

Biblical Eldership, Part 2 – Whom Does God Want Leading His Flock, the Local Church? (Titus 1:5)

Before we return to Titus, I want to back up and give us a broader context of the whole counsel of God by starting with the question:

Where did this whole idea of leaders called shepherds or elders come from? What was the background to NT readers? The answer is the OT, and that's where we'll start today. We need to see that elder leadership was not a NT invention or convention or temporary early church tradition

Ezekiel 34:1-10 (NASB95)¹ Then the word of the LORD came to me saying, ²“Son of man, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel. Prophesy and say to those shepherds, ‘Thus says the Lord GOD, “Woe, shepherds of Israel who have been feeding themselves! Should not the shepherds feed the flock?’ ³“You eat the fat and clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fat *sheep* without feeding the flock. ⁴“Those who are sickly you have not strengthened, the diseased you have not healed, the broken you have not bound up, the scattered you have not brought back, nor have you sought for the lost; but with force and with severity you have dominated them.’ ⁵“They were scattered for lack of a shepherd, and they became food for every beast of the field and were scattered. ⁶“My flock wandered through all the mountains and on every high hill; My flock was scattered over all the surface of the earth, and there was no one to search or seek for them.”’ ⁷Therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ⁸“As I live,” declares the Lord GOD, “surely because My flock has become a prey, My flock has even become food for all the beasts of the field for lack of a shepherd, and My shepherds did not search for My flock, but *rather* the shepherds fed themselves and did not feed My flock; ⁹therefore, you shepherds, hear the word of the LORD: ¹⁰“Thus says the Lord GOD, “Behold, I am against the shepherds, and I will demand My sheep from them and make them cease from feeding sheep. So the shepherds will not feed themselves anymore, but I will deliver My flock from their mouth, so that they will not be food for them.”’ ”

This is the same God who inspired 1 Peter 5:1-2:

“I exhort the elders among you ... **shepherd the flock of God** among you ... **not for sordid gain** ... nor yet as **lording it over** those allotted to your charge, but proving to **be examples to the flock.**”

This is the same God who inspired Acts 20:28 where Paul says to the elders of the church in Ephesus:

“Be on guard for yourselves and for all **the flock**, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **shepherd the church of God** which He purchased with His own blood.”

This is not mere man's work or man's word on how God's church should be run and led. This is the Living Word of God the Father who owns the church, and the text says God the Son purchased the church with His own precious blood, and God the Holy Spirit makes men to be overseers or elders to shepherd God's flock.

- This shepherd-leadership is a monumental trust, a convicting and challenging responsibility that no godly man takes lightly.
- I think I can speak for myself as well as all the elders when I say with the apostle Paul, “who is sufficient for such things?”

- This is a responsibility beyond what even the best man can fulfill on his own. And we're going to see that God never intended a man to do this on his own.
- There is no more serious or sobering or weighty charge in scripture.
- There are no stronger words our Lord has than for false shepherds who misuse their position and abuse those entrusted to them (Jude 12 "who *shepherd* [care only for] themselves")
- This is language with gravity and weightiness. This is no small thing, but is a sacred work to be approached with fear and trembling and much prayer and we need much of your prayer.

How does God want His church to be run and governed?

Democracy – pure congregationalism rules the church?

Deacons or Trustee Boards or Businessmen or Marketers?

Denomination or higher powers outside local church?

Dictatorship - Single-Elder Rule / Solo Pastor as King?

Devoted Loving Leadership by a Plurality of Godly Elders?

Our church believes and practices the principle of leadership by elders. And today I want to give you some biblical reasons why

Last week we saw the Priority of Elders.

