

RETHINKING CHURCH GOVERNMENT

PART 2 – The Role of Spiritual Leadership

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In part 1 of this study, we examined the role of the congregation as it pertains to authority in the church. Our conclusion was that while the New Testament affirms the reality of congregational *authority* (specifically in the areas noted), it does not necessarily support the notion of congregational *government* (at least in the purely democratic sense).

We now turn our attention to the role of spiritual leadership to consider how it fits into the overall picture of church order and authority. Once again we will examine the relevant New Testament passages in their probable chronological order, enabling us to make note of any patterns or developments, and then draw some conclusions that may be applied to local church government today.

The Role of “Overseers” (or Elders)

Before turning to specific New Testament passages that deal with the role of leaders in the local church, we would do well to remember that Jesus both teaches and exemplifies what is popularly known as “servant leadership” (Mark 9:33-35; Matt 23:11; Luke 22:24-27; John 13:1-17). Specifically, our Lord clarifies that authentic Christian leadership bears no resemblance to the domineering and authoritarian style characteristic of the unbelieving world, and this should be kept in mind as we proceed:

You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first

must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many (Mark 10:42-45; par. Matt 20:25-28).

We would also do well to remember that Jesus, in his “Great Commission,” emphasizes the vital role of teaching in the process of making disciples: “All authority in heaven and on earth has been given to me. Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, and *teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you*” (Matt 28:18-20, emphasis added; cf. Col 1:28-29).

Acts 6:1-6. The earliest church was first led by the apostles (i.e., “the Twelve”; cf. Acts 1:2; 2:37, 42-43; 4:33, 35, 37; 5:2, 12), who had been called to devote themselves “to prayer and the ministry of the word” (6:4; cf. v. 2; note that they are quite clear on their role in the church). When a pressing administrative task threatens to distract them from their calling, they wisely empower the congregation to choose additional leaders to oversee this task.¹ The result of this organizational restructuring is nothing less than the expansion of the church! (v. 7).

The seven men chosen to “wait on tables” are not identified by any official name, such as “deacons” or “elders” (although both have been suggested by commentators).² However, “It is noteworthy that spiritual qualifications were sought in men appointed to such tasks within

¹ Stott rightly points out that “there is no hint whatever that the apostles regarded social work as inferior to pastoral work, or beneath their dignity. It was entirely a question of calling . . . God calls all his people to ministry, that he calls different people to different ministries, and that those called to ‘prayer and the ministry of the word’ must on no account allow themselves to be distracted from their priorities” (*The Spirit, the Church and the World* 121, 122).

² Verse 6 does speak of the laying on of hands but, as Ben Witherington clarifies, “This should probably be seen as an act of commissioning for the task and so a conveying of authority, not a formal rite of ordination [to some particular office]” (*The Acts of the Apostles: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1998] 251).

the church.”³ Whatever their title (if they had one), they were certainly spiritual leaders of the congregation, for these men were “known to be full of the Spirit and wisdom” (v. 3).⁴

James 3:1. It is generally agreed that James the (half) brother of Jesus wrote the letter of James, and that he did so sometime prior to the Council at Jerusalem (Acts 15). This dates the letter in the 40s, providing us with one of the earliest glimpses into local church life. Here he provides a warning about the teaching office: “Not many of you should presume to be teachers, my brothers, because you know that we who teach will be judged more strictly” (cf. Matt 23; Rom 2:21). In this passage, as Peter Davids explains,

the author deals with people wishing to put themselves forward as teachers because of the status and other rewards of the position. This process could and did lead to rivalries and divisions as teachers tried to secure a following. Not so, says James, for not many should be teachers. Only a few are called. What is more, such a role means not simply honor and a following, but responsibility, for “to whom much is given from him much is required” [Luke 12:48].⁵

James 5:14. Later in the letter James writes, “Is any one of you sick? He should call the elders of the church to pray over him and anoint him with oil in the name of the Lord.” What is immediately noteworthy about this verse is that “James expected that there would be elders *in every New Testament church to which his general epistle went*—that is, in *all the churches in existence at that time*.”⁶ Exactly how this office came about is nowhere revealed in the Bible (although

³ I. Howard Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles: An Introduction and Commentary* TNTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1980) 125. Witherington adds that “the main issue is character, not special talents or abilities, and on their being full of the Spirit” (*The Acts of the Apostles* 250).

⁴ “These might be regarded as ideal requirements of all church appointments” (F. F. Bruce, *The Book of the Acts*, Revised Edition [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988] 121).

⁵ Peter H. Davids, *The Epistle of James: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1982) 136. Douglas J. Moo adds, “James’ intention is not to dissuade those from teaching who, like himself, have the call and gifts to teach. But he does want to impress upon his readers the seriousness of the ministry and to warn them that it must not be entered into frivolously or for selfish reasons” (*The Letter of James* TNTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1985] 120).

⁶ Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994) 912.

there were Jewish antecedents⁷; cf. Acts 4:5, 8; 6:12). What we can affirm here is that, at the time of James' writing, the office was already established in the church, there was a plurality of elders in each local congregation (this is the obvious understanding of "the elders of the church" in this verse), and their function included praying for the sick.

Acts 11:30. Likewise, the term "elders" (referring to Christian elders) appears in the book of Acts for the first time rather surprisingly and without explanation. The church at Antioch decides to provide famine relief for believers in Judea and end up "sending their gift to the elders by Barnabas and Saul." The apostles were still active in the church at Jerusalem, but now elders (plural) are functioning alongside of them⁸ (cf. 15:4, 6, 22; 16:4; 21:18), "apparently as the officials who deal with financial (and doubtless also other) matters."⁹

Acts 13:1-3. In the church at Antioch we are not told of elders, but rather of "prophets and teachers"¹⁰ (v. 1). Five such leaders are mentioned, with Barnabas and Saul listed among them. It is impossible to be certain which men were prophets and which were teachers, leading Ben Witherington to suggest that "perhaps it is best to understand the list to refer to those who were both teachers and prophets, both informing and inspiring, being themselves informed and inspired."¹¹ Were they also considered elders? We simply do not know.

