. In his otherwise very biblically-based book, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church*, Getz makes this opening statement in chapter 26 about the need for a primary leader: “It may be surprising to learn that the biblical story of local church leadership offers little data to make the specific observation that someone must function as the primary leader.”⁴⁰ Getz proceeds to make the case, however, that because Peter was clearly the leader of the disciples, this creates the example for elders in a New Testament church. Getz argues that since the disciples had Peter as a leader, then New Testament groups of elders also should have a clearly defined leader. Getz also maintains that just because Ignatius may have been in error when he separated the office of bishop from elder and placed a single bishop in charge of a local church, this action in the second century does not eliminate the need for a primary leader. The model of Peter, as Getz perceives Peter’s position with the other disciples, is the sole basis for Getz’s position

³⁹ Dave Harvey, *The Plurality Principle: How to Build and Maintain a Thriving Church Leadership Team* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2021), 27.

⁴⁰ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God’s Plan for Leading the Church, A Biblical, Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Chicago: Moody, 2003), 217.

that “shepherds need a shepherd,” and that the role of the CEO-Pastor is still warranted.⁴¹ Getz offers no other biblical argument.

John Frame offers that there are several forms of church government that are biblical. In *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief*, Frame summarizes the forms of protestant church government as Episcopalian, Presbyterian, and Congregational. Episcopal churches are under the authority of one man, the bishop. Presbyterian churches elect elders who lead with plurality, and each local church belongs to a larger collection of churches with loose authority over all the member churches. Congregational churches often found in the Baptist denomination have no collectively defined form of government, and each church is independent from any association or other church’s authority. The local governing body may be elders or deacons, typically with a lead pastor, or CEO-Pastor running the entire church.⁴²

Wayne Grudem is much clearer and opinionated on this topic of government. In his *Systematic Theology*, Grudem states that there is a quite consistent pattern of a plurality of elders in New Testament churches.⁴³ No passage suggests that any church, even the smallest mentioned, had only one elder. In the New Testament, there is not a diversity of forms of government, but a unified and consistent pattern of multiple, pluralistic elder leadership. Like Frame, Grudem views the biblical words for elder, bishop, overseer, and even pastor to be synonymous.⁴⁴ Grudem does present views which support the outgrowth of the separate office of bishop by the early church, and that the office has been beneficial to the church through the ages and should be preserved. But soon thereafter, Grudem points out that the word for bishop is clearly synonymous with

⁴¹ Getz, *Elders and Leaders*, chap. 26, “The Need for a Primary Leader” (pp. 217–26).

⁴² John M. Frame, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Christian Belief* (Phillipsburg, NJ: P & R, 2013), 1028.

⁴³ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*, 2nd ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2020), 1123.

⁴⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1136.

elder in the New Testament and is always mentioned in the plural form. Jesus did not leave any particular apostle in charge of the others when He ascended into heaven, and there is no mention whatsoever of even an un-named person holding such a position. Authority was equal among the apostles and is strongly implied in Scripture that authority is to be equal among a group of elders or bishops.⁴⁵

While Grudem is in favor of a pluralistic elder rule with no formal single-man authority in the local church, he does write that nowhere in Scripture do elders have collective authority over anything but their own congregations, and certainly not over other churches. While the Presbyterian system seems to have the most biblical form of government within each church, their concept of local churches being subject to a larger body of elders is not found in God's Word.

Regarding Congregational forms of government, Grudem states that the single-elder, or CEO-Pastor form is currently the most common among Baptist churches in the United States. In most of these churches, the pastor is seen as the only elder in the church, with an elected board of deacons that serve the church and give support to the pastor.⁴⁶ This system is often expanded to include more elders or pastors who are on the paid staff of the church. But, as Grudem says, the important feature is that only the vocational staff pastors possess the governing authority in the church, an authority which is not shared by non-staff, or "lay" people in the church. Grudem mentions several contradictions in this style of government, one of which is the question, "How can churches say that the qualifications for elders found in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–7 are commanded for us today, but the system of plural elders found in these very same verses is not commanded, but was required only in that time and in that society?" For Grudem, it is unwise to ignore a clear pattern which was described for each church in the New Testament for which we

⁴⁵ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1144.

⁴⁶ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1140.

have evidence. Grudem’s pivotal question, therefore, is, “Why should we adopt as the norm a pattern of church government which is nowhere found in the New Testament (e.g., single-man control) and reject a pattern everywhere found in the New Testament (e.g., pluralistic elder rule)?”⁴⁷

Gregg Allison is one of the most prominent professors at The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. Allison’s book, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, devotes chapters 7 and 8 to the offices of the church and to various types of church government. In chapter 9, Allison presents the model for church government that of all the various alternatives, is the most biblical pattern for a New Testament church to follow. He refers to his model as a “plural-elder-led, deacon and deaconess-served, congregational church with strong connections.”⁴⁸ Within the church, spiritual leadership is provided by a plurality of elders. There is no CEO-Pastor and no elder with authority over any other elder. Elders are a mix of vocational (staff) pastors and non-vocational (not employed by the church) men, each of whom meet the biblical qualifications for the office. Some of the elders are devoted to preaching and teaching, while others spend most of their time leading various ministries of the church. Deacons and deaconesses serve the church, led by the various elders. Allison makes a strong case for significant connections between churches, even though the episcopalian and presbyterian systems of multiple churches lack biblical support for their very robust and often bureaucratic hierarchies.⁴⁹

Allison has synthesized his preferred model from clear patterns and language found in Scripture. It is not presbyterian, in that it does not include a larger body to which individual local churches are accountable but does follow the Presbyterian model of a

⁴⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1143.

⁴⁸ Gregg R. Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers: The Doctrine of the Church*, Foundations of Evangelical Theology (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2012), 297.

⁴⁹ Allison, *Sojourners and Strangers*, 316.

plurality of elders within each local church. It is not congregational, yet Allison highly recommends that the larger decisions from the elders remain tentative until affirmed by the congregation. There is clearly a biblical warrant for the church's people to agree with directional decisions by their leaders. Finally, Allison's system is biblical in that there is no bishop, or other single-man authority over the church.

Conclusion

There is ample evidence, both in the Scripture and in early church documents, to conclude that the early church was intended to be governed, and actually was governed, by a plurality of elders, and that single-man authority in these early churches was not present. Single-man authority over a church would have been unusual, perhaps even strange and heretical to most Christians at that time.

Just as other deviations from the truth developed in the early churches and were addressed in most of the canonical epistles to the early churches, another small error developed in the second century. Humans always find ways and rationale to stray from God's directives, yet the canon was closed, and no further errors would be addressed by Scripture. By including in his writings that a single man, a bishop, should rule the local elders and the church, Ignatius introduced an error which would grow to monstrous proportions and ultimately consume the culture of the church over the next centuries and millennia. Even Reformation churches retained this error from the Roman Catholic Church, albeit on a much smaller scale. Today, this single-man concept remains in most forms of government in Protestant churches. Gladly, many believers and churches are coming back to the Scripture as the only source of truth and guidance for all matters, including their form of government and leadership within the church.

CHAPTER 3
EXEGETICAL ANALYSIS

Scriptural Basis for Historical Polity

This section will address the preceding historical ecclesiological positions concerning church government from the view of Scripture alone, free from the inventions of personalities, politics, practicality, church tradition, or human reason. God's Word prescribes how His children are to live their lives and please Him with their service, worship, and activities within His church. Too often, we as humans think that because of the surrounding culture or circumstances of the present time, we have a better way and can achieve better outcomes. However, just as in all doctrines of the faith, the Reformed believer must look to the Scripture alone for the answers because to trust in anything less or in anything more amounts to a deviation from God's plan for His church. Scriptural evidence of plurality of church leadership will be analyzed. The scriptural basis, if any, will be addressed for the various historical positions described previously, held by individuals and denominations.