OUR OUTLINE TODAY:

1. The **Plurality** of Elders
2. The **Parity [Equality]** of Elders
3. The **Polity [Government]** of Elders

Next week, we'll see the PURITY of Elders (Titus 1:6 says elders must be "above reproach" or "blameless" and then he talks about marriage fidelity as "husband of one wife" or "a one-woman man")

First, let's consider their PLURALITY

Titus is instructed to "appoint elders in every city" or town church

Where are leaders called elders/shepherds first mentioned in Bible? The answer is Exodus 3

It is to the shepherd Moses when God reveals Himself in the burning bush as "I AM" in that famous speech and self-revelation that God mentions elders as leaders of God's people and whom God wants Moses to involve in leading the exodus from Egypt

¹¹ But Moses said to God, "Who am I, that I should go to Pharaoh, and that I should bring the sons of Israel out of Egypt?" ¹² And He said, "Certainly I will be with you, and this shall be the sign to you that it is I who have sent you: when you have brought the people out of Egypt, you shall worship God at this mountain." ¹³ Then Moses said to God, "Behold, I am going to the sons of Israel, and I will say to them, 'The God of your fathers has sent me to you.' Now they may say to me, 'What is His name?' What shall I say to them?" ¹⁴ God said to Moses, "I AM WHO I AM"; and He said, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'I AM has sent me to you.'" ¹⁵ God, furthermore, said to Moses, "Thus you shall say to the sons of Israel, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, the God of Isaac, and the God of Jacob, has sent me to you.' This is My name forever, and this is My memorial-name to all generations. ¹⁶ "Go and gather the elders of Israel together and say to them, 'The LORD, the God of your fathers, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob, has appeared to me, saying, "I am indeed concerned about you and what has been done to you in Egypt."

...¹⁸ “They will pay heed to what you say; and **you with the elders of Israel will come to the king of Egypt and you will say to him**, ‘The LORD, the God of the Hebrews, has met with us. So now, please, let us go a three days’ journey into the wilderness, that we may sacrifice to the LORD our God.’

Exodus 4:28-30 (NASB95)²⁸ Moses told Aaron all the words of the LORD with which He had sent him, and all the signs that He had commanded him *to do*.²⁹ Then Moses and Aaron went and assembled **all the elders of the sons of Israel**;³⁰ and Aaron spoke all the words which the LORD had spoken to Moses. He then performed the signs in the sight of the people.

Exodus 12:21 (NASB95)

²¹ Then **Moses called for all the elders of Israel** and said to them, “Go and take for yourselves lambs according to your families, and **slay the Passover lamb**.”

Exodus 17:4-6 (NASB95)

⁴ So Moses cried out to the LORD, saying, “What shall I do to this people? A little more and they will stone me.”⁵ Then the LORD said to Moses, “Pass before the people and **take with you some of the elders of Israel**; and take in your hand your staff with which you struck the Nile, and go.⁶ “Behold, I will stand before you there on the rock at Horeb; and you shall strike the rock, and water will come out of it, that the people may drink.” And **Moses did so in the sight of the elders of Israel**.

Exodus 18:12-26 (NASB95)

¹² Then Jethro, Moses’ father-in-law, took a burnt offering and sacrifices for God, and **Aaron came with all the elders of Israel to eat a meal with Moses’ father-in-law before God**.¹³ It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening.¹⁴ Now when Moses’ father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, “What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit *as judge* and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?”¹⁵ Moses said to his father-in-law, “Because the people come to me to inquire of God.¹⁶ “When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws.”¹⁷ Moses’ father-in-law said to him, “The thing that you are doing is not good.¹⁸ “You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; **you cannot do it alone**.¹⁹ “Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people’s representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God,²⁰ then **teach them the statutes and the laws**, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do.²¹ “Furthermore, you shall **select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders** of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.²² “Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and **they will bear the burden with you**.²³ “If you do this thing and God *so* commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace.”²⁴ So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said.²⁵ Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens.²⁶ They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge.

Exodus 19:6-7 (NASB95)

⁶ and you shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.’ **These are the words that you shall speak to the sons of Israel.**’⁷ So Moses came and **called the elders of the people, and set before them all these words** which the LORD had commanded him.

