

Eldership
in *Action*

Through
BIBLICAL
GOVERNANCE
of the **CHURCH**

Richard H. Swartley

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Eldership in Action: Through Biblical Governance of the Church
Richard H. Swartley

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Endorsements

There is a sad dearth of books advocating biblical eldership that also address the crucial issues involved in improving elder leadership and effectiveness. Not a theoretician but a practitioner of the truths he presents, Dick Swartley has spent a lifetime thinking about the issues of biblical church government, and has been at the forefront of establishing a biblically ordered church that has a worldwide outreach. He exposes the distortions of eldership and sets forth a positive practical vision for effective church eldership.

This book is particularly helpful for growing churches, with excellent insights and suggestions for enhancing prayer, elders-staff relations, planning, consensus building, decision making, and communication with the congregation. I highly recommend this valuable work as standard reading for church leaders. It fills a big gap.

Alexander Strauch

*Author of *Biblical Eldership**

Elder, Littleton Bible Chapel, Littleton, Colorado

While there are good books on the theology of eldership, Dick Swartley's work carefully addresses the practice of eldership. It is clarifying, challenging, and convincing, and I commend its common sense linking of solid biblical insight with the real-life struggles those of us in church leadership all share.

Doug Goins

Former Pastor Elder; now Pastor-At-Large and Missionary,
Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, California

For me, the philosophy of ministry of the church is an area of expertise and a real-time, hot-button issue. Clad in my scholar's hat and my churchman's experience, I am very picky (sometimes downright ornery) when I encounter others' attempts to give insight and direction on the biblical functioning of the church. Usually, I walk away from such books with great disappointment, saddened anew that another author just did not get it. But, I can say unashamedly that Dick Swartley gets it in this book!

I have not read any other book on church leadership and governing that so fully integrates the biblical and wisely, practical! Dick draws from his graduate theological training and over forty years' experience of providing the kind of leadership of which he speaks. The work is the author's mature expression of biblical interpretation and decades of wise leading in the church. I recommend that it be put in the hands of as many elders, pastors, seminary professors, and students as possible. This fantastic book will be immensely helpful to those who will have to give an account to Jesus Christ for their leadership role in His Church.

Walt Russell, Ph.D.

*Author of *Playing with Fire**

Professor of New Testament, Talbot School of Theology
Biola University, Los Angeles; Church Consultant

THE ELDER

selection process to achieve a council that will support their philosophy of ministry.³¹ However, the standards of elder equivalence and plurality make it absolutely necessary that a group of men whose loyalty is to Christ, not to another leader within the church, is in place.

By way of preparation and consensus building, men who are being seriously considered for selection as elders should first complete a course on the role of the elders,* and the history, theology, purpose, vision, policies, and procedures of the church. In this context, each candidate ought to be prayerfully considering his calling. The men and their wives should be interviewed to find out if they are willing to commit the time and effort to fulfill the responsibilities of the position and have their families' support. Only when all these aspects of the process are finished may the council consider the men's appointment.

LACK OF CANDIDATES

Many authorities on creating strong, collaborative leadership teams stress recruiting the best talent possible, and it is true that great groups or teams are composed of great individuals.³² Still, the church cannot create elders. To appoint men to eldership because they are outstanding leaders elsewhere is unbiblical and foolhardy. Instead, we must appoint men whom the Holy Spirit has already appointed, who have demonstrated that appointment through their visible service in the church.

**Men will not labor as true elders unless the church
is organized in such a way that volunteer service
is essential for the body to function.**

All that has been said here about the appointment of elders is predicated on this proviso: Men are already undertaking the work and role of elders among God's people. But here we must face the undeniable truth—and face it squarely—that men will not labor as true elders unless the church is organized in such a way that such

* I recommend Alexander Strauch, *The Study Guide to Biblical Eldership*, and Alexander Strauch and Richard Swartley, *The Mentor's Guide to Biblical Eldership*, supplemented by the church's own statements of doctrine, values, vision, positions, and policies.