The theologian must come to the Scripture with faith that its words are fully and completely inspired by God and, therefore, is His self-revelation in all matters into which the Scripture delves. Scripture is inerrant, infallible, and true in all that it states. Scripture is sufficient in its wisdom and guidance in matters of human relationships with the Creator and with each other, such as our unique person in the image of God, our standing before God in Christ Jesus, our marriages between a man and a woman, and our conduct in the body of Christ, the church. In all these areas, the Reformed believer looks only to the Scripture for guidance and truth. There should not be an exception for ecclesiology.

In the triage of truth, scriptural doctrines may first be recognized and understood in the most straightforward manner based on direct commands or statements from the Bible. Second, scriptural doctrines may also be reliably synthesized from clear revelation and teaching from multiple passages from God’s Word, such as the doctrine of the Trinity. Third, Scripture often provides clear patterns of thinking or behavior regarding issues facing mankind and the church, even though no clear commands may be found. Finally, if there is insufficient specific guidance about a spiritual matter from the preceding approaches, then the matter should be decided by prayer, and in full alignment with the principles of God’s Word as guided by the Holy Spirit. In all these ways, the theologian seeks understanding while exercising faith that God’s Word is wholly true and fully reliable.

This third case is where the scriptural evidence for church government is found. Where there is only one pattern of behavior for a particular matter mentioned in Scripture, and this sole pattern is repeated in multiple passages (although the truths implied may not be as clear as a direct commands) this pattern should not be ignored in favor of another humanly devised model which finds no mention in Scripture. This is especially true if the humanly devised model significantly contrasts with the scriptural pattern, resulting in shaping and defining the church and its culture away from a New Testament model.

Regulative versus Normative Principle

This exegesis will rely on the Regulative Principle of church conduct, specifically as it applies to church government. This is an important marker to lay down as we search the Scripture to determine God’s design for the church. The Regulative Principle may be put in this way: “God regulates the church’s worship and government through the Scriptures. The church does not have the authority to require what the Word

of God does not require or to add what the Word of God has not added.”¹ This principle includes other doctrines as well as church worship and government. The truth regarding salvation, how we are to live as Christians, and how we are to serve the Lord Jesus Christ is either expressly stated in Scripture or may be deduced from it. We are not to add to the Scripture or modify it by either supposed revelation or by man’s tradition or reason.

Historically, the Regulative Principle was formulated in the seventeenth century by the early Reformers. Its earliest expression was in the Westminster Confession, chapter 21 and in the London Baptist Confession of 1689, chapter 22:

The light of nature shows that there is a God, who hath lordship and sovereignty over all; is just, good, and doth good unto all; and is therefore to be feared, loved, praised, called upon, trusted in, and served, with all the heart and all the soul, and with all the might. But the acceptable way of worshiping the true God, is instituted by Himself, and so limited by His own revealed will, that He may not be worshiped according to the imagination and devices of men, nor the suggestions of Satan, under any visible representation, or any other way not prescribed in the Holy Scriptures.²

We are not capable of having judgment that equals or exceeds that of God’s, although many times we act as if we are. Scripture describes man as blind, ignorant, and incapable of seeing or knowing God’s ways. Man’s judgment is finite and damaged by sin. Even as believers, we continually need the guidance of our Heavenly Father’s revelation in His Word, the resurrection power of the gospel that we have in Christ, and the Holy Spirit to guide, instruct and correct. Man is not a light unto himself in reference to the things of God and of faith. We rely on the Holy Spirit to illuminate and interpret the Word. Our own devices and inventions are not pleasing to the Lord when He has

¹ Samuel E. Waldron, “A Presbyterian’s Response,” in *Who Runs the Church? 4 Views on Church Government*, ed. Steve B. Cowan, Counterpoints: Church Life (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2004), 232.

² Samuel E. Waldron, “The Regulative Principle of the Church,” Providence Reformed Baptist Church, May 12, 2015, <https://reformedbaptistmn.org/the-regulative-principle-of-the-church-by-samuel-waldron/>.

already given us clear instruction and patterns of behavior in His Word. This includes how His church is to be organized.³

One the other end of the spectrum of church conduct is the Normative Principle. This principle says that we may do anything that God does not strictly prohibit. In the area of church government, many believe that there is “broad latitude” in the various offices and titles of church leaders and how these leaders are organized. It should then be no surprise that this perceived human latitude takes the form of types of human government other than what is found in Scripture. Man’s reasoning concludes that whatever works the best, is in the historical tradition of collective experience, or whatever preserves the control of the church is the best alternative. With the Normative Principle and the application of broad latitude, there are a wide variety of organizational concepts that might seem to be acceptable. In this way of thinking, the results are what matter. As an example, a corporate structure for the church would not only seem to yield the best results but also not be in opposition with God’s Word, provided the church grows rapidly, and if sufficient funds are made available for the employed staff. This logic works only under this Normative Principle of church conduct. Of course, this way of thinking may lead many people to employ the Normative Principle in other areas of Christian faith and behavior. To what other scriptural truth may “broad latitude” be applied, and where does it end? Who makes this judgment call, and on what basis? The Bible, however, is not a book that contains every prohibited attitude, action, or relationship. Its purpose is not to provide legal guardrails for every deviant behavior that man can devise in his pride and depravity. Rather, the Bible is God’s revelation about Himself and His redemptive plan found in Christ Jesus. As believers and followers of Christ, we are to seek to be like Him in every thought, conviction, and action. We should

³ James Henley Thornwell, *The Collected Writings of James Henley Thornwell*, vol. 4, *Ecclesiastical*, ed. B. M. Palmer (Edinburgh, Scotland: Banner of Truth, 1986).

not need God to treat us like mis-behaving two-year olds for whom the most frequent controlling word is “no.”

The differences between the Regulative and the Normative Principles reflect fundamental epistemological differences regarding how we read, study, and are taught by God’s Word. Paul dealt with this topic in Romans 14 concerning Christian liberty. Some believers are convinced that they can do anything provided Scripture does not explicitly prohibit it. Others strive to behave only as Scripture teaches, encourages, and implies. It is a matter of wisdom to know the difference, yet one’s approach to God’s Word and the desire to please Him often is at the root of the question. Paul says in 1 Corinthians 10:23, “All things are lawful, but not all things are profitable. All things are lawful, but not all things edify.” Certainly, Paul does not literally mean “all things” because in 1 Corinthians 6, Galatian 5, and Colossians 3, he lists behaviors that are directly against the will of God for the believer. But otherwise, there are several varying lifestyles that Paul seems to be condoning. Yet, as believers, we should seek the best, not just the permissible. Our maturity in the faith should cause us to shed those permissible behaviors and replace them with those that build us into Christlikeness, edify the body of Christ and point others to the Savior. Stretching the limits of the Normative Principle in terms of what we think we can do and how we can behave is a dangerous path and does not speak of following closely as a disciple of Christ.

