

# Leadership Model in a Local Church

[Leonard Li](#)

(Updated 5/1/2007)

## 1. Introduction

The leadership structure in Protestant churches today seems to gravitate towards three basic models. At one end there is the single-leader model, where a church has a central figure usually with the title of senior pastor, who has the final authority on all major church decisions. At the other end there is the democratic model, where members of the congregation by majority rule hold the ultimate power of directly or indirectly making major decisions, including the selection of church officers. Finally, there is the model somewhere in between, where a group of positionally equal leaders, sometimes called elders, jointly makes decision on important church matters.

Naturally, that is a very general description of church leadership models. In reality there is a spectrum of leadership structures spanning those three models. In this article, however, we would like to present the idea that the New Testament model of church leadership is basically a plurality of elders making strategic decisions with a group of deacons managing church operations. We are presenting this model as one of the simplest ways to combine most of the relevant scriptures into a consistent picture.

## 2. Some Basic Concepts

Before getting into our main topic, let us first clarify some basic concepts that will help us understand the church leadership model as outlined in the New Testament:

### ***A. Dual View of Church Leadership - Gifts and Offices***

To understand church leadership as outlined in the New Testament, we need to differentiate *gifts* from *offices* in a local church. Perhaps a simple analogy will help. In a university there are positions (offices) such as professors, associate professors, etc., and each position has certain qualifications or requirements associated with it. On the other hand, a professor may specialize in one or more fields such as humanities, science, engineering, etc. These specializations are associated with the individual's skills (talents or gifts). A person may have more than one specialization (gift), e.g., a physicist may also be an engineer. However, at a single time and place a person will only take one position (office). For example, a professor will not normally be an assistant professor of the same college at the same time.

The New Testament describes co-workers in a church with these two complementary views. One is from the view of offices, such as in I Timothy 3 and Titus 1, and the other is from the view of gifts, such as in I Corinthians 12 to 14, Romans 12, and Ephesians 4. Recognizing these two views helps us understand the leadership model, whereas mixing these two views can cause confusion and lead to unnecessary disputes.

The only places in the New Testament where church offices are discussed in some detail are I Timothy 3 and Titus 1. On the other hand, based on the context, it is not difficult to see that the list in Ephesians 4:11 is a list of people with various God-given gifts, and such is also the case with the list in I Corinthians 12:28. In fact, I Corinthians 12:4-6 uses several related terms: gifts (Greek "*charisma*"), services (ministries, Greek "*diakonia*"), and

workings (operations, Greek “*energ ē ma*”). None of them, however, refers to church offices.

### **B. Elders and Overseers**

The qualifications for an overseer (Greek “*episkopos*”) as listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and those for an elder (Greek “*presbyteros*”) in Titus 1:6-9 are basically the same. Paul uses both terms to refer to the same person in Titus 1:5 and 1:7. Therefore it is generally concluded that “elder” and “overseer” are two different words for the same office in a church. Evidence from other places in the New Testament (Acts 20:17, 20:28, Philippians 1:1) supports this conclusion as well.

### **C. Elders and Deacons**

Based on what we can learn directly from the New Testament, e.g., from I Timothy and from Titus, in a local church the only two offices mentioned are elders (overseers) and deacons. Even though there are not significant differences between the qualifications of elders (overseers) and those of deacons, we can see that elders carry the responsibility of shepherding and teaching (I Timothy 3:2, I Peter 5:1-3, Acts 20:28). It is therefore reasonable to say that elders are the church leaders responsible for providing spiritual guidance and making strategic decisions, while deacons are responsible for managing church operations.

### **D. Plurality of Elders**

An interesting and important observation is that the word “elder” always appears in plural in the New Testament. The word “elder” (Greek “*presbyteros*”) appears 67 times in the New Testament. Six times it refers to person(s) older in age (Luke 15:25; John 8:9; Acts 2:17; I Timothy 5:1, 2; I Peter 5:5). Among the other 61 times, (Matthew - 13 times; Mark - 7 times; Luke - 4 times; Acts - 17 times; I Timothy 5:17, 19; Titus 1:5; Hebrew 11:2; James 5:14; I Peter 5:1; II John, III John, Revelations - 12 times), the word is always plural except for three places. The three places where it obviously has to be singular are: I Timothy 5:19, where it refers to an elder being accused, and II and III John where the Apostle John refers to himself as an elder (see Reference [8] for an in-depth analysis on this). For the remaining 58 times, about one third of them refers to church elders, while other times it refers to Jewish elders, or those heavenly elders in Revelation.