Leviticus 4:15-16 (NASB95)

¹⁵ ‘Then **the elders of the congregation shall lay their hands on** the head of the bull before the LORD, and the bull shall be slain before the LORD.¹⁶ ‘Then **the anointed priest** is to bring some of the blood of the bull to the tent

If you read the whole chapter, it is dealing with sins of the congregation or people in general, then v. 22 talks about when a leader sins, and then v. 27 speaks of when “one of the common people sins”

When the people as a whole congregation are in sin is the context of v. 13. It's interesting that the elders here identify themselves with the people and it is the elders that lay on hands (we'll see this later in the NT when this pattern of elders laying on of hands continues, showing their public identity with the one they lay hands upon in behalf of the people).

Notice also that verse 16 distinguishes the priest from the elders. Both OT & NT never confuse priests with elders, those are different roles. It was the priest who made atonement.

This is important, because those who argue for church democracy and congregationalism use as their most common battle cry the NT teaching of "the priesthood of every believer"

Priesthood doesn't have anything to do with elder leadership. An elder or teacher of God's Word was always a separate position. Christ has replaced and ended the priestly and sacrificial system because He is our High Priest and our Sacrifice and completed that work, but He did not discontinue leadership by a plurality of men.

Of course it's always been true that God is and always was in OT times the Ultimate Leader, the Ultimate Teacher, the Ultimate Judge, Ultimate Overseer, the Ultimate Shepherd, Ultimate Head over all, but He also has always worked through godly men who bore those human titles and positions with delegated authority. Not their own innate authority or power, they were to serve with God's. Even with the greatest of leaders like Moses, God intended spiritual leadership to be shared, rather than a solo ministry.

Some have tried to argue for the solo elder or single-pastor model of government by appealing to the image of shepherd, which they think requires one man over an entire flock.

But this ignores the fact that in the Bible we find flocks being shepherded by multiple men at the same time. In the first book of the Bible, Genesis, we have all of Joseph's brothers watching the flock. And by the beginning of the NT, this was still the case as we read in Luke 2:8

"In the same region there were *some* shepherds staying out in the fields and keeping watch over their flock [singular] by night."

It would be a tough and lonely task to have to shepherd a flock all alone in the cold with unruly sheep and wolves with all the dangers and difficulties and discouragements and no other shepherds.

Numbers 11:11-17 (NASB95)

¹¹ So Moses said to the LORD, "Why have You been so hard on Your servant? And why have I not found favor in Your sight, that You have laid the burden of all this people on me?" ¹² "Was it I who conceived all this people? Was it I who brought them forth, that You should say to me, 'Carry them in your bosom as a nurse carries a nursing infant, to the land which You swore to their fathers'?" ¹³ "Where am I to get meat to give to all this people? For they weep before me, saying, 'Give us meat that we may eat!'" ¹⁴ "**I alone am not able to carry all this people, because it is too burdensome for me.**" ¹⁵ "So if You are going to deal thus with me, please kill me at once, if I have found favor in Your sight, and do not let me see my wretchedness." ¹⁶ **The LORD therefore said to Moses, "Gather for Me seventy men from the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and their officers and bring them to the tent of meeting, and let them take their stand there with you.**" ¹⁷ "Then I will come down and speak with you there, and I will take of the Spirit who is upon you, and will put *Him* upon them; and **they shall bear the burden of the people with you, so that you will not bear it all alone.**"

Deuteronomy 27:1 (NASB95)

¹ Then **Moses and the elders of Israel charged the people**, saying, “Keep all the commandments which I command you today.

Deuteronomy 31:9-12 (NASB95)

⁹ So **Moses wrote this law and gave it to the priests**, the sons of Levi who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, **and to all the elders of Israel**. ¹⁰ Then Moses commanded them, saying, “At the end of *every* seven years, at the time of the year of remission of debts, at the Feast of Booths, ¹¹ when all Israel comes to appear before the LORD your God at the place which He will choose, **you shall read this law in front of all Israel in their hearing**. ¹²

“Assemble the people, the men and the women and children and the alien who is in your town, **so that they may hear and learn and fear the LORD your God, and be careful to observe all the words of this law**.