Retribution Principle

Another error among today’s church leaders is to draw the conclusion that God must be pleased with the work of their church if it shows growth in the numerical metrics of attenders, staff, and budget, even if they are aware that the leadership or the church culture does not align with Scripture. Sadly, however, this reveals their incorrect notion of how to assess a Christ-centered church, and the history of the Retribution Principle. The book of Amos helps us understand this principle. Amos’s ministry was during the

reign of Jeroboam II over ten tribes in the North called Israel, and the reign of Uzziah over two tribes in the South called Judah. This places his writings between 792 BC and 753 BC. During this time, God blessed Israel perhaps like no other time in their history. Israel had expanded its borders in the North beyond historical boundaries due to a strong military. Israel was at peace with Judah, and the economic status of both countries was vibrant. Trade was flourishing, and Israel enjoyed political influence and prominence with her neighbors. Israel was even practicing many Levitical ceremonies but was syncretistic in mixing in pagan practices. With their military successes and economic prosperity, most Jews believed that these blessings were a sign of God's favor. This conclusion stemmed from a naïve understanding of the Retribution Principle, which is the belief that when one obeys God, He will bless them and when one disobeys God, He will curse them or punish them. Ultimately, this is always true, but blessing or punishment takes place on God's schedule, not in accordance with human reasoning or how humans think they earn God's favor. During life, blessings are no more a sure sign of God's pleasure than is difficulty in the life of an individual a sign of God's displeasure. According to the prophet Amos, the people under Jeroboam were doing great evil in the sight of the Lord. His blessing sprang from His mercy, grace, and love, not from their obedience. God was using Amos to awaken the people to their sin, even in the midst of their blessing.⁴

The book of Job teaches about wisdom, particularly God's wisdom, which we cannot understand. God had declared Job to be a righteous man, but still allowed Satan to bring great difficulty and heartache into this life. God's ways are too high for us to grasp, and often He does not reveal His ultimate purpose, other than to glorify Himself. Our part

⁴ T. J. Betts, *Amos: An Ordinary Man with an Extraordinary Message*, rev. ed., Focus on the Bible (Ross-shire, Scotland: Christian Focus, 2011), 13.

is to glorify Him whatever He allows, learn from His trials, and trust Him for His provision. Job teaches us not to measure our relationship with God by circumstances.

James also teaches us that trials do not necessarily mean that God is displeased with us. God brings trials to teach us endurance and patience, trials which we should receive with pure joy (Jas 1:2). First Peter 3–5 speaks of trials and suffering for Christ, having nothing to do with sin or God’s displeasure, but with the testing of our faith, and His grace and assurance that we belong to Him.

Even with fundamental Reformed history and lessons about God’s dealings with His people in both the Old and New Testaments, over the last one-hundred years most Baptist churches have strayed profoundly from a course of wisdom in these matters.⁵ Most church leaders do not know of either the Regulative or Retribution Principles, and even if they were to be informed of them, are convinced that their methods are permissible and that blessing is to be interpreted as God’s favor and agreement. Human reasoning says that if their approach to worship and government is yielding the best results, or if it aligns with the traditions of their church, it therefore must be pleasing to God. Gladly, however, there is a growing movement to return to the Regulative Principle in many Christ-centered churches across America, in which believers seek to follow the Scripture, trusting that His ways are best. Conclusions about church government by their spiritual leaders are leading to fundamental changes in the way these churches are led and taught and worship.

For this exegetical analysis, the Regulative Principle will be the guiding philosophy in seeking to understanding what Scripture teaches about church government and what it says about the thesis of this paper. Human metrics of church health will not make up the scriptural plumbline of a Christ-centered church.

⁵ Jeff Robinson, “The Regulative Principle—A Baptist Doctrine,” Founders Ministries, March 25, 2016, <https://founders.org/articles/the-regulative-principle-a-baptist-argument/>.

Synonymous Words for the Same Office

In the New Testament, the following words for the office of spiritual leader in a church are synonymous: (a) *episkopos*,⁶ meaning overseer or bishop; (b) *presbytos*,⁷ meaning elder; (c) *poimen*,⁸ meaning pastor. The term “elder” is the most commonly used in Scripture, but there are several instances where the word for bishop is clearly describing the same office. The term “bishop” is not once used in the Scripture to denote an office different from the elder. They are used for different purposes. Bishop describes the function of oversight, while elder refers to the dignity of the office and the character of the individual.

Paul calls the elders from Ephesus to himself in Acts 20:17: “From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders [*presbytos*] of the church.” Paul then proceeds to give these elders information about his personal plans and also encouragement in the faith. Then to this same group of elders, as part of his same address to them, in Acts 20:28, he refers to them as overseers (*episkopos*): “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [*episkopos*].” Without further elaboration or explanation, Paul refers to these Ephesian elders as overseers or bishops. Paul clearly was using these two terms interchangeably, and these elders also understood that both of these terms described their spiritual office in the church at Ephesus.

In 1 Timothy 3:1–2, Paul writes to Timothy when he is at Ephesus: “It is a trustworthy statement: if any man aspires to the office of overseer [*episkopos*], it is a fine work he desires to do.” From the prior passage in Acts 20, we know that Paul referred to the spiritual leaders in this church as both elders and bishops. We also see in 1 Timothy

⁶ James Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2010), s.v. GS1985.

⁷ Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, s.v. GS4245.

⁸ Strong, *The New Strong’s Expanded Exhaustive Concordance of the Bible*, s.v. GS4166.

5:17 that the elders who rule are to be extended honor for their ruling and their teaching: “The elders [*presbytos*] who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” From this context, it is clear that Paul is using the words elder, bishop and overseer synonymously. All three words describe the same office of leadership, teaching and caring for the church at Ephesus.⁹

Titus 1:5–7 gives additional evidence that Paul used these Greek words interchangeably: “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders [*presbytos*] 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 [*episkopos*] must be above reproach as God’s steward.”

On most occasions in the New Testament, the Greek word *poimen*, meaning shepherd or pastor, is used to describe a shepherd for God’s people. In many of these instances, *poimen* is used to describe Jesus’s ministry with lost people. There is a single occasion, however, in Ephesians 4:11–12 where *poimen* is translated as pastor when speaking about church leaders.¹⁰ Paul is speaking about the unity of the body and Christ’s gifts to the church when he writes, “And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.” In verse 11, the grammatical connections between the words for pastors and teachers suggest that they are referring to the person in the same office. When Paul mentions teachers after the word pastors, Paul drops the masculine plural article and the conjunction *δέ* (“the” occurs before “pastors” but not before “teachers”). He then connects teachers closely to pastors with the simple conjunction *καί*, which is different from the other “ands” (*de*) in the

⁹ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1123.

¹⁰ Wilford Stone, “The Role of the Pastor in Southern Baptist Churches: A Biblical View Versus a Prevailing View” (DMin diss., Liberty Baptist Theological Seminary, 2006), 105.

verse.¹¹ Baptists throughout history have often used this single verse as their basis to designate their senior leader as “pastor-teacher.”

There is ample evidence, however, that these nouns for teacher and pastor are not referring to the same individual person in an office of leadership in the church, even though they are united with the same Greek article in the sentence. The Granville Sharp rule of Greek translation does not apply in this instance, when the Greek article appears with plural substantives. The phrase “pastors and teachers” is probably not to be identified as referring to the same person who fills the role of both pastor and teacher, even though the use of just one article for the two nouns suggests a close association. Paul most likely wanted to convey that pastors are to be gifted in teaching but did not want to indicate that all teachers are gifted to be shepherds or pastors.¹² Even though the phrase “pastor-teacher” is very common in Protestant churches in America, this is the only occasion in which pastor is used for a church office. However, pastoring (shepherding) and teaching are certainly functions of the office of elder. Paul and Peter refer to the shepherding of the flock when speaking about overseers and elders in Acts 20:28–29 and 1 Peter 5:2. Also, the office of elder clearly involves teaching as one of its primary duties, distinctions, and qualifications in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9. Therefore, it seems very likely that in Ephesians 4:11, Paul is using both “teacher” and “pastor” (*poimen*) as referring to the office of elder in the church,¹³ although perhaps not the same individual elder with the both personal giftings. The remainder of this short passage says that one of the roles of the pastor and teacher is to equip the saints for the “work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ.”

¹¹ Clinton E. Arnold, *Ephesians*, Zondervan Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament 10 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2010), 436.

¹² Arnold, *Ephesians*, 436.

¹³ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1123.