Acts 14:23. Toward the end of his first missionary journey, Paul, along with Barnabas, travel back to the recently planted churches at Lystra, Iconium and Pisidian Antioch and

⁷ Davids notes that "it is reasonable to conclude that it was absorbed from the synagogue, although given a distinctly Christian character" (*James* 193; Cf. G. Bornkamm, *TDNT* IV 651-683; David Mappes, "The 'Elder' in the Old and New Testaments," *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 [January-March 1997] 80-92).

⁸ Marshall speculates that these "elders" may be the seven men chosen in Acts 6 (*Acts* 204). Alastair Campbell goes further, making a case (unconvincingly, in my mind) that apostles and elders are referring to the same body in the church at Jerusalem ("The Elders of the Jerusalem Church," *The Journal of Theological Studies* 44.2 [October 1993] 511-528).

⁹ Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. I 566.

¹⁰ Teachers are mentioned in Acts only here, but cf. 1 Cor 12:28; Rom 12:7; Eph 4:11.

¹¹ Witherington, *The Acts of the Apostles* 391.

“appoint elders for them in each church.”¹² This is the first reference in the book of Acts to elders outside the church at Jerusalem, and once again it is plural (i.e., as in James 5:14, multiple elders serve each local congregation).

Acts 15; 16:4. As we noted in the first part of this study, the congregations of Antioch and Jerusalem were actively involved in the circumstances surrounding the Council at Jerusalem (and, to some degree, in the meeting itself); however, we are told explicitly that the decision that came out of this gathering was “reached by the apostles and elders in Jerusalem for the people to obey” (Acts 16:4; cf. 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23).¹³ James played a prominent role in the proceedings (15:13-21; cf. 12:17; 21:17-18), “but his decision is portrayed by Luke as a reflection of the Spirit-led consensus of the entire council”¹⁴ (and 16:4 confirms this). In other words, we find that “authority was more collegiate than hierarchical.”¹⁵

1 Thessalonians 5:12-13. The leaders (plural) alluded to in 1 Thessalonians 5 are not identified by name (either personal or official), but Donald Guthrie suggests that “they were probably elders, since according to Acts Paul and his companions were in the habit of appointing elders in every church which they established (Acts 14:23).”¹⁶ How these people functioned in the church is revealed in verse 12 by three present participles¹⁷: They are described as (1) “working hard among you” (cf. v. 13), in the sense of toiling for the needs of the

¹² “One way of strengthening the churches was making provision for leadership in them. In each of them there were some members who had already attained a sufficient degree of spiritual maturity to serve their fellow believers as guides and give them the further instruction and encouragement they required in face of the hardship and persecution which they must expect as they maintained their Christian witness” (Bruce, *The Book of the Acts* 280).

¹³ Commenting on Acts 15:4ff, C. K. Barrett writes, “The serious business of the Council is to be done by *apostles and elders*” (*A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Acts of the Apostles*, vol. II ICC [Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1998] 712).

¹⁴ Hanson, “Authority” 106.

¹⁵ *Ibid.*

¹⁶ Donald Guthrie, *New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1981) 761.

congregation; (2) “leading you in the Lord,” the verb carrying with it “the primary senses of both ‘to lead’ and ‘to care for’”¹⁸ (and, interestingly, it is the same verb used of overseers in 1 Tim 3:4-5; deacons in 1 Tim 3:12; and elders in 1 Tim 5:17; cf. Rom 12:8); and (3) “admonishing you,” an activity shared by the congregation (1 Thess 5:14; Rom 15:14; Col 3:16). It is on the basis of carrying out these functions that the leaders are to be respected and highly esteemed in love. Indeed, “Paul views Christian leaders not as those of the highest status within their community, but as those who serve”¹⁹ (cf. 1 Cor 3:5-9; 2 Cor 4:5; 10:8; 13:10).

1 Corinthians 12:27-31. In Paul’s discussion with the Corinthians about spiritual gifts, he lists a number of functions that suggest some sort of leadership role within the congregation: “In the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then . . . those able to help others, those with gifts of administration . . .” (v. 28).²⁰ Concerning the ranking of the first three, “It is not so much that one is more important than the other, nor that this is necessarily their order of authority, but that one has precedence over the other in the founding and building up of the local assembly.”²¹ While apostles were unique and temporary (cf. 9:1-2; 2 Cor 12:12; Eph 2:20), they, along with prophets and teachers (cf. Acts 13:1), were primarily devoted to the ministry of the word (cf. Acts 6:2, 4).

¹⁷ “Since the three present participles are governed by a single definite article, the reference is to one group of people who perform the three specified services in the church” (Bruce, *1 and 2 Thessalonians* 118; Cf. Wanamaker, *Thessalonians* 192).

¹⁸ B. Reicke, *TDNT* VI 702; cf. BAGD 707. The NIV rendering, “who are over you in the Lord” employs a preposition (“over”) that is never used in the NT of local church leaders.

¹⁹ Andrew D. Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church: Christians As Leaders and Ministers* (First Century Christians in the Graeco-Roman World; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000) 247.

²⁰ As Ben Witherington III points out, this list strongly suggests “that God gives not only abilities but also persons as gifts to the community, whether *apostoloi*, prophets, teachers, or others” (*Conflict and Community in Corinth: A Socio-Rhetorical Commentary on 1 and 2 Corinthians* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995] 262).

²¹ Fee, *The First Epistle to the Corinthians* 619-620; cf. Blomberg, who sees the ranking as indicating “chronological priority” (*1 Corinthians* 247).