...²⁴ It came about, when Moses finished writing the words of this law in a book until they were complete, ²⁵ that Moses commanded the Levites who carried the ark of the covenant of the LORD, saying, ²⁶ “Take this book of the law and place it beside the ark of the covenant of the LORD your God, that it may remain there as a witness against you. ²⁷ “For I know your rebellion and your stubbornness; behold, while I am still alive with you today, you have been rebellious against the LORD; how much more, then, after my death? ²⁸ “**Assemble to me all the elders of your tribes and your officers, that I may speak these words in their hearing and call the heavens and the earth to witness against them**.

Those who argue for a single-elder rule of a church sometimes appeal to the “Moses model” – but I don’t think they’ve read the model of Moses carefully enough. Moses was a unique and rare individual in the history of Israel. He was distinct from the elders and was different than a NT elder in a number of ways:

- Moses was one who wrote Scripture, in fact He had a prominent and special role as the first writer of Scripture, and the lawgiver for God’s people
- He was the one who communicated new revelation after speaking directly with the Lord
- He was the leader of the entire nation
- He was the deliverer or redeemer of Israel
- Moses is thus more a picture of Christ
- The NT doesn’t use the image of Moses as the pattern for pastors but it does use the image and terminology of elders

Moses, this greatest and most famous leader in Israel’s history himself had the need for elders, a plurality of leaders. And when the NT establishes the pattern for leaders in the local church, it is elders that are continued, not the Judges or Monarchs of the OT.

This plurality of godly leadership is the pattern God has always honored and will continue to honor. Among the elders of Israel, even the mighty leadership of Moses was not enough and was to be shared among elders. This leadership model was not just a cultural development or tradition in Israel, it was explicitly God’s instructed pattern from the time Scripture was first written.

After 1,500 years of this pattern of leadership of God’s people, what does Paul the Jewish apostle write for Titus to put in order?

Titus 1:5 says “appoint elders in every city as I directed you”

Elders is in the plural and city is in singular

According to Homer’s *Iliad* and *Odyssey*, Crete was known for having somewhere between 90 and 100 cities or towns in its past, and whichever of those had Christian communities, Titus 1:5 says he needed to get biblical elders in place for each.

Scholars believe the churches in Crete were very young, so you can't explain away the plural use of elders in this command of God's Word by saying maybe Crete had developed multiple house churches with one elder in each church (that's actually the main argument for many who argue for solo elders instead of plurality).

IN ACTS 14, WE HAVE PAUL'S OWN PATTERN

²³ When **they had appointed elders for them in every church**, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

The word "church" is singular and "elders" is plural. This is *as churches were established*, not split to multiple house flocks. This was the apostle's pattern by Paul himself who writes to Titus that he is also to appoint elders in every church on the island of Crete.

The biblical pattern is not a solo pastor, a singular exclusive elder, a Lone Ranger Leader by himself on the range. There was a multiplicity of men leading each early church in the clear N.T. examples we have recorded, many of whom were bi-vocational.

In fact, the word "elders" is always in the plural in the NT, except in John's epistles where he identifies himself individually as elder.

A plurality of elders was not only true of the churches Paul established. Acts 15:4 says there were elders in Jerusalem who the apostles met with. Acts 20:17 says there were elders (plural) in the church (singular) of Ephesus. If there were multiple local churches or house churches referred to, Luke could have easily written the plural word "churches" as he did in 15:41 and 16:5. But in Acts 20:28, he says "'Be on guard **for yourselves** and for all **the flock** [singular], among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the **church** [singular]" – the singular "flock" is also repeated in verse 29 instead of using the plural "flocks." Revelation 2:1–7, written about 40 years later according to traditional dating, implies there was still one church in Ephesus.

Other evidence for plurality has been summarized as follows:

- On occasion, people say that there was more than one church in a city. However, no passage explicitly states this. It is a matter of speculation, therefore, that early first century cities had more than one church. We are on safer ground to go with what the New Testament does in fact say than to bring in ideas that have no exegetical support, being mere conjecture.
- Paul addresses one local church in Philippi with its multiple deacons and overseers (Philippians 1:1). Philippians 4:15–16 clearly indicates that Paul has one church in mind, for he says that no church but the one to whom he is writing supported him at that time. Furthermore, Philippi was a small village in the first century; thus, there would hardly have been more than one local church there.
- Paul addresses the church (singular) in Thessalonica (1 Thessalonians 1:1), yet refers to its leadership in the plural (5:12–13). These men, Paul says, *labor among you, have charge over you, and admonish you*. *Labor* and *have charge* are the same verbs Paul uses to describe the ministry profile of elders in 1 Timothy 5:17. The apostle does not suggest that elders from other churches *have charge over* the Thessalonian church, only that its own elders do.