Office of Elder-Bishop-Pastor Is Always Plural in the New Testament

The New Testament uses the synonymous words for elder (*presbytos*), bishop (*episkopos*) and pastor (*poimen*) always in the plural when speaking of the role and function of these offices in the church. God called multiple leaders to the same church, but never as sole leaders. Luke, Paul, James and Peter all refer to this office in the plural, as follows:

1. Acts 11:30 “And this they did, sending it . . . to the elders.”
2. Acts 14:23 “When they had appointed elders for them in every church . . .”
3. Acts 15:2–4 “they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders . . .”
4. Acts 15:6 “The apostles and the elders came together to look into this matter.”
5. Acts 15:22 “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders.”
6. Acts 15:23 “The apostles and the brethren who are elders . . .”
7. Acts 20:17 “. . . and called to him the elders of the church.”
8. Acts 20:28 “among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers . . .”
9. Eph 4:11 “. . . and some *as* pastors and teachers . . .”
10. Phil 1:1 “To all the saints in Christ Jesus . . . overseers and deacons.”
11. 1 Thess 5:12 “. . . those who . . . have charge over you . . . give instruction.”
12. 1 Tim 5:17 “The elders who rule well . . . worthy of double honor.”
13. Titus 1:5 “. . . and appoint elders in every city . . .”
14. Heb 13:17, 24 “Obey your leaders and submit to them . . .”
15. Jas 5:14 “Then he must call for the elders of the church . . .”
16. 1 Pet 5:1–3 “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder . . .”¹⁴

¹⁴ J. R. Miller, *Elders Lead a Healthy Family: Shared Leadership for a Vibrant Church* (Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2017), 28.

The plurality of elders in New Testament churches is clear from these references. There is no reference to a church with only one elder. We know from the references above that the churches in Jerusalem, Antioch, Lystra, Iconium, Pisidian, Crete, Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, Philippi, and the churches mentioned in Hebrews and Timothy all had multiple elders. A total absence of reference to a single-elder church does not prove the matter with absolute certainty, but the scriptural pattern is very strong that multiple elders was the norm.¹⁵

No Hierarchy among Elders-Bishops-Pastors in the New Testament

Some will refer to James as the single elder in the church in Jerusalem, but we know from Acts 11:30 that the church had multiple elders. When Paul, Barnabas, and Peter sought council from the “apostles and elders” in Acts 15:1–12 about a spiritual matter, it is obvious from the narrative that the council was comprised of several apostles and several elders.

Not only was the group of apostles and elders plural in the church in Jerusalem, but there is no indication that a single elder was in charge of the rest of the elders and the entire church. Some people attempt to cast James as the leader of the elders, who may have held some formal position above the others. However, the Scripture does not indicate whatsoever that James was the single authority over this group of multiple apostles and elders. The narrative from Acts 15:13–35 simply reports that James was the spokesman for the matter, perhaps the one to whom the Holy Spirit had given wisdom for this issue. James did not make a final pronouncement based on any supposed higher authority that he possessed, but rather offered his comments as “my judgment.” After James had offered his judgment in the matter, then it seemed good to all

¹⁵ Samuel E. Waldron, “Plural-Elder Congregationalism,” in Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?*, 212.

the apostles and elders. The truth, as reinforced by the indwelling Holy Spirit, had settled the matter for the group of apostles and elders, not the authority of James. The communication that was subsequently sent to Paul and Barnabas with the answer to their question was sent by the whole group, not just from James. In the narrative of the story, James's name is not even recorded as being in the letter. Acts 15:23 relates, "The apostles and the brethren who are elders, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia who are from the Gentiles, greetings. . . . Since we have heard. . . it seemed good to us, having become of one mind. . . . For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us." The spiritual matter of circumcision of believers was considered and decided by the apostles and elders as a group, under the direction of the Holy Spirit, without any reference to James's authority in the decision. Being a spokesman for a particular matter may indicate wisdom and influence, but certainly not positional authority.

As mentioned in the historical review in this paper, many in Baptist churches have placed a significant emphasis on the argument from A. H. Strong concerning the angels of the churches in Revelation. Strong held that these angels in Revelation 2–3 each were lead pastors of their respective churches, the solo person responsible for the entire church. As an example, Revelation 2:1 says, "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write . . ." This pattern is repeated for all seven churches in Revelation 2–3. Both the Greek and Hebrew words translated as "angel" literally mean a messenger. It is possible that this word refers to the lead pastor of these New Testament churches, but much more probably to spiritual angels, or to the messengers charged with communicating on behalf of those congregations. We know that the church in Ephesus had multiple elders, and in the passages that make reference to the multiple elders in Ephesus, there is no mention or even inference of a lead elder.¹⁶ The same is true for each of the seven churches at

¹⁶ Waldron, "Plural-Elder Congregationalism," 213.

Ephesus referenced in Revelation.¹⁷ The word “angel” is also not used in this manner anywhere else in the New Testament, nor in Greek is it synonymous with elder, bishop, or pastor. Basing an argument for the most powerful and accountable position in a New Testament church on the interpretation of a single word in an apocalyptic genre of Scripture would seem to be not just a slender reed of proof, but rather a stretched support for a previously held view of church polity. This is especially true, given the absence of other scriptural support for a single authoritative leader. It is dangerous to create doctrine in this way, using a single word, without any additional support from the rest of Scripture, especially considering a consistently different pattern displayed multiple times elsewhere in Scripture. It is in this way that significant error often enters the church.

The use of the apostle Peter as the foundation for the argument for a lead or CEO-Pastor seems even more egregious than using James or the angels of Revelation. Author Gene Getz is one of the proponents of this concept as he outlines in his book, *Elders and Leaders*. In fairness, Getz confesses in the beginning of his chapter 26 about the Senior Pastor, that the “biblical story of local church leadership offers little data to make the specific observation that someone must function as the primary leader.” In this case, “little data” may more properly be re-phrased as “no data.” This argument is based completely on imagination, without even offering a single verse to misuse.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus commends Peter for his confession that Jesus is the Christ, the Savior. Jesus says that upon this truth, He will build His church. The church was not built on Peter as a man, since Peter subsequently proved by his denials of Jesus that as a man, he was a failure as His follower. The Holy Spirit had revealed this truth about Jesus as the Christ to Peter, but Jesus was not beginning His church with Peter as its foundation. In speaking about God’s building, the church, Paul writes in 1 Corinthians

¹⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology*, 1143.

3:11, “For no man can lay a foundation other than the one which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.”

There was no question that Peter had great influence among the other disciples, and subsequently the apostles. But this does not indicate authority. Jesus did not leave the disciples with a defined leader, but as a group of followers who He expected to work together for the kingdom. In 2 Peter 1:1, Peter refers to himself first as a servant of Christ, and second as an apostle: “Simon Peter, a bond-servant and apostle of Jesus Christ.” In 1 Peter 5:1, Peter considered himself as one of the plurality of elders, with no special authority over the others: “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ.” If the Lord did not elevate Peter to a position of authority over the other apostles, if Peter himself did not consider himself in this way, and if there is no reference to his supposed position in the rest of the New Testament, then we are wrong to elevate him to a position that we have created by our own devices. Using Peter as the basis for the argument for a CEO-Pastor is another abuse of Scripture to support a human pre-supposition.

Reformation Theology and Polity

The Reformation in the sixteenth century was a theological and political earthquake, with a cataclysmic break from the Roman Catholic Church, yet the polity of bishop-rule survived in several Protestant denominations. The Church of England continued with the Episcopacy, as did the Lutherans. Only select denominations of Reformed theology dismantled the hierarchy of church government and reassembled it in full accord with the Scripture.