The other two gifts we are interested in, “those able to help others” and “those with gifts of administration,” require a bit more explanation. The former is a vague term (occurring only here in the NT) that probably includes the idea of ministering to the physical and spiritual needs of others in the congregation.²² The latter term (also occurring only here in the NT) is poorly translated (given that we would think of “administrative skills”), for the word speaks of a helmsman, that is, one who steers or directs a ship,²³ and thus “refers to those who give guidance or wise counsel” to the church.²⁴ It is tempting to see in this function a veiled reference to elders (and perhaps even deacons in the previous function), but that would be pure conjecture at this point.

1 Corinthians 16:15-18. Later in the letter Paul urges the Corinthians to recognize and submit to various leaders (plural) who had “devoted themselves²⁵ to the service of the saints” (v. 15), laboring hard in their work and providing spiritual refreshment to all (vv. 16, 18; cf. 1 Thess 5:12-13; Philemon 7). As Andrew Clarke observes, “The legitimation which Paul offers for their authority lies not with their status, and significantly no title is applied to them. Rather their legitimation lies with the fact that they worked and labored for the community.”²⁶ In other words, the emphasis, as we have seen in previous passages, is on function rather than office.

Romans 12:6-8. In a passage very similar to 1 Corinthians 12, Paul writes,

We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. If a man’s gift is prophesying, let him use it in proportion to his faith. If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; if it is encouraging, let him encourage; if it is contributing to the needs of others, let him give generously; if it is leadership, let him govern diligently; if it is showing mercy, let him do it cheerfully.

²² Cf. Fee, 621; Blomberg, 247.

²³ H. Beyer, *TDNT* III 1035-1036.

²⁴ Witherington, *Conflict and Community in Corinth* 261; Blomberg suggests that it “encompasses the governing aspect of church leadership” (1 *Corinthians* 247).

²⁵ Literally, “they have appointed themselves,” suggesting that these church members saw a need for leadership and took the initiative to meet it (presumably being gifted to do so).

²⁶ Clarke, *Serve the Community of the Church* 217-218.

Once again we see that various capacities of leadership are among the gifts that God graciously gives to his church.²⁷ Every believer has a gift (or gifts), but only some have gifts of leadership (cf. Eph 4:11), such as prophesying, teaching, and “leadership.” Concerning this latter word, Douglas Moo notes that “Paul twice elsewhere uses this verb (once absolutely) to denote the ‘leaders’ of the local church (1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 5:17). It is probably this ministry, usually associated with the elders/overseers (see 1 Tim 5:17) that Paul has in mind here.”²⁸ And, as the apostle goes on to clarify in the text, this gift of leadership is to be exercised “with diligence.”

Acts 20:17-38. We now arrive (chronologically speaking) at Paul’s farewell address to “the elders [plural] of the church” at Ephesus (v. 17). In it he says, “Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God, which he bought with his own blood” (vv. 27-28). From this crucial text we may briefly note the following:

- I. Paul commands²⁹ the Ephesian elders “to pay attention to their own spiritual condition (cf. 1 Tim 4:16) as well as to that of the church; it is only as the leaders themselves remain faithful to God that they can expect the church to do likewise.”³⁰

²⁷ “In this regard see especially how the participle for leaders, ‘those who care for the church,’ is found nestled between ‘contributing to the needs of others’ and ‘showing mercy’” (Fee, “*Laos and Leadership*” 141 n.37).

²⁸ Douglas J. Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* NICNT (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1996) 768-769. He continues: “Noting that Paul sandwiches this gift between two others that refer to giving, some commentators argue for the meaning [‘give aid’]. But the meaning ‘give aid’ is not well attested for this verb, and Paul does not appear to use the verb with this meaning elsewhere” (on this alternative view, see esp. James D. G. Dunn, *Romans 9-16* WBC [Dallas: Word Books, 1988] 731; Those who support Moo’s conclusion include Leon Morris, *The Epistle to the Romans* [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988] 442, and John R. W. Stott, *Romans* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1994] 328).

²⁹ The verb is a present imperative which, as previously noted, calls for continued action.

³⁰ Marshall, *The Acts of the Apostles* 333. Stott adds, “They cannot care adequately for others if they neglect the care and nurture of their own souls” (*The Spirit, the Church and the World* 326).

2. He then reminds them that it is the Holy Spirit who has gifted and called them to serve the congregation in Ephesus. This certainly encourages leaders to take their role seriously, as it is God himself who has entrusted them with the care of his flock. But this also helps to clarify that those who are involved in appointing leaders (whether it be a church, as in Acts 6:1-6, or an apostle, as in 14:23) are primarily responsible for identifying those whom God has already appointed.
3. The apostle then clarifies that these elders are also “overseers.” And while the two terms are obviously referring to the same people, they are not identical in meaning.³¹ “Elder,” as the name itself suggests, typically has to do with age and seniority, but also alludes to those qualities that tend to come with age, such as maturity and wisdom.³² “Overseer,” also as the name suggests, speaks more of function rather than status or character.³³
4. And, as the text goes on to clarify, the particular function that these elders/overseers are to carry out is “to shepherd the church of God.”³⁴ In other words, they are to serve as “pastors”! As the context reveals and John Stott summarizes, this entails “a double duty: to feed the sheep (by teaching the truth [vv. 20, 27]) and to protect them from wolves (by warning of error [vv. 29-31])”³⁵ (cf. Col 1:28-29).
5. Finally, Paul reminds the elders/overseers that the flock they are to pastor belongs not to them, but to God, who purchased it with his own blood. There could hardly be a

³¹ See esp. “Excursus 2: Overseers and their relation to elders” in Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* 170-181.

³² Cf. Bornkamm, *TDNT* VI 651-683.

³³ Cf. Barrett, *The Acts of the Apostles*, vol. II 975-976; Beyer, *TDNT* II 599-622.

³⁴ The NIV reads like a command, but the Greek reveals that the verb is an infinitive of purpose.