- 1 Timothy 5:17 points to the plurality of elders [within a church it says “*let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those that labor in the Word and doctrine*”] ... 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks inclusively of an overall category of elders within which—as a sub-category—at least one elder labors at teaching the Word. Plurality of elders is inescapable in this verse.
- In James 5:14, a sick person is *to call for the elders* (plural) *of the church* (singular), i.e., of his own local church. Because each church is autonomous and responsible to bear the burdens of its own members, James would not exhort a sick man to seek out the leadership of another church. Consequently, all of the elders whom the ill believer calls serve in the sick person’s church, which validates the plurality of elders.¹

*Interestingly, Protestants don’t challenge a plurality of deacons (which is only mentioned in 2 passages) but there is a strange distrust of a plurality of elders (which is all over NT)

#2 - A PARITY OF ELDERS

Is there such a thing as a “Chief Pastor,” in charge of all the other elders as their superior?

Yes, if you remember the word “pastor” means “shepherd” and if you remember that Peter says the only “Chief Shepherd” is Jesus. Christ is the CEO, the Senior Pastor-Shepherd, we are just under-shepherds. Under Christ, elders stand on equal ground at the cross.

When Peter (this great apostle, the most prominent spokesman of the original 12 disciples), when he writes to other elders he doesn’t write from a higher rank and he doesn’t pull rank on them, he writes in 1 Peter 5:1 “I exhort you *as a fellow elder*”

*SHOW SLIDES AGAIN WITH PROPER STRUCTURE?

The modern concept of a single / senior pastor ruling a church developed much later than Titus or the rest of the NT. So did the pyramid business model and hierarchical clergy ranks (Episcopalians have bishop above elders), RCC adds cardinals, pope, etc. 1 Timothy 5:17 doesn’t teach that there is a “ruling elder” who has a higher rank or different office than teaching elder – it actually just say “elders who rule well are worthy of double honor, *especially* those that labor in the Word and doctrine.” All elders are to be able to rule and teach, but some do so more effectively than others. They are equal in their position as elders, although they don’t have to be equal in giftedness or time, there’s no biblical teaching I can find of an elder totem pole or pyramid.

Now, there *is an authority above elders* and that is Jesus, but there is a genuine parity or equality among the elders. One way we here at GCBC try to apply this is unanimity in decisions before moving forward. In the main biblical picture we have of the elders deliberating over a difficult decision in Acts 15, it says that the elders agreed in verse 22 and verse 25 said they were of one mind.

Our original constitution says it this way (which will stay the same in our new constitution as well):

“Because unity and harmony must be modeled by the spiritual leadership, the Elders by prayerful consideration with humility, are to be unanimous in all decisions (1 Corinthians 1:10; Philippians 1:27, 2:2-5; Ephesians 4:3-6; Romans 15:5-6)”

1 Corinthians 1:10 (NASB95)

¹⁰ Now I exhort you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you all agree and that there be no divisions among you, but that you be made complete in the same mind and in the same judgment.

Philippians 1:27 (NASB95)

²⁷ Only conduct yourselves in a manner worthy of the gospel of Christ, so that whether I come and see you or remain absent, I will hear of you that you are standing firm in one spirit, with one mind striving together for the faith of the gospel;

Philippians 2:2-5 (NASB95)

² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others. ⁵ Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ

Ephesians 4:3-6 (NASB95)

³ being diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. ⁴ *There is* one body and one Spirit, just as also you were called in one hope of your calling; ⁵ one Lord, one faith, one baptism, ⁶ one God and Father of all who is over all and through all and in all.