In addition, the Greek word “*sympresbyteros*” (fellow-elder) appears once in the New Testament (I Peter 5:1) where the Apostle Peter also refers to himself as an elder.

For the sake of completeness, another Greek word “*presbyterion*”, generally meaning an assembly of elders, appears three times in the New Testament (Luke 22:66; Acts 22:5; I Timothy 4:14).

Even though it is not explicitly stated in the New Testament, the plurality of elders seems to give the picture of a group of leaders receiving instructions from the one and only head of the church - Christ. The plurality also provides some checks and balances as the leaders pray together to receive instructions from Christ.

### 3. Leadership Model of a Local Church

We all know that Christ is the Head of the church, and leaders of a church are merely servants receiving instructions from Christ. In other words, Christ is the *single-leader* of the church, and any human leader(s) are merely second-level leaders. Based on discussions in the previous section, we can see that in a local church the only two offices clearly mentioned in the New Testament are elders (overseers) and deacons. Whenever church leadership is mentioned, we always find the plural word “elders” implying collective leadership, not singular. An elder shepherds the church along with other elders. They work together with mutual respect. Any one elder should not think or act in such a way as if he has final authority, because any elder is fallible and has limitations. They should complement and correct each other while seeking instructions together from the head of the church - Christ, in order to minister to the church.

### 4. Discussions

#### A. *Pastors*

The Greek word “*poim ē n*” (shepherd) appears 18 times in the New Testament. Ephesians 4:11 is the only place it is translated as “pastor”. Among the other 17 times, 9 times this word refers to Jesus Himself (Matthew 26:31; Mark 14:27; John 10:11, 12, 14, 16; Hebrews 13:20; I Peter 2:25), and 8 times it refers literally to a shepherd of sheep (Matthew 9:36, 25:32; Mark 6:34; Luke 2:8, 15, 18, 20; John 10:2). Therefore, Ephesians 4:11 is the only place where this word “*poim ē n*” is used to mean someone with the gift of shepherding.

Let us look at Ephesians 4:11. From the context, especially verse 8, it is not difficult to see that verse 11 refers to workers in church to whom the Lord has given various gifts. In particular, “pastor” is a term used to describe a co-worker in a church with the gift of shepherding.

In addition, the Greek word “*archipoim ē n*” (chief shepherd) appears once in the New Testament (I Peter 5:4) where it refers to Jesus Himself.

A pastor is a person with the gift of shepherding. An elder is a person taking the office of eldership, and one of the responsibilities of that office is shepherding. When someone who has the gift of pastor also takes the office of elder, then that person can be addressed either as pastor or elder. There is no contradiction or confusion - just as we can address a physics professor either as a physicist or as a professor. One title emphasizes the person’s gift and the other emphasizes the person’s position.

On the other hand, an elder is not necessarily a pastor, and vice versa. Even though an elder’s responsibility includes shepherding, it does not mean that every elder has the gift of shepherding (cf. [8]). This is similar to the situation where the responsibility of every Christian includes evangelism, but not every Christian has the gift of evangelism.

#### B. *Full-time workers versus part-time workers*

What is not discussed in this article is the New Testament view of so-called full-time (clerical) workers versus part-time (lay) workers in a church. Suffice it to say that the difference between an elder and a pastor is not because one term refers to part-time workers and the other to full-time workers, but rather due to the two complementary views of church co-workers discussed before.

### ***C. Workers for the universal church versus workers for the local church***

There is a view that elders and deacons are positions in a local church, and apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers (Ephesians 4:11) refer to positions in the universal church. Again this discussion is outside the scope of this article. We will only point out that: 1) this view is not inconsistent with the statement that elders and deacons are the only two offices in a local church, and 2) this view is not without its difficulties. Questions arise, for example, whether the positions in the universal church should include not only the ones described in Ephesians 4:11, but also those described in I Corinthians 12 to 14, and in Romans 12.

### ***D. Women as Elders***

This article does not address the issue whether women can be elders. Even though it is generally accepted among Protestant churches that a woman can be a deaconess, mostly based on I Timothy 3:11, views seem to be split when it comes to the question of whether women can be elders.