³⁵ Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World* 328. Referring to the thoroughness of Paul’s teaching (certainly as a model for the elders to follow), Stott writes, “He shared all possible truth with all possible people in all possible situations. He taught the whole gospel to the whole city with his whole strength.”

greater incentive to be diligent in leading and caring for a local church than to remember this key truth.³⁶

Ephesians 4:11-12. Given the ground we have just covered, it is not surprising to find Paul referring to “pastors and teachers” among the leadership gifts with which Christ has blessed the church (v. 11).³⁷ And, as we just discovered, the pastoral function is at the heart of being an elder/overseer, which surely explains why neither of these latter two terms are found in the passage. Pastors and teachers (and the other leaders mentioned) are specifically given “to prepare³⁸ God’s people for works of service, so that the body of Christ may be built up” (v. 12).³⁹ In other words, as Peter O’Brien concludes, “Christ has given ‘special’ ministers so that they will ‘make God’s people fully qualified’, thus enabling them to serve their Lord by serving one another.”⁴⁰

Philippians 1:1. We have already briefly analyzed this verse on pages 3-4, but it bears noting once again that Paul only identifies “overseers and deacons” as the apparent leaders of the church at Philippi. However, in light of Acts 20:17, 28 (as well as 1 Peter 5:1-2, which we will get to shortly), we can now safely assume that he doesn’t name either elders or pastors simply

³⁶ Stott concludes with these choice words: “Pastors will persevere in caring for them only if they remember how valuable they are in God’s sight. They are the flock of God the Father, purchased by the precious blood of God the Son, and supervised by overseers appointed by God the Holy Spirit. If the three persons of the Trinity are thus committed to the welfare of the people, should we not also be?” (*Ibid.* 329).

³⁷ This is the only place in the NT where the noun “pastor” is used of church leaders. Further, commentators raise the question as to whether “pastors and teachers” are referring to one office or function (“pastors-teachers”) or two. In response, we should note that, according to our discussion of Acts 20, pastors will of course be teachers (i.e., they must feed and protect the flock). However, the question remains as to whether all who are gifted as teachers are also thereby pastors or elders/overseers.

³⁸ O’Brien notes that for this noun there are “several related meanings, including ‘repairing’ (Matt. 4:19; Mark 1:19), ‘equipping, preparing’, ‘completing’, and ‘training, disciplining.’ The notion of equipping or preparing, in the sense of making someone adequate or sufficient for something, best suits the context” (*The Letter to the Ephesians* 303; cf. BAGD 418).

³⁹ Note the brief discussion and related footnotes on pages 16-17 of this study concerning the translation of this verse.

⁴⁰ O’Brien, *The Letter to the Ephesians* 303.

because doing so would be redundant – the three terms (overseers/elders/pastors) apply to the same people.⁴¹

1 Timothy 3:1-7. At the chronological end of Paul’s New Testament letters stand the so-called “Pastoral Epistles.”⁴² In 1 Timothy 3 we find the first of two texts that detail the qualifications for those who “set their heart on being an overseer”⁴³ (v. 1; cf. Titus 1:5-9; this desire itself perhaps being the first necessary qualification). Neither list is a checklist (for certain items would not apply to all candidates⁴⁴) but rather a set of guidelines for those responsible for appointing leaders – as well as norms for those who desire to be appointed or are already serving.

What Paul primarily emphasizes in both lists are observable moral qualities that should characterize all church members. As Marshall explains, “there is no ‘higher standard’ for church leaders, but it is expected that they will actually show the qualities which are desirable for all believers.”⁴⁵ The items in 1 Timothy 3 that more specifically relate to a leadership role include being “able to teach” (v. 2; although cf. Rom 15:14; Col 3:16) and “taking care of God’s church”

⁴¹ An interesting question is why Paul chose to use the term “overseers” here rather than “elders” to designate the primary leaders of the church (he refers to church leaders as elders elsewhere in his letters; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5). Interestingly, James Jeffers notes that “overseers” is the only leadership term Paul uses that may have been borrowed from the Greco-Roman world (specifically of the voluntary associations) (James S. Jeffers, *The Greco-Roman World of the New Testament: Exploring the Background of Early Christianity* [Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1999] 80).

⁴² Although written to two of Paul’s delegates (Timothy and Titus), Marshall notes that “there is much to suggest that 1 Tim and Tit were intended to be overheard by the local leaders in these congregations and probably by the ordinary members as well” (*The Pastoral Epistles* 52).

⁴³ “If 1 Tim 3:2 and Tit 1:7 speak of the [overseer] in the singular and with the article, the reference is to the [overseer] as a type and not to the number of [overseers] in a given place” (Beyer, *TDNT II* 617; cf. Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* 84 [additional notes on 3:2-3]).

⁴⁴ Notably those that speak of being married and having children (1 Tim 3:2, 4; Titus 1:6; cf. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* 158).

⁴⁵ Marshall, *The Pastoral Epistles* 472.

(v. 5). And here we see that the duties of overseers are basically what we found in Acts 20: teaching the truth, refuting error (cf. Titus 1:9), and providing spiritual oversight.⁴⁶

1 Timothy 4:14. Later in the same letter, Paul tells Timothy, “Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the body of elders laid their hands on you.” Paul now switches his terminology from “overseers” to “elders,” but in light of what we’ve learned so far he is almost certainly referring to the same body of leaders.⁴⁷

1 Timothy 5:17-25. Yet again Paul employs the term “elders” when he writes, “The elders [plural] who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (v. 17). This verse makes it even more certain that elders and overseers are one and the same, for here the function of elders is described as “directing the affairs of the church” and “preaching and teaching.” The verb in the former phrase is the same one Paul uses elsewhere to refer to the task of leaders (1 Thess 5:12, Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 3:4-5, 12), and in every case it speaks of “leading” and “caring for” the church.⁴⁸ The latter phrase, “those whose work is preaching and teaching,” is probably not referring to a subset of elders (as the translation implies), but rather further clarifying the work of all elders (cf. our discussion on Acts 20:28).⁴⁹ As William Mounce notes, given that 1 Timothy 3:2 requires

⁴⁶ Mounce concludes, “The Pastoral Epistles make it clear that the primary leadership is in the hands of the teachers” (*Pastoral Epistles* 185). However, Marshall clarifies that Paul “never requires that teaching be confined to those holding an official position, and the description of the qualities required in overseers . . . is most naturally understood to indicate that they exercised their teaching gifts before their appointment” (*The Pastoral Epistles* 176).