John Calvin addressed church government in his *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, written in 1539, as part of major sections of his work in which he dealt with the doctrines of the church. Calvin argued that the words “elder,” “bishop,” “presbyter,” and “minister” all referred to the same office. In *Institutes*, Calvin writes, “In giving the name

of bishops, presbyters, and pastors, indiscriminately to those who govern churches, I have done it on the authority of Scripture, which uses the words as synonymous.”¹⁸

Although in Calvin’s view the words elder and bishop are synonymous and denote the same office, he did recognize the need for one of the elders to act as a bishop for the purpose of preserving order and moderating elder gatherings. In *Institutes*, Calvin writes,

The bishop, however, was not so superior in honor and dignity as to have dominion over his colleagues, but as it belongs to a president in an assembly to bring matters before them, collect their opinions, take precedence of others in consulting, advising, exhorting, guide the whole procedure by his authority, and execute what is decreed by common consent, a bishop held the same office in a meeting of presbyters.¹⁹

Calvin was clear that the goal of the office of bishop was purely to lead and preserve the church, to protect her, but not to dominate. The lessons of the papacy and the Roman Catholic Church were very fresh in the minds of the Reformers. Again, from *Institutes*,

To the government thus constituted some gave the name of Hierarchy—a name, in my opinion, improper, certainly one not used by Scripture. For the Holy Spirit designed to provide that no one should dream of primacy or domination in regard to the government of the Church. But if, disregarding the term, we look to the thing, we shall find that the ancient bishops had no wish to frame a form of church government different from that which God has prescribed in his word.²⁰

One Office but Different Gifting

Calvin also interpreted Scripture to instruct that there were to be two types of elders, those who rule and those who both rule and teach. Calvin used 1 Timothy 5:17 as his reference for this position: “The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.” Calvin taught that the early church also had three types of spiritual leaders: (1) elders, or presbyters,

¹⁸ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.3.8.

¹⁹ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.4.2.

²⁰ Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.4.4.

who were the pastors and teachers; (2) elders, or presbyters, who were the ones who ruled and governed the church; (3) deacons, who were the ones who executed the affairs of the church under the direction of the elders.²¹ From *Institutes*, “In the Epistle to Timothy, also, he mentions two kinds of presbyters, some who labor in the word, and others who do not perform the office of preaching, but rule well (1 Tim 5:17). By this latter class there is no doubt he means those who were appointed to the inspection of manners, and the whole use of the keys.”²²

Regarding the Timothy passage, there are two important matters of interpretation. First, rather than two types of elders as Calvin taught, the Timothy passage refers to one office, but with two different types of gifting and ministry focus. The distinction between those who “rule well” and those who “work hard at preaching and teaching” should not be the basis for two types of elders; those who rule versus those who teach. All elders are called to lead and to teach. This is clear from the qualifications of elders in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, which is also what distinguishes them from deacons. Deacons are not called to teach or lead, but to serve and execute the direction that they receive from the elders. Elders are uniquely called to do both. There will, however, be different levels of gifting among the plurality of elders in every church. Some are gifted at leadership and administration. Others are more gifted at the study and communication of God’s Word. First Timothy 5:17 speaks of degree, not distinction in the function or class of those in the elder group. The contrast is between those elders who do some teaching and those who do a greater degree of teaching and are especially devoted to it.²³ In nearly all translations, the Greek word *μαλιστα*, *malista*, is taken as “especially,” which confers or implies the meaning that there are some elders who are good at leading

²¹ L. Roy Taylor, “Presbyterianism,” in Cowan, *Who Runs the Church?*, 90–92.

²² Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*, 4.11.1.

²³ Waldron, “Plural-Elder Congregationalism,” 216.

and directing the affairs of the church, while a subset of this larger group is much more focused on preaching and teaching.²⁴

The second matter of interpretation from this passage is the word “honor.” The word is properly interpreted and considered to mean regard, respect, consideration, and perhaps remuneration. In no sense is this word “honor” to mean authority, though even if this were to be the case, it still applies to several elders, not just one. The elders (plural) who rule well are worthy of double honor. Those (plural) who are devoted to preaching and teaching are also worthy of double honor. The verse does not say that those who preach and teach are worthy of triple honor, or a greater honor than those who rule well. With the word “especially,” Paul is simply cautioning churches not to leave them out of the double honor, but to be certain to designate them for the honor. It is a tortured stretch of linguistics to find a directive from Paul in this passage to elevate one elder who teaches above the other ruling and teaching elders into a position of a CEO-Pastor. However, this is precisely how some use this verse to defend corporate-style hierarchical organization within the church.

Conclusion

Based on this analysis, conclusions that one can make directly from Scripture are: (a) there is absolutely no evidence in Scripture of a single man leading a New Testament church; (b) no epistle written to a specific congregation, or general missionary epistle written to several churches, even hinted at a single man who may have led the church; (c) since the spiritual health and direction of local churches was the purpose of most of the biblical letters, the absence of directives to a single-man leader, had he existed, is glaring, and helps to make the case that this form of leadership is not a biblical concept; (d) there are frequent occasions where multiple elders are mentioned who lead a

²⁴ Andreas Kostenberger, *1 Timothy*, in *The Expositor's Bible Commentary*, vol. 12, *Ephesians to Philemon*, ed. Tremper Longman III and David E. Garland, rev. ed. (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Academic, 2006), 547.

church, thereby establishing a clear biblical pattern; (e) directions to elders in their roles are always to an audience of multiple elders, there being no directives to a single leader of elders.

If one adheres to the Regulative Principle, then the path is clear for church government. If, however, one believes in the Normative Principle of “broad latitude” in matters of one’s own choosing, then church government becomes a blank slate upon which men can create any form of government that meets with their approval and achieves their own human ends.

CHAPTER 4

PRACTICAL CONSIDERATIONS

Opening

The practicality, effectiveness, or historical tradition of a certain church polity is often the explanation for, and the defense of, certain forms of church government, particularly the CEO-Pastor model. When there is no scriptural basis for this form of leadership, then other human arguments naturally are offered. For many, it would seem that the ends, in terms of church growth and other humanly desired factors, are more important than the means of following the biblical pattern. Therefore, it must be noted that this section on the practical considerations of a plurality of elders will not be following that strain of human argument. The exegetical chapter contains the revelation from God which is the only basis for decisions in this matter. There are, however, certain positive outcomes if the scriptural model is followed, and negative outcomes if it is not. A discussion of these outcomes, for the health of the church and the glory of Christ, comprises the content of this chapter.

Concepts

In analyzing the various roles and gifting of the individuals who make up an average elder group, it is helpful to move the discussion from the purely subjective toward the objective. There are many personality-type analytical approaches in the workplace and in use by the church, and no one tool is perfect. The Myers-Briggs Type Indicator (MBTI), however, is a very popular and well-known one, so we will use it in this thesis project. Developed by Isabel Briggs Myers and Katherine C. Briggs, it is based on habitual personal preferences in four areas. Carl Jung provided the foundation for this

analysis, and with his approach, measures a person's basic attitude toward the world (extraversion or introversion) and how one normally functions in perceiving (sensation or intuition) and judging (thinking or feeling).¹ The MBTI does not attempt to label, stereotype, or compartmentalize a person. Its goal and use are to help individuals better understand their own propensities and those of others around them. Even though most people can operate through a broad spectrum of communications and reactions, a "preference" of a person is the style of comprehending and acting that is most comfortable to them. People have different interests, varied skills, and are adept or sometimes very flawed in the way that they communicate or how they choose to live their lives. The MBTI is a helpful tool to indicate these habits.² For this thesis analysis, the MBTI will be useful to identify the differences between those in the church's elder group who rule well and those who are best devoted to preaching and teaching.

Extroverts (E) fill their personal "gas tank" from being around people, processing information externally, through speaking, hearing, and interacting with other people. Introverts (I) are more comfortable processing information internally, through reading, writing, and thinking. Solitude recharges the introvert and brings them peace and stability.

A sensor (S) is a person who is detailed oriented, spotting flaws in the world and considering most of them to be major issues. Sensors live in the present and prefer active solutions to passive theories, calling themselves realists. Intuitives (N) think on a broad scale, are globalists, and leave the details to others. Intuitives are idea people (whether their ideas are good or not) and are the inventors and innovators among us. Intuitives trust their gut, while sensors work with tangible information.

¹ Robert J. Thesing, "The Myers-Briggs, Enneagram, and Spirituality," *The Way Supplement* 69, no. 1 (1990): 50–60.

² David K. Hagey, "Personality Type and Leadership," *United States Army Medical Department Journal* 29, no. 6 (October 2009): 24–26.