Romans 15:5-6 (NASB95)

⁵ Now may the God who gives perseverance and encouragement grant you to be of the same mind with one another according to Christ Jesus, ⁶ so that with one accord you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus

If Christ is the head of the church, we don't believe the Head will want the body to go in different directions, and if the leaders are not in sync, how will the body be in sync? If God wants His local flocks to be led by spirit-filled servant-leaders, the One Spirit will not lead differently and in humility we need to be diligent to preserve the unity of the Spirit, patiently persuading each other from God's truth in God's timing for God's glory.

Our 3rd and final point: The POLITY of Elders (government)

Nowhere in the Bible do we find a church run by a solo pastor or majority rule. Nowhere is a pastor called the head of a church – Christ is always the Head and we need to do things His way.

The model for church structure is not the business world, where there's a president or CEO in charge at the top, with a VP and board of directors underneath him, and the stockholders as the voting members of the corporation, with the bottom line being image or finances or growth or other worldly measures of success.

The model for government in scripture is not pure congregationalism, either. If decisions were made by what all the people want, the Israelites would have gone back to Egypt, as the vast majority voted to do on numerous occasions. God's leaders are answerable to God's will, not the will or whims of the people.

I know there are many good Baptist men who are committed to congregational-led churches, but I just don't see in Scripture where the sheep are to be leading their shepherds. In God's Word, the shepherds are to lovingly lead the sheep in paths of righteousness.

That may not sound like the Baptist way or the American way, but believe it or not, God doesn't have an American flag by His throne in heaven. If an elder-led church government doesn't sound Baptist or American to you, I'm sorry, but unless I am convinced by Scripture, my conscience is captive to the Word of God. Here I stand. I cannot do otherwise. God help me.

*One pastor said it this way: 'Many people also wrongly assume that our church government is patterned after the U. S. government and operates as a democracy. The pastors and the elders are the elected officers, similar to the President and Congress [and the Democrats and Republicans bicker in Senate and vote their preferences and the most vocal or powerful majority wins] ... While that system is fine for America, at the risk of sounding un-American or anti-Baptist, I must say that democracy is not the biblical way to view church government. As shocking as it may sound, God is not an American! He didn't set up His church as a democracy, where the most powerful factions control the purse strings. We're not free to impose our American ideas about government onto the church, unless we find those ideas in the Bible.'*²

We live in a very anti-authority culture, especially the generation I'm in which recoils at any thought of having someone over us and us not being the ones who call the shots. But God's Word is our authority and 1 Thessalonians 5:12 says leaders are "those who have charge over you" (you are to recognize and respect, not rebel)

Hebrews 13:17 (NKJV) "**Obey those who rule over you**, and be **submissive**, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief" The word "rule" can be misleading if you think of a harsh ruler lording it over like secular rulers do – this is *agape* leadership, not arrogant lording, but it is leadership with highest accountability and responsibility to God, watching over your soul. The way you can make it a joy to the men who lead this church is by submitting to God's Word and following it when taught. Not complaining about us, but praying for us, as this is a high task beyond our human abilities.

In Titus 1:5, God's Word instructs to "appoint" plural elders in the church, and the Greek word for "appoint" carries the literally meaning of "put in charge" (that thought of responsibility doesn't excite me in a hunger for position, it honestly makes me tremble)

Even the verb for "pastor" or "shepherd" can be translated as "rule" as we see it translated 3x in Revelation of Christ ruling with a rod (2:27, 12:5, 19:15). The shepherd's rod and staff image in the OT was an image of discipline, but Psalm 23 says it also brings comfort to the believer. Even church discipline comforts true sheep

1 Peter 5 says elders are to lead the flock whom it describes as "those allotted to your charge ... shepherd ... exercising oversight ... but not lording it over them" (those are leadership terms)

Godly leadership is not to be harsh – it's to be loving leadership like Christ exemplified. The fact that 1 Peter 5:4 in that context describes Christ as the “Chief Shepherd” is clear indication that the term Shepherd carries authority and loving leadership with it that sheep neglect to their own danger and peril. If sheep are to lead the shepherd, as some Christians seem to argue, are we to lead Christ the Shepherd? The analogy breaks down. Can you honestly look at that passage and conclude the sheep are to lead the flock, instead of shepherds? The logic of the passage requires leaders and the fact that there is a “*Chief Shepherd*” requires under-shepherds.