⁴⁷ Alternative views include seeing the overseer as an elder in charge of a house church, with the collective elders forming a governing pastoral council (Giles, *What On Earth Is the Church?* 150); and seeing elders as a covering term for both overseers and deacons (Fee, *1 and 2 Timothy, Titus* 78).

⁴⁸ Cf. Reicke, *TDNT* VI 702.

⁴⁹ Virtually all commentators note that the word here translated “especially” can also mean “namely,” or “in other words,” and this is the preferable rendering in this context.

that all elders be “able to teach,” “it seems unlikely that there was such a person as a nonteaching elder/overseer.”⁵⁰

Paul continues in the passage, “Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by two or three witnesses. Those who sin are to be rebuked publicly, so that the others may take warning” (vv. 19-20). Here we see that Paul is concerned with protecting elders from “slandorous attacks or unsubstantiated accusations,”⁵¹ but we also see that leaders are not without accountability – whether from other elders or members of the congregation.

Titus 1:5-9. We come now to the second of Paul’s two lists of qualifications for church leaders. This one is basically the same as (though not identical to) the list in 1 Timothy 3,⁵² only now the term “elders” is used: “The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. An elder must be blameless . . .” (vv. 5-6). What is immediately noteworthy is that Paul clearly felt that a local church without elders (plural) was not complete (observe that he calls for “elders *in every town*,” that is, in every town that has a church; cf. Acts 14:23). But then as he proceeds to list the qualities to look for in selecting elders, the apostle switches terms and speaks of “an overseer” (v. 7). This removes all doubt that elders and overseers are one and the same in Paul’s mind.⁵³

1 Peter 5:1-5. Peter’s instructions to the elders in churches “scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia” (1 Pet 1:1) are very similar to those of Paul to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 (although approximately 5-10 years have passed):

⁵⁰ Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles* 307.

⁵¹ David Mappes, “The Discipline of a Sinning Elder,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (July-September 1997) 333.

⁵² The differences surely are due to the fact that Timothy and Titus were dealing with different circumstances, and therefore certain items are emphasized differently – or exclusively – in one context or the other. The gist is the same, however: leaders are to be morally and spiritually qualified to lead.

⁵³ Leon Morris writes, “It is difficult to interpret this passage other than on the assumption that the office of [overseer] is identical with that of elder” (*Ministers of God* [London: InterVarsity, 1964] 73).

To the elders [plural] among you . . . Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers — not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

As we found with James' reference to local church elders (Jas 5:14), "Far from expecting different kinds of church government when he was writing, Peter assumes that *all* these churches, whether founded by Paul or by others, whether predominately Gentile or predominately Jewish or evenly divided in their makeup, would have elders leading them."⁵⁴ And here, as in Acts 20:28, the "elders" are identified as "pastors" and "overseers"⁵⁵ (the latter two roles in the form of a verb, denoting function rather than title or office⁵⁶). What's more, they are reminded that the flock is not theirs, but God's (v. 2; cf. v. 4, where Jesus is identified as "the Chief Shepherd"; John 21:16).

How these leaders are to go about their task is provided by three contrasting statements: (1) "not because you must, but because you are willing," which is to say, "No-one should be pressured into accepting a church office which he does not really want to have — God wants our

⁵⁴ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 912. J. Ramsey Michaels, noting the absence of the definite article with the noun "elders" suggests that the translation should perhaps read "to any elders among you," meaning that not all congregations would necessarily have elders (*1 Peter* WBC [Waco: Word Books, 1988] 279). However, Peter H. Davids effectively refutes this position, noting that "5:5 uses an identical anarthrous construction to refer to 'younger people,' certainly without implying that some churches had none. Instead, Peter, using this generic construction, divides the congregation into two parts: (1) elders and (2) non-elders" (*The First Epistle of Peter* NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1990] 175 n.2).

⁵⁵ It is significant that earlier in the letter Jesus is referred to as "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls" (2:25). This leads Michaels to recognize that "the risen Christ cares for his people by means of the care and responsibility they take for one another"[esp. through the ministry of leaders, who are his undershepherds] (*1 Peter* 283). Davids adds that, in connecting shepherding with overseeing both here and in Acts 20:28, it is clear that "shepherding is a job of oversight" (*The First Epistle of Peter* 178)

⁵⁶ It should be noted that Peter actually commands the elders to "Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers." Michaels notes that the aorist imperative "in keeping with the many aorist imperatives in 1 Peter . . . establishes a pattern of behavior to be maintained until the end of the age" (*1 Peter*. 282).

ungrudging service”⁵⁷ (cf. 1 Tim 3:1); (2) “not greedy for money, but eager to serve,” for to be in leadership for financial gain is morally reprehensible (cf. 1 Tim 6:3-11); God wants leaders who are eager not for money, but to care for his church; and (3) “not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.” This latter phrase “implies that they [the elders] did exercise a real authority in the congregations: the subtle danger was the temptation to misuse that authority.”⁵⁸ This calls to mind the teaching of Jesus (cf. Mark 10:42 and p. 23 of this paper), and further clarifies that there is no place for a domineering or authoritarian leadership style in the church. Rather, leaders are to be examples to the congregation – especially of humility (cf. vv. 5-6; 3:8; Phil 2:1-11; Col 3:12-14).⁵⁹ The ultimate motivation for serving as the kind of leader Peter describes is found in verse 4: “And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away” (cf. Matt 25:14-30, “well done good and faithful servant!”).⁶⁰

Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24. The writer of Hebrews does not use the term “elder,” “overseer,” or “pastor,” but rather speaks of “leaders” (plural), which is surely a reference to those fulfilling the primary leadership role in the church (in other words, they could just as easily have been referred to by the other names).⁶¹ They are characterized as people who teach/preach the word

⁵⁷ Grudem, *The First Epistle of Peter* 188. Michaels adds, “Peter knows that the human ego is a severe and unhealthy taskmaster and that ministry all too often becomes a compulsive act of self-gratification. He wants it instead to be a free and joyous response to God’s love” (*1 Peter* 284).