### ***E. Christ as “Chief Shepherd” and Elders as Shepherds***

The term “Chief Shepherd” is from I Peter 5:4. We would like to point out that I Peter 5:1-4 is in fact an excellent place for us to see that elders are shepherds of the church. Here not only did the Apostle Peter call himself an elder, but he was also addressing and exhorting fellow elders to “be shepherds of God’s flock ..., serving as overseers ...; not lording it over ... , but being examples ... And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory ...” (NIV). From the context it is very clear that Christ is the Chief Shepherd and the elders are the shepherds.

Therefore if a pastor (person with the gift of shepherding) joins a church and serves in an office of eldership (with the responsibility of shepherding), then in terms of his gift he is a pastor, but in terms of his office he is an elder. This is why the Apostle Peter called himself an elder (I Peter 5:1). In terms of his calling he was an apostle, but in terms of his position in the church he was an elder. Not only Peter, but the Apostle John also called himself an elder (II John 1:1, III John 1:1) for the exact same reason.

It is interesting to note that according to Acts 13:1 Barnabas was either a prophet or a teacher. On the other hand the Bible also refers to Barnabas as an apostle (Acts 14:14). Similarly in Acts 13:1, the Apostle Paul, though clearly an apostle, was also listed among the prophets and teachers. All of these further strengthen the notion that the list in Ephesians 4:11 (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) refers to gifts and not offices in local churches. A person can have many different gifts, but a person normally does not occupy different offices simultaneously.

### ***F. Appointment of Elders***

In Acts 14:23 it is mentioned that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders. Indeed in Titus 1:5 Paul also directed Titus to appoint elders in every town. However, we must remember that ultimately it is the Holy Spirit who appoints workers (Acts 13:1-3), and man merely confirms the calling of the Holy Spirit. Therefore whether we confirm the will of the Holy Spirit by using appointment or election is not critical. The important element is that this person must meet the qualifications set forth in the Scripture, and be confirmed by the saints of the church. Another example is Acts 20:28 where Paul said to the Ephesian elders, “the Holy Spirit made you overseers”.

## 5. Summary

In this article we point out that in the New Testament there are two complementary views about church co-workers, one based on different gifts and the other based on different offices. With this, we recognize that the model of church leadership is basically a group of elders overseeing church ministry, and deacons managing church operations. As Christ is the undisputed *single-leader* of the church, any human leader(s) are merely second-level leaders. Their function is more for receiving instructions than for making decisions. As such, the Scripture implies a plurality of human leaders so that they should complement and correct one another while seeking instructions together from the Lord.

In the mean time, from a complementary point of view, the Bible paints a picture of co-workers with Spirit-given gifts working together as members of the Body of Christ. In fact, the Bible seems to put more emphasis on this view than the view of offices. Here however, we should note that the gifts given to Christians are not just limited to those five listed in Ephesians 4. One should also include at least those described in I Corinthians 12 to 14, and in Romans 12. Each and every Christian is commanded to use their individual Spirit-given gifts for the Kingdom of God.

## 6. References

- [1] Alexander Strauch, “*Biblical Eldership*”, Lewis and Roth (1987).
- [2] John MacArthur Jr., “*Answering The Key Questions About Elders*”, Grace to You (1984)
- [3] Gordon Fee, “*1 and 2 Timothy, Titus*”, New International Biblical Commentary (1984)
- [4] Gordon Fee, “*Gospel and Spirit*”, Hendrickson (1991)
- [5] <http://www.nccn.net/~brennanp> (Biblical Eldership Homepage, 12/1999)
- [6] <http://www.davidbrash.org.uk/Studies/be/be.htm> (Biblical Eldership (UK), 4/2007)
- [7] “*Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Leadership*”  
(<http://www.peacemakers.net/resources/strauch/biblicaleldership.htm>)
- [8] Daniel B. Wallace, “Who Should Run the Church? A Case for the Plurality of Elders”  
([http://www.bible.org/page.php?page\\_id=414](http://www.bible.org/page.php?page_id=414))
- [9] Jon Zens, “The Pastor” (<http://www.searchingtogether.com/articles/zens/pastor.htm>)

**Note:** This article can be found at <http://www.sbecc.org/elders.pdf>. It may be freely used, quoted, redistributed, or linked to. Please send comments to author’s e-mail address at [lsli@alumni.upenn.edu](mailto:lsli@alumni.upenn.edu).