A thinker (T) will also base their decision-making on real, tangible information. Thinkers are often not the first to speak, because they are processing what they are taking in. Thinkers are viewed as realists, and normally base their comments on proven principles. Feelers (F), however, base their actions and decisions on theirs, and other's values and emotional clues. They will base their decisions on how their actions make others feel or make themselves feel. They are seen as warm and friendly people and viewed as people-persons.

A judger (J) requires a structured, ordered, and predictable environment. They are unhappy with chaos or disorder and will work to correct it or will constantly complain about it. Judgers are excellent planners. Perceivers (P) are more phlegmatic in their approach to life. They prefer events to unfold as they will, and do not seek to direct them in a certain way. What is chaotic to a judger is comforting to a perceiver. For the perceiver, chaos prompts creativity, encourages lightheartedness, and is not stifling to their freedom.³

An aspect of psychological type theory is that one of the four functions (S, I, F, or T) takes the lead in an individual's development and becomes the dominant function in their preferences. This factor gives the primary shape to that person. If sensing dominates, then the person will be very practical in their approach to life, while intuition describes a more creative person. One with whom feeling dominants may more humane, while thinking type people usually take a rational approach to situations.⁴

With personality-type analysis, it is vital to remember that as believers, we all are to be striving, "making every effort," and "being all the more diligent" (2 Pet 1:5, 10) to add Christlike virtues and behaviors to our way of thinking and acting. Our genetic,

³ Hagey, "Personality Type and Leadership."

⁴ Christopher Alan Lewis, John Hopkins Burgess, and Leslie J. Francis, "Psychological Type Profile of Ministers of Word and Sacrament within the United Reformed Church (URC)," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 25, no. 9 (2022): 921–30.

environmental, or preferential starting point is not our end goal. As Christians, we have been transformed, re-born, and our life is now hidden in Christ. We do not live for ourselves, but for Christ. As disciples, we all are to take on the “mind of Christ” and cooperate with the Holy Spirit to develop personality profiles like our Lord. This does not mean that we are all to be the same. In 1 Corinthians 12, Paul makes it very clear that the body of Christ is made up of many gifts and types of people, all of whom are to work in unity for the gospel and the Great Commission. But in many ways, there should be a convergence of virtues, values, and principles in understanding, judging, and acting in our personal lives, all in accordance with God’s Word.

Elder as Preacher-Teacher

Preacher-teachers must be theologians to properly and correctly teach the Word of God. In being a true minister of the Word, their responsibility is to communicate, explain, and apply the truths and doctrines which God has revealed in Scripture, not use their own intuition and perceptions. Many enlightening articles have been written on this topic. Bryan Chapell of Grace Presbyterian Church, Peoria, Illinois, writes,

To expound from Scripture, we have to be able “rightly to divide the Word of truth.” We know that the 2 Tim 2:15 phrase, “rightly dividing . . .” means to “cut straight” or “plow a straight furrow.” We are thus called to be faithful and precise in our understanding and presentation of biblical truth, necessitating scholarship that involves a degree of expertise in language, history, and theology. Biblical pastoring requires a degree of scholarly understanding of the text in its biblical context. We are called to be scholars of the biblical world. We also have to be able to “give a reason for the hope that is in us.” We are not called only to divide the Scriptures but to defend their truths.⁵

Albert Mohler, President of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Louisville, Kentucky, has also written,

⁵ Bryan Chapell, “The Pastor as Scholar/Theologian,” *Journal of the Evangelical Homiletics Society* 20, no. 1 (March 2020): 15–25.

Every pastor is called to be a theologian. The health of the church depends upon its pastors functioning as faithful theologians—teaching, preaching, defending, and applying the great doctrines of the faith. . . . The pastorate is inherently theological. . . . The idea of the pastorate as a non-theological office is inconceivable in light of the New Testament. . . . Today’s pastors must recover and reclaim the pastoral calling as inherently and cheerfully theological. Otherwise, pastors will be nothing more than communicators, counselors and managers of congregations that have been emptied of the gospel and of biblical truth.⁶

In addition to this perspective on the role of the preacher-teacher, for this thesis project, expository preaching-teaching will be the standard against which the primary teaching leader(s) of the church will be compared. John MacArthur leads the MacArthur Center for Expository Preaching in Los Angeles, California. MacArthur defines expository preaching: “The primary responsibility of a preacher is to bring the people the truth of God by explaining the Scripture. In the personal aspects, in counseling and comfort and instruction, the preacher is the bearer of divine truth. You must help them grasp the Scripture and then apply it to their lives.” Also, MacArthur’s philosophy of preaching is inextricably linked to his conviction that “the only logical response to inerrant Scripture . . . is to preach it expositionally. By expositionally, [he means] preaching in such a way that the meaning of the Bible passage is presented entirely and exactly as it was intended by God.”⁷

Although there is no one profile of a proper student and expositor of Scripture, various studies have been conducted to investigate the personality types of those who are devoted to preaching and teaching. Such a study of the psychological-type preferences of 333 biblical scholars was undertaken by the members of the Society of Biblical Literature. In this project, these men showed strong bias toward introversion over extroversion (74 percent to 25 percent respectively), strong bias toward thinking over feeling (67 percent to 33 percent), and equally strong for judging over perceiving (83

⁶ R. Albert Mohler Jr., “The Pastor as Theologian, Part One,” *Albert Mohler* (blog), April 17, 2006, <https://albertmohler.com/2006/04/17/the-pastor-as-theologian-part-one>.

⁷ “Why Expository Preaching?,” The MacArthur Center, accessed January 15, 2024, <https://macarthurcenter.org/about/expository-preaching/>.

percent to 17 percent). Somewhat surprisingly, sensing and intuition were about equal (49 percent to 51 percent).⁸

What is the ideal profile for a faithful communicator of God's Word? Ideally, the preacher-teacher is capable of being sufficiently extroverted to comfortably exhibit the dynamic of preaching, the pathos of the art. But the truth and conviction of God's Word, the logos and ethos, can only be understood and discerned by prayer, meditation, reflection, deep thinking, internalizing, and illumination by the Holy Spirit, all of which are distinctly introverted activities and habits.

If the preacher-teacher is to explain God's Word in the way and with the words that God has revealed, rather than simply using the Scripture as a reference for his own human message, then sensing is vital. The student of God's Word must come to it with humility, ready to be taught by the Word and the Holy Spirit, so that he may be used by God to teach others. Theologians who are expositors must be devoted to, and invested in, transcendent truth, not immanent personal opinions, agendas, or paradigms. Teaching the Scripture with expositional clarity and not superficially is a great privilege and responsibility. Full reliance on the inerrant exactitude of the divine revelation is required, while coming to the Scripture in faith, trusting the Holy Spirit for illumination and understanding. Intuition is very important, but when the accuracy of the Scripture is involved, sensing should dominate.

Thinking, also, is critical over feeling. The faithful preacher-teacher may present God's Word employing his feelings and passion, but the truth comes from his thinking. Thinking and feeling are both vital, but accuracy derives from thinking, while passion for worship springs from feeling. John Piper very eloquently makes the point that both are necessary, stating, "The mind provides the kindling for the fires of the heart.

⁸ Andrew Village, "Psychological-Type Profiles of Biblical Scholars: An Empirical Enquiry among Members of the Society of Biblical Literature," *Mental Health, Religion & Culture* 15, no. 10 (2012): 1047-53.

Theology serves doxology. Reflection serves affection. Contemplation serves exultation. Together they glorify Christ to the full.”⁹

Finally, the preacher-teacher should make judgments that are clear, based squarely on God’s Word, and not on perception of circumstances, people, or the culture. Teachers are to live their personal lives and communicate the Word in such a way that gives confidence, clarity, and consistency to difficult issues of life, all in total alignment with God’s Word. If perception carries the day, then the church risks becoming a social and political body, shifting with every movement in the surrounding world. Answers to difficult questions will then depend on the speaker and their individual perceptions. However, if one has the foundation of a well-developed sensing and thinking function, then this will naturally manifest itself in the judgments that one makes, consistently in alignment with God’s Word.