A word closely related to shepherd is “overseer / bishop” – in fact Peter also wrote in 1 Peter 2:25 that Christ is both “Shepherd and **Overseer** of your souls” (some translations say “Guardian”)

That's the image of an “overseer” – a guardian not only of the church in general and of God's truth, but of precious souls!!

Christ is the ultimate Overseer but until He comes again to rule or shepherd His kingdom on earth, His Word has appointed overseers to visibly carry on His ministry over His flock under His headship. The description of an elder as an “overseer” to Greek audiences was very familiar to them for a leader with delegated authority.

The word ... is of Greek origin from pre-New Testament times. Secular usage of the word referred to those whom the Greek or Roman emperor would appoint to lead the captured city-states of that day. The bishop [OVERSEER] of the city was responsible to the emperor for the well-being and order in the city.

Lightfoot has provided valuable insight by his historical research. He states, “‘Bishop, overseer’ was an official title among the Greeks. In Athenian language it was used especially to designate commissioners appointed to regulate a new colony or acquisition.” He further points out that the usage of the word *bishop* “suggests two subsidiary notions also: (1) Responsibility to a superior power; (2) The introduction of a new order of things.” Both of these ideas clarify the use of the word *bishop* by the NT church.

When the churches began springing up, the Greek converts would naturally look for (and be guided to) a term to describe their leaders. *Bishop* [OVERSEER] was a logical selection as they already understood its meaning in secular life.

The term ... seems to be used fewer times in the book of Acts, but there were also probably fewer saved Greeks than Jews at that point in church history as well. *Bishop* is used in the epistles written to the city churches in Gentile areas.³

The term “elder” on the other hand, was of Hebrew OT origin and was a very familiar concept to those of Jewish background, and was not even limited to their culture only.

Alexander Strauch's book *Biblical Eldership* documents how

‘Leadership by a council of elders is a form of government found in early every society of the ancient Near East. It was the fundamental government structure of the nation of Israel through its Old Testament history ... For Israel ... eldership was as basic as the family By definition, the elder structure of government is a collective form of leadership in which each elder shares equally the position, authority, and responsibility of the office.’⁴

It was eldership that God through Moses set apart as their earliest form of shared leadership; helping Moses communicate God's Word to the people, and applying God's Word in judging difficult cases among the people. Leaders called "elders" later led cities, but still "their function was decision making – applying wisdom to the lives of the people, resolving conflicts, giving direction, and generally overseeing the details of an orderly society."⁵

Even some who disagree with elder rule being for churches today admit the term "elder" meant "to rule, direct, or govern"⁶

One writes:

... the elders established and led in the exile synagogues in each town. They thus were the religious leaders or rulers. Of elders in this OT period, the respected Bible scholar and historian J. B. Lightfoot states:

Illustrations are found among the chosen people we meet at every turn with presbyters or elders in Church and State from the earliest to the latest times. In the lifetime of the lawgiver, in the days of the judges, throughout the monarchy, during the captivity, after the return, and under Roman domination, the "elders" appear as an integral part of the governing body of the country. ... Over every Jewish synagogue, whether at home or abroad, a council of "elders" presided.⁷

It is easy to see why the Holy Spirit should move the inspired writers to use the term *elder* and, in fact, establish a church office with that title. Jewish believers would be very familiar with the significance and responsibilities associated with the term *elder*. The church thus took an existing word from one familiar setting to use in another.⁸

Paul who grew up immersed in this Jewish culture and as a Christian often interacted often with elders of Jewish synagogues and spoke there whenever he could – he now writes of the church:

1 Timothy 5:17 "The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching."

The idea of elders ruling or governing was not invented by modern denominations, it's the expectation of the text. And those who do it well are to be doubly honored, especially those who not only rule well, but who also labor to exhaustion in God's Word.