⁵⁸ D. Edmond Hiebert, “Counsel for Christ’s Under-Shepherds: An Exposition of 1 Peter 5:1-4,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 139 (October-December 1982) 337. Cf. Bornkamm, *TDNT* VI 665.

⁵⁹ “In fact, one could well argue that, following the pattern of the ancient world and especially of Judaism, teaching and leading was for the NT basically a matter of example rather than of lecture or command. Being an example fits well with the image of ‘flock,’ for the ancient shepherd did not drive his sheep, but walked in front of them and called them to follow” (Davids, *The First Epistle of Peter* 181).

⁶⁰ As the passage continues in verse 5, commentators are not in full agreement as to whether Peter is continuing to refer to those in the office of elder (which explains why the NIV translates the term, “those who are older”). Whether he is or not, the idea of being submissive to leaders has explicit biblical support in 1 Corinthians 16:16 and Hebrews 13:17.

⁶¹ Lane indicates that the term “is not used substantively as a designation of office but rather in its original participial sense of men in any leading position” (*Hebrews 9-13* 526); cf. Buchsel, *TDNT* II 907-908.

of God (v. 7), whose faithfulness to Christ is worthy of imitation (vv. 7-8), and who “keep watch over you as men who must give an account” (presumably to God; v. 17). For these reasons, they are worthy of the congregation’s obedience and submission (v. 17). However, as was clarified in the previous section (p. 20), “the specific quality of the obedience for which [the word here] asks is . . . that won through persuasive conversation and that follows from it.” In other words, leaders must help fellow members of the congregation see the wisdom in following their lead so that the church will willingly submit to them (cf. 2 Tim 2:24-26).

Jude 12. This verse speaks of “shepherds who feed only themselves” (cf. Ezek 34; Matt 23). To be sure, pastors are to “keep watch over yourselves” (Acts 20:28), but a primary reason for this (as that verse goes on to clarify) is so that they may be effective in caring for God’s flock that has been entrusted to them. In other words, they should feed *not only* themselves (spiritually speaking), but the flock also.

3 John 9. John speaks of Diotrephes, who is apparently a leading member of the church, and describes him as one “who loves to be first” (which, of course, is not good!). Again, this calls to mind the teaching of Jesus (e.g. Mark 9:33-35), and reminds us that leaders are called to serve, not be served.

Revelation 1:20. Finally, it is held by some that Jesus, when he speaks of “the angels of the seven churches” (cf. 2:1, 8, 12, 18, 3:1, 7, 14), reveals that churches have a primary leader in authority over them rather than a team of elders/overseers/pastors who share the leadership role. In response, we should note first that the consistent pattern that emerges from the passages we have previously examined supports the latter position.⁶² It is also recognized by all

⁶² Timothy and Titus are sometimes presented as examples of a single chief officer, however, as Gordon Fee explains, “in both cases they are itinerants on special assignment who are there as Paul’s apostolic delegates, not as permanent resident pastors” (“Reflections on Church Order in the Pastoral

commentators that every other occurrence of the word “angel” in Revelation (and there are many) is clearly speaking of a heavenly being.⁶³ Furthermore, as Saucy notes, “It is doubtful also that the ‘angels of the seven churches’ (Rev 1:20ff) are references to the [individual] pastors [of each church]. One of the churches, that of Ephesus, is known to have had a plurality of elders (Acts 20:17).⁶⁴

At the very least, we should be cautious about what we conclude about these “angels,” for there are almost as many positions as there are commentators!⁶⁵

Brief Summary and Analysis of the Role of Overseers

Before summarizing the role of overseers, there are some preliminary conclusions that we can draw regarding local church leadership in general as we reflect upon the ground we have just covered.

First of all, it is abundantly clear that “elder,” “overseer,” and “pastor” are all names for the same office or task in the church (Acts 20:17, 28; Eph 4:11; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1; 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Pet 5:1-2).⁶⁶ “Elder” probably emphasizes the status and character of a leader (i.e., a

Epistles, with Further Reflection on the Hermeneutics of *Ad Hoc* Documents,” *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 28.2 [June 1985] 147; cf. Banks, *Paul’s Idea of Community* 197-198)

⁶³ This does not mean that the occurrences in Rev. 2-3 must therefore also refer to heavenly beings, but it is a significant observation.

⁶⁴ Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* 150.

⁶⁵ For the most detailed analysis of the various ways the angels are identified, see David E. Aune, *Revelation 1-5 WBC* (Dallas: Word Books, 1997) 108-112, who does not take a position himself. G. K. Beale contends that they are heavenly beings (*The Book of Revelation: A Commentary on the Greek Text* NIGTC [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1999] 217); Robert L. Thomas believes that they are “men who are representatives of the churches but are without a unique leadership function” (*Revelation 1-7: An Exegetical Commentary* [Chicago: Moody Press, 1992] 118); Robert H. Mounce holds that “the angel of the church was a way of personifying the prevailing spirit of the church” (*The Book of Revelation* NICNT [Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1977] 82).