This summary of MBTI types is the background for a personality attribute type expressed in four letters. An example of this is the ideal profile of a theologian-expositor and preacher-teacher of God’s Word, which is introvert-sensing-thinking-judging (ISTJ). This is the profile of the detail-oriented, logical leader. Also ideal is the profile of the extrovert-sensing-thinking-judging (ESTJ) type or the decisive and fair leader. If a lead pastor, however, leans heavily on the research and work of others for his scriptural content, if he uses the Scripture simply as a reference for his own outlines and philosophies, and if his acceptance by congregants is based more on his oratory dynamics than on the beauty and truth of God’s revealed Word, then many other MBTI profiles are common. If the lead pastor-speaker is more of a performer, philosopher, encourager, or entertainer than a theologian and expositor, then E, N, F, and P are much more successful traits in building a personality-following. Roy Oswald and Otto Kroeger of the Alban

⁹ John Piper, *Think: The Life of the Mind and the Love of God* (Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2010), 183.

Institute collected data about Myers-Briggs personality types for more than 1,300 clergy. Nearly 40 percent of clergy are comprised of extrovert-intuitive-feeling-judging types (ENFJ or the passionate leader), extrovert-sensing-feeling-judging types (ESFJ or the charismatic and generous leader), and extrovert-intuitive-feeling-perceiving types (ENFP or the inspirational leader). This is not an unexpected result, given that the vast majority of clergy are not students of the Word nor expository preachers, but are more motivators of people or commentators on social issues.¹⁰ Sadly, many preachers today use the Scriptures like a drunk uses a lamppost; more for support than illumination.

Elder as Ministry Leader

In a church with a number of ministries other than the large-audience preaching-teaching of the Word, genuine leadership is required. Youth ministry, children's ministry, older-generation ministry, Christian education ministry, outreach and mission activities are examples of the variety of activities in a Christ-centered church. Each ministry should be led by a deacon or deaconess (vocational or non-vocational) under the care and personal involvement of one or more elders (vocational or non-vocational) from the larger elder group.

Genuine leadership skills can be learned, but the root character value of the leader should be a servant's heart. For the biblical leader, Philippians 2 defines the mind of Christ, who in all things, gave us as His disciples an example of the heart of a servant. All believers are to take on this mind, or attitude of Christ, in all things including leadership. Therefore, a servant-leader is not a dictator; dictatorial leadership is a contradiction in terms. Dictatorial leadership may be very time efficient, but it is not leadership; it is simply dictating. Servant-leadership is a commitment and is time-consuming. Servant-leadership is a very relational activity, with the leader listening,

¹⁰ Roy M. Oswald and Otto Kroeger, *Personality Type and Religious Leadership* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1988), 24.

understanding, counselling, motivating, inspiring, directing, evaluating, communicating, sometimes correcting, and encouraging those he leads. Biblical leadership is more about empowerment than it is about control.¹¹ It requires a personality type that is suited to this very important role in the church.

Transformational and empowering leadership is a process by which leaders and followers work together, both working toward achieving common goals. For the dictator, the follower is there only to serve, comply, and stay quiet. For the servant-leader, the follower is the one to be served and to whom the leader listens, even while providing the vision and the resources. Mark McCloskey and Jim Louwsma state it this way in their book, *The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership*: “Leaders of transformational organizations are deeply committed to their people. . . . Leaders of transformational organizations serve the employees or members of the organization, not the other way around.”¹² In addition, for both the leader and the follower, it is God’s agenda that shapes the vision and the goal, not any single person’s personal agenda.

True servant-leaders are willing to model what matters. They are continually engaging in honest self-evaluation, asking, “How am I growing in Christ?” They also recognize that they are not doing this by themselves but are in a spiritual collaboration with others in the body of Christ. To do this successfully, servant-leaders must communicate with clarity, provide accountability for themselves and the followers, and support followers with the resources that they need to do their work. The top priority of the servant-leader is for the followers to succeed in their pursuits toward the group’s goals and vision. In *Leadership in Christian Perspective*, Justin Irving and Mark Strauss state the following about transformational leadership: “Ninety percent of your time you

¹¹ Justin A. Irving, “Christian Leadership, Lecture 4,” unpublished class notes for 40080 (The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, Summer Semester, 2021).

¹² Mark McCloskey and Jim Louwsma, *The Art of Virtue-Based Transformational Leadership: Building Strong Businesses, Organizations and Families* (Bloomington, MN: The Wordsmith, 2014), 26.

should be doing everything you can to help your direct reports succeed. You should be the first assistant to the people who work for you.”¹³ Although thinking is vital for every believer and leader in the church, feeling is even more vital for relational and servant leadership. This is in contrast with the ideal profile of the theologian-expositor preacher-teacher.

A study performed by the United States Naval Academy concentrated on what type of leadership yields the best results for transformational versus transactional leadership. Transformational leaders have learned to communicate high expectations of, and confidence in, their followers. These leaders inspire loyalty, treat followers as individuals, promote problem solving, and inspire belief in the organization’s cause or mission. In contrast, transactional leadership is where the leader initiates and clarifies what is required of their followers, and what positive or negative reinforcement will result from their performance.¹⁴ Using MBTI, the study revealed that sensing types (as opposed to intuitive types) were rated higher by their followers on inspirational leadership. Feeling types (as opposed to thinking types) were rated as the most effective leaders, and the most transformational in their style. Judging types benefited from other leadership factors, such as properly perceiving their own strengths, weaknesses, and impact on their followers. Interestingly, extroverts were found to be no more transformational than introverts.¹⁵ Even though this was a study in a military environment, there are many leadership parallels to the mission of the church and the organized achievement of mission goals for the gospel.

¹³ Justin A. Irving and Mark L. Strauss, *Leadership in Christian Perspective: Biblical Foundations and Contemporary Practices for Servant Leaders* (Grand Rapids: Baker Academic, 2019), 192.

¹⁴ Paul E. Roush and Leanne Atwater, “Using MBTI to Understand Transformational Leadership and Self-Perception Accuracy,” *Military Psychology* 4, no. 1 (March 1992): 17.

¹⁵ Roush and Atwater, “Using MBTI to Understand Transformational Leadership and Self-Perception Accuracy,” 31.

The conclusion of this analysis is that, using the MBTI codes, a ministry leader (whether deacon or governing elder) is ideally: (a) extrovert or introvert (E or I); (b) sensing, not intuitive (S, not N); (c) feeling, not thinking (F, not T); (d) judging or perceiving (J or P). Although there are some commonalities with the MBTI profile of the preacher-teacher who is theologian-expositor, the key differences are: (a) effective leaders can be either extroverted or introverted, whereas most theologian-expositors preacher-teachers tend to be introverts arising from the need for intense time invested in personal study, prayer, meditation, contemplation, message preparation; (b) effective leaders are much more often feeling types, due to the need to relate, communicate, and inspire followers, while theologian-expositor preacher-teachers need to be thinkers; (c) effective leaders may tend to be judges, and some are perceivers, while the theologian-expositor preacher-teacher must clearly be a judge who accurately discerns and divides the Word and helps the church see the truth applied with clarity.