The Greek word "rule" here is *pro-istemi*, which means to rule, or to govern, to lead, to preside over or stand before, to direct, to manage. It includes not just the nuance of authority but also the image is lovingly looking after and protecting by its leadership.⁹

1 Tim 3:3-4 uses the same Greek word when it says the elder must govern his own house well if he will govern the church family.

There is an idea of authority and leadership clearly in verse 3 because of the analogy of the father leading his home.

And when verse 4 speaks of "taking care" of God's house, the word means "to care for, look after, have charge of."¹⁰ It's used of the Good Samaritan who was not like the unloving religious Jewish leaders ignoring a hurting wounded man in his path.

Luke 10:34 says he cared enough that he “*came to him and bandaged up his wounds, pouring oil and wine on them; and he put him on his own beast, and brought him to an inn and **took care of him.***”³⁵ “*On the next day he took out two denarii and gave them to the innkeeper and said, ‘**Take care of him ...**’*”

There’s a stewardship there when you’re entrusted to take care of souls in the church of God. It’s a responsibility with high accountability when verse 4 talks about taking care of God’s house

In verse 12, deacons are also required to be good **leaders** of their own family, but it doesn’t say deacons govern the church of God

Deacons are servants of the church, and they certainly can lead that way by example. Women like Phoebe are also referred to with the same word as servants of the church and she is an example to all in Romans 16:1-2 of her great ministry as a women servant (same word *diakonos* as 1 Timothy 3:12) who Paul esteems highly her role of helper and Paul lists her first in the list of names there.

But that is not a ruling or governing leadership office – the Scripture reserves those types of terms for the team of elders or in 1 Timothy 3 your translation may say overseers or bishops.

Notice what Paul says right after discussing elders and deacons

1 Timothy 3:15 (NASB95)¹⁵ but in case I am delayed, *I write* so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.

Paul is writing these instructions in these pastoral epistles (letters to Timothy and Titus) so that God’s people who read these letters will know how to conduct things and ourselves in God’s house.

And in 1 Timothy 5:17 he speaks of honoring “elders [who] rule well” – there are some elders of the church who will be more gifted in ruling or governing than others.

This same word is used of spiritual gifts in Romans 12:6-8:

“⁶We have different gifts, according to the grace given us ... ⁷...If it is serving, let him serve; if it is teaching, let him teach; ⁸if 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.” (NIV)

KJV “he that ruleth, with diligence” (some use “lead” and some add “with zeal”). You can’t get away from loving ruling governing leadership, which is God’s gift to godly men for our benefit.

1 Timothy 5:17-22 only makes sense with a plurality of elders. I challenge anyone who thinks solo elders are to be the norm to explain how this passage works with that.

Please pray for us as we seek to lead this church in a way that would glorify God.

¹ George E. Meisinger, "Elders: How Many?" *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 10/1 (Spring 2004), p. 15-17.

² Steve Cole, "Who Runs this Church?" <http://www.fcfonline.org/content/1/sermons/021807M.pdf>

³ David Bixby, "What is an Elder," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* Volume 9/2 (Baptist Bible College and Seminary, 2005), p. 8-9.

⁴ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, p. 39.

⁵ John MacArthur, "Answering the Key Questions About Elders," available from Grace to You Ministries (www.gty.org)

⁶ David Bixby, "Elder Rule," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* Volume 10/1 (Spring 2006), p. 6. This writer feels the term "elder leadership" is more appropriate than "elder rule" when the other N.T. images and descriptions are taken into account.

⁷ 4. J. B. Lightfoot, *Saint Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1963), 96.

⁸ Bixby, "What is an Elder," *Journal of Ministry and Theology* Volume 9/2 (Baptist Bible College and Seminary, 2005; 2006), p. 7-8.

⁹ *Theological Dictionary of the New Testament*, ed. Gerhard Kittel, Geoffrey William Bromiley and Gerhard Friedrich (Grand Rapids, Mich: Eerdmans, 1964-1976), 6:700-703.

¹⁰ Timothy Friberg, Barbara Friberg and Neva F. Miller, *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids, Mich.: Baker Books, 2000), 4:165.