⁶⁶ See esp. David Mappes, “The New Testament Elder, Overseer, and Pastor,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154 (April-June 1997) 162-174; Daniel L. Akin, “Overseer,” *Evangelical Dictionary of Biblical Theology* (ed. Walter A. Elwell; Grand Rapids: Baker, 1996) 586, who writes, “Scholars are virtually unanimous that in the early church the [elder] and the [overseer] were one and the same”; and J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul’s*

respected person who displays godly wisdom and maturity), while “overseer” and “pastor” stress the function (i.e., one who provides spiritual oversight by shepherding God’s flock).

Second, it is also quite clear that leadership in the local assembly is to be shared by a team of people (Acts 6:1-6; Jas 5:14; Acts 11:30; 13:1-3; 14:23; 16:4; 1 Thess 5:12-13; 1 Cor 16:15-18; Acts 20:17, 28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Pet 5:1-2; Heb 13:7, 17, 24). As Wayne Grudem observes, “it was never the pattern in the New Testament, even with the apostles, to concentrate ruling power in the hands of any one person.”⁶⁷ Likewise, Robert Banks concludes that “pastoral work in the congregation was always a corporate rather than solo affair.”⁶⁸ John Stott gets right to the point of these realizations:

There is no biblical warrant either for the one-man-band (a single pastor playing all the instruments of the orchestra himself) or for a hierarchical or pyramidal structure in the local church (a single pastor perched at the apex of the pyramid). It is not even clear that each of the elders was in charge of an individual house church. It is better to think of them as a team, some perhaps with the oversight of house-churches, but others with specialist ministries according to their gifts, and all sharing the pastoral care of Christ’s flock. We need today to recover this concept of a pastoral team in the church.⁶⁹

Third, this “concept of a pastoral team” (i.e., a plurality of elders/overseers/pastors) is the only form of local church leadership portrayed in the New Testament. As Grudem again states, “we do not see a diversity of forms of government in the New Testament church, but a unified and consistent pattern in which every church had elders [or those functioning as elders but referred to by another name] governing it and keeping watch over it.”⁷⁰ Reflecting on Acts 20 and 1 Peter 5, Alexander Strauch adds, “It should be observed that these two great apostles

Epistle to the Philippians (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1953; reprint of 1913 edition), 95, who over a century ago wrote, “It is now generally recognized by theologians of all shades of opinion, that in the language of the New Testament the same officer in the church is called indifferently [overseer] and [elder]” (see also 96-97).

⁶⁷ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 931.

⁶⁸ Robert Banks, “Church Order and Government,” *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters* (eds. G. R. Hawthorne and R. P. Martin; Downers Grove: InterVarsity, 1993) 135.

⁶⁹ Stott, *The Spirit, the Church and the World* 324.

⁷⁰ Grudem, *Systematic Theology* 913.

[Paul and Peter] assign the task of shepherding the local church to no other group or single person but the elders."⁷¹

Fourth, to state the obvious, the only people who should serve on a pastoral team are those who are biblically qualified to do so (Acts 6:3; 1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9; cf. 1 Pet 5:2-4). Saucy writes, "The fact that two extensive lists of qualifications for the office of elder are recorded in the New Testament evidences God's concern over the leadership of the church and the necessity for care in choosing such leaders."⁷²

With these things in mind, we may note that, according to the New Testament data, the role of overseers/elders/pastors includes at least the following (and they are not so much separate items as different ways of describing or further clarifying the task of leading the church):

1. Providing spiritual oversight for the congregation (inherent in the word "overseer"; Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1; Titus 1:7; 1 Pet 5:2; cf. Heb 13:17); or, to put it another way,
2. Leading and caring for the church in the Lord (1 Thess 5:12; Rom 12:8; 1 Tim 3:5; 5:17; cf. Acts 20:35), which includes – among other things – giving guidance and wise counsel (Acts 15; 1 Cor 12:28), praying for the sick (Jas 5:14; and praying in general, Acts 6:4), and providing spiritual refreshment to all (1 Cor 16:18; Phile 7). This is also referred to as
3. Shepherding the flock of God as Christ's undershepherds (Acts 20:28; Eph 4:11; 1 Pet 5:2; cf. John 10:11, 14; 1 Pet 2:25; 5:4; Heb 13:20). This specifically entails

⁷¹ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Revised and expanded; Littleton: Lewis and Roth, 1995) 16.

⁷² Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* 148. This is perhaps a good place to note that "Although the churches did not assist in the appointment of elders by the apostles and their representatives (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5), that should not immediately be interpreted as indicating that elders were only selected by other elders. It must be noted that those instances pertain to the founding of new churches and, it might be argued, are not normative for established churches [cf. Acts 6:1-6]" (Saucy, "Authority in the Church" 233).

4. Teaching and preaching the word of God to the community of believers (i.e., *feeding* the flock by teaching truth; Matt 28:20; Acts 6:4; Jas 3:1; Acts 13:1; Rom 12:7; Acts 20:28 [cf. vv. 20, 27]; Col 1:28-29; Eph 4:11; 1 Tim 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9; Heb 13:7), and doing so humbly and gently, but persuasively (Heb 13:17; 2 Tim 2:24-26). Shepherding also entails
5. Admonishing or warning the congregation as part of the teaching process (i.e., *protecting* the flock by refuting error; 1 Thess 5:12; Acts 20:28-31; Col 1:28-29; Titus 1:9). This teaching and admonishing is for the purpose of
6. Preparing God's people for works of service (or, equipping the saints for the work of ministry; Eph 4:11-12). And vital to an effective teaching/equipping ministry is
7. Being an example to the flock that is worthy of imitation (1 Pet 5:3; Heb 13:7; cf. 1 Cor 11:1; 1 Tim 4:12; Titus 2:7-8). Finally,
8. Possibly handling certain financial matters (Acts 11:30), although we should note that the apostles were quick to delegate such matters when they distracted them from "prayer and the ministry of the word" (Acts 6:1-6).