Time Management

Based on the preceding discussion, the preacher-teacher must devote many hours in solitude to studying, understanding, meditating and internalizing the Word of God. First Timothy 5:17 uses the English translated words of “working hard” or “laboring” in preaching and teaching by these elders. The meaning conveyed is one of focus on this divine calling, to the point of exhaustion, not leaving much room for devotion to other roles in the church. Examples from well-known preacher-teachers of sermon preparation time are: (a) Tim Keller, 14–16 hours; (b) David Platt, 20–25 hours; (c) Matt Chandler, 16 or more hours; (d) Mark Dever, 30–35 hours; (e) John MacArthur, 32 hours. While these numbers do not represent the entire work week of a preacher-teacher, preparing to impart God’s Word clearly comprises the majority of his available time and spiritual energy. The preacher-teacher also needs to be active in counselling and other roles where the church needs to understand what God’s Word says and how to

apply it. In addition to all of this, the preacher-teacher should be continuously improving their knowledge and skill in the Word and the communication of it to others. In other secular professions, classes, seminars, reading, and other sensing activities are required to stay current and to improve one's capabilities, so this should also be a part of every preacher-teacher's normal pursuits.

The ministry leader also has a very active week, but his impact is usually not felt when he is alone in his office. An effective leader must be in front of people, in meetings, one-on-one discussions, listening to his followers, interactively establishing objectives, and nurturing them with his encouragement. He also needs to set broad direction, inspire, motivate, and otherwise spend his time relating to others. Interacting with followers, setting objectives, evaluating their performance, and making corrective action is time-consuming.¹⁶ For these elders, 1 Timothy 5:17 uses the English translated words "rule well" to describe the efforts of those elders who actively lead others in the church. Similar to preacher-teachers, the meaning conveyed is also one of focus on this divine calling. Leading well is a commitment, and both elders and deacons must be ready to invest in their followers. Ruling well by leading followers versus working hard at preaching-teaching are distinctly different in terms of time management, and fully impractical for one man in a CEO-Pastor role to attempt to do both.

Many preacher-teachers have resorted to the organizational concept of the Executive Pastor (XP). In an effort to maintain ultimate decision-making and control over the staff organization and all church functions, or to fulfill the church's expectations to do so, preacher-teachers have resorted to delegating leadership to the XP. In this concept, the XP reports to the CEO-Pastor. The rest of the church's staff reports to the XP. The CEO-Pastor retains control but is not burdened with the time commitment of genuine leadership. This concept again places one person atop the organizational pyramid of other

¹⁶ Irving, "Christian Leadership, Lectures 10–11."

elders or deacons who lead in the other ministries of the church. In this case, we have not one, but two single-man leaders, with the preacher-teacher still having single-man authority. This is not plurality, but CEO-Pastor style authority.

Impact on the Church

The impact on the preacher-teacher who is expected to act like a CEO-Pastor is significant or even severe. As discussed earlier, the two key roles of leading ministries and preaching-teaching are very different in terms of gifting, personality preferences, and time management. By attempting to collect the ultimate responsibility for both into one position, rather than employing a biblical plurality of elders roles, the CEO-Pastor is susceptible to many risks; (a) personal stress and burnout; (b) disillusionment; (c) personal abuse of power; (d) becoming a speaker and performer, not a theologian; (e) abdicating and delegating leadership to an XP; (f) failure as husband and father; (g) developing personal attributes that are not Christlike. A myriad of articles and books have been written about this subject, and we will not survey them here. It is sufficient to say, however, that an overworked and overstretched man in a CEO-Pastor role, particularly if he is forced to function outside of his gifting and preferences, is a recipe for disaster. More importantly, it is not a role which finds any support in Scripture.

The impact on the rest of the elder group is also significant, depending on which form of government the church adopts. With the CEO-Pastor concept, all authority flows upward through this one man. Other elders who have the capability and who understand the scriptural expectation to lead, are frustrated with their role and either drift away or are not interested in being available to serve as an elder. The culture and primary responsibility of the elder group becomes one of ratifying, defending, and protecting the CEO-Pastor, not leading, teaching, shepherding, or ruling well. The church is ultimately operated through the employed staff, all of whom report upward to the CEO. The elder group is marginalized and moved out of the way, to “thirty-thousand feet” per some

church cultures. The plurality concept, however, does just the opposite. Leaders are developed, the elder group learns to lead together, and the load of ministry is spread. True biblical brotherhood develops from an elder group of equals, each learning from the others and maturing in their leadership and teaching. Elders are not board-elders looking only at a dashboard of church metrics once a month, but are biblical shepherding, teaching, serving, and leading elders who are down among the sheep.

The impact on the church is also significant. With the biblical pattern of a plurality of elders, the people witness a pattern of leadership that aligns with Scripture. The church should not be following a human personality, but must follow Christ, being disciplined through the teaching of preacher-teachers. More teachers will be developed, men who aspire to be elders. With elder plurality, a larger percentage of the congregation will participate in the key ministries of the church body, much more so than with a purely staff-led church, typical of a CEO-Pastor organization.

In a plurality governance environment, the elders who work hard at preaching and teaching will have the time to properly study and prepare to communicate God's Word. Church members will benefit in many ways, because as John MacArthur states, theological-expository preaching: (a) submits each person and the church body to the authority of God and the headship of Christ; (b) works cooperatively with the Holy Spirit to sanctify believers; (c) results in humility in the preacher and the congregation and submission to God's Word; (d) protects the church from false teaching; (e) encourages the congregation to concentrate on Christ rather than a personality in the pulpit.¹⁷ Young men in the church will aspire to be elders, since the role in this biblical environment involves maturity, leadership, and properly handling God's Word. The deacons (vocational or non-vocational) who execute the ministry functions will be led by those who employ genuine leadership methods, not simply dictatorial pronouncements from

¹⁷ "Why Expository Preaching?"

above. The culture of the church will prosper and be better equipped to carry out the mission of Christ, rather than a culture of oppression that is present in many CEO-Pastor environments. Tragic stories like Harvest Bible Chapel and Mars Hill Church were not the just the result of the attitudes and actions of James McDonald or Mark Driscoll but were the ultimate and predictable end of the form of CEO-Pastor government that these large churches adopted.

CHAPTER 5

CONCLUSIONS

Conclusions from History

One-man authority in a New Testament church began in the second century and over the next millennium, culminated into the expansive structure and polity of the Roman Catholic Church. Even the Reformers with *Sola Scriptura* in their soteriology did not completely return to the biblical pattern in their ecclesiology. Most Reformed churches retained the lead pastor role. Recently, however, there is a growing movement in Reformed churches to return to the biblical model of elder plurality.

Conclusions from Exegesis

The exegesis of pertinent passages in Scripture fully supports the model of elder plurality, with no evidence of single-man rule, or hierarchy among elders. In all things, as believers we are to be regulated by God's Word and follow scriptural teaching and scriptural patterns. This should be the only course that we consider as disciples of Christ.

Conclusions from Practicality

Preaching and teaching requires different gifting and personality traits than leading church ministries. Also, there is insufficient time in the week for one man to do both functions properly. The practical arguments, although not dispositive, show that the biblical pattern of elder plurality is the best for the elders as individuals and as a group, for the church, and for the cause of Christ. In all matters, however, the only true and final argument must come from Scripture.

Final Conclusions

We are now ready to conclude that the thesis of this project has been defended, which is that churches should be led, taught, and governed by a plurality of elders, leading the church as a group without a defined single-man authority over them. May God bless those churches and church leaders who have the selfless courage to look intently at the Scripture and faithfully follow the model that Christ has provided for the governance of His body.

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ABSTRACT

PLURALITY OF ELDER LEADERSHIP VERSUS ONE-MAN AUTHORITY IN A NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

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The thesis of this paper is that churches should be led, taught, and governed by a plurality of elders, leading the church as a group without a defined single-man authority over them. Chapter 1 contains the thesis statement, along with a brief discussion of the content and the methodology used in this paper. Chapter 2 reviews church history, from the point in the second century when the church departed from the biblical model of church government until the present day. Chapter 3 provides the exegesis of scriptural passages and examines the pattern of church government and explores whether there is just one or multiple models found in New Testament churches. Chapter 4 presents practical arguments for alternate models of government, based on personality preferences and time management issues. Chapter 5 presents the conclusions formed from the preceding analysis, thereby defending the thesis statement.

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