All of this simply affirms that overseers/elders/pastors have the God-given authority and responsibility to serve as the primary leaders of the congregation (in the manner described above⁷³). However, this does not invalidate or displace the authority of the congregation as it seeks to carry out its role in the church (as summarized at the end of part 1 of this study). It is perhaps better to think in terms of *shared* authority, where there is mutual responsibility, mutual accountability, and lots of humility! (which, of course, requires the vital ministry of the Holy Spirit; cf. Gal 5:13-26; Eph 5:18-21). In other words, both the congregation and those gifted

and called to be leaders contribute to the government of the church (specifically in the ways we have outlined). And this brings us to one last area of interest.

The Role of “Deacons”

Compared with overseers/elders/pastors, the Bible tells us very little about deacons as leading members of a local church. The Greek word is typically translated “servants” (or “servant”; e.g. Matt 20:26; 23:11; 1 Cor 3:5; 2 Cor 6:4; Eph 6:21), and speaks of “voluntary, love-prompted service for the benefit of others.”⁷⁴ Exactly when the word is used in an official sense referring to a position of leadership is not always clear.

Acts 6:1-6. The seven men who are selected by the Jerusalem congregation to take over the administrative task that was keeping the apostles from “prayer and the ministry of the word” are not actually referred to as “deacons,”⁷⁵ but tradition has held that they are in fact the first to serve as such.⁷⁶ In the end, we cannot be certain one way or the other. However, it is instructive that as the needs of the church increase, the leadership of the church (in this case, the apostles) delegates part of the oversight of the community to other qualified men. And, ultimately, everybody benefits from this arrangement – the apostles can get back to what they are called to do, the practical needs of the church are better served, and more people come to faith in Christ (v. 7)!

Romans 16:1. At the end of his letter to the church in Rome, Paul writes, “I commend to you our sister Phoebe, a servant [i.e., “deacon”] of the church in Cenchrea.” Leading

⁷³ It should be noted that “Language of ‘rulership’ [in the hierarchical sense] and ‘authority’ is altogether missing in the NT passages which speak about leadership, except as Paul refers to his apostolic authority in his own churches” (Fee, “*Laos* and Leadership” 134).

⁷⁴ D. Edmond Hiebert, “Behind the Word ‘Deacon’: A New Testament Study,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 140 (April-June 1983) 160.

⁷⁵ Although the verb form is used of these men to describe their ministry (Acts 6:2).

commentators all agree that this is probably the earliest reference to a person fulfilling the office of deacon.⁷⁷ And, of course, it is noteworthy that Phoebe is a woman.⁷⁸

Philippians 1:1. Paul's letter to the church at Philippi acknowledges "the overseers and deacons," but then tells us nothing more about these two groups of servant leaders. However, the order and basic meaning of the two terms suggest that the overseers were the primary leaders of the church, and the deacons somehow assisted them (perhaps in a way similar to Acts 6:1-6).⁷⁹ As Saucy puts it, "It would appear reasonable to conclude that the general function of the deacons is the performance of various services of a practical nature in the church, relieving the elders [i.e., overseers] of burdens which might interfere with their ministry of spiritual oversight."⁸⁰

1 Timothy 3:8-13. The last reference to deacons is found in a list of qualifications for those desiring to fulfill this office in the church. This immediately follows the list of qualifications for overseers, revealing that the church in Ephesus at that time had both overseers and deacons serving it (just as the Philippian church did).⁸¹ The list for deacons, while a bit shorter, is not substantially different from the list for overseers (both are primarily concerned with observable moral qualities). Noticeably absent, however, is any mention of the ability to teach, which suggests that deacons "enjoyed no church-recognized teaching authority akin to

⁷⁶ For helpful discussions of the pros and cons of viewing these men as the first deacons, see Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* 154-155, and Morris, *Ministers of God* 82-88.

⁷⁷ See, for example, C. E. B. Cranfield, *A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Epistle to the Romans*, vol. II (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1979) 781; Dunn, *Romans* 887; Moo, *The Epistle to the Romans* 914.

⁷⁸ Incidentally, there was no Greek word at this time that would be the equivalent of our "deaconess." Men and women alike would be referred to as "deacons."

⁷⁹ Cf. Marshall, "Excursus 10: Deacons and their relation to overseers," *The Pastoral Epistles* 486-488.

⁸⁰ Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* 157.

⁸¹ Interestingly, the list of qualifications for elders in Titus 1:5-9 is not followed by any mention of deacons, which may suggest that deacons were added to the overall leadership picture only after churches were more established (and perhaps larger, thus having more needs). The churches in Crete, in which Titus was to appoint elders, were apparently only recently planted.

that of elders.”⁸² Noticeably present, interestingly enough, is a verse that speaks of “their wives” or “women” or “deaconesses” (depending on the Bible translation used; v. 11). Were there in fact women deacons as well as men? Romans 16:1 has already indicated that there were, so we will leave it at that for now.⁸³

Brief Summary of the Role of Deacons

There is not much that we can say here, other than noting that in some cases there are deacons (apparently both men and women) that serve along with the overseers/elders/pastors (probably in larger, more established churches). Their function is likely to assist the pastoral team by taking care of the various practical needs of the church that would otherwise be distracting to the primary leaders. And not just anyone can be a deacon; only those who meet the biblical qualifications may serve in this capacity.

⁸² Carson, “Church, Authority in” 229.

⁸³ To pursue this issue further, see (along with commentaries on 1 Timothy) Saucy, *The Church in God’s Program* 159-160; and Jennifer H. Stiefel, “Women Deacons in 1 Timothy: A Linguistic and Literary Look at ‘Women Likewise . . .’ (1 Tim 3.11),” *New Testament Studies* 41 (1995) 442-457.