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OF IMMEASURABLE ASSISTANCE AND ENCOURAGEMENT in the preparation of this work were those who also labor to promote biblical leadership of Christ's church. Ben Able, Paul Apple, Tom Arnsberg, John Ellis, Doug Goins, Dr. Vern Mittelstadt, Dr. Walt Russell, Alexander Strauch, and Paul Winslow not only supported the value of the project with enthusiasm, but graciously reviewed the manuscript at various stages of completion. These brothers' sound advice and helpful suggestions have made a significant contribution. Their insights have been especially valuable, since each has had substantial, but different, experience in church leadership and in working out the implications of the New Testament teaching on church governance. I am especially grateful for their candor in disagreeing with me over various issues. These cautions have prompted reexamination of many questions, leading to a better overall result.

I also thank my wife, Anne, for her help in all aspects of this project. Because of her mastery of the subject and knowledge of Scripture, her contributions have been invaluable. This work demonstrates the effects of her loving encouragement and probing questions.

Preface

IN 1986, ALEXANDER STRAUCH authored *Biblical Eldership, An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Eldership*.¹ This definitive work has sold more than 145 thousand copies in English, and in translations used around the world. The effect on the thinking of the leadership of the church has been profound, and, consequently, many are evaluating the governance and leadership styles of their churches.

I have enjoyed the privilege of working with Alexander Strauch in producing companions to his work, *The Study Guide to Biblical Eldership* and *The Mentor's Guide to Biblical Eldership*.² As the result of this association, I have spoken with many church leaders who are now convinced of the biblical imperative that our churches be elder-led. But these men struggle with issues of implementation. They are especially frustrated with the overt (or covert) conflicts they encounter when attempting to institute biblical governance. These challenges manifest themselves as:

- Cultural resistance to biblical eldership in churches attempting change.
- Failure of churches to grow sufficiently to meet community needs, despite their being faithful to the biblical directives. Or, alternatively,
- Loss of their biblical character by churches as they experience growth.

However, many have also described enthusiastically how the concept of biblical eldership has been life-changing! They speak of how pastors, elders, and whole elder councils have been prompted to study the entire issue and reconsider their own roles in the church's

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governance. Though transformed and encouraged as they enter these new waters, it is not surprising that they face many questions.

It has been exactly in empathetic response that I have reached out to partner with these brothers—in church plants and in churches experiencing growing pains. For some time, they have encouraged me to explain in detail how a church can be truly biblical in its governance and leadership, while simultaneously accomplishing the Great Commission effectively in our day. My focus will be on the elders' collective responsibilities, and the practical aspects of putting biblical structures and methods to work in the church of today. We will explore valid implementations all along the continuum, from the small church, to the church plant, to the large church with many members and ministries. Through an examination of the biblical teaching and explanation of how some outstanding examples function, we will see that the struggle for implementation is well worth the effort.

Although the principles taught throughout this book have broad application to various churches and assemblies, a number relate more specifically to larger evangelical churches with paid staff. While I strive to differentiate between large and small bodies, readers must evaluate the instruction in light of the context in which they serve.

I do not present myself as the expert with all the answers—or as having been associated with a church that is more than a work in progress. Like those of the same mind around the world who are engaged in restoring biblical governance, I am continuing to learn. It has been my privilege and pain to serve as a founding elder in a church (planted in 1972, now with an adult attendance of two thousand), that experienced rapid growth, along the way succumbed twice to its successes, and that, for the most part, has recovered the initial vision of its elders. This recovery has occurred mainly through transitioning from a secular pattern of church leadership to the biblical model for elder leadership.

I am especially grateful to Dr. Walt Russell³ who redirected the leadership of Church of the Saviour⁴ to a biblical model for elder leadership in 1995, during an extensive consultation; and to the staff of the Peninsula Bible Church,⁵ for encouragement throughout our transformation, contributed through transparent discussions, backed up by their considerable credibility of more than five decades of biblical governance.

I am also thankful for my own distressing personal failures and the negative experiences God has allowed me. I did not welcome such irritants and taxing of resources. But, having witnessed, both at close hand and from afar, the destructive swath wreaked by unbiblical

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leadership in the church, I confess that I have discovered a great deal about the corrupting influence of ego, power, and privilege—as well as men’s timidity, passivity, and acquiescence in responsibility. The failed behavior, commission and omission, of our leadership and the resulting turmoil in our churches have driven many of us to repent of past lack of obedience and to reexamine both Scripture’s directives on church governance and the biblical parameters of leadership.

For more than thirty years, I have served as a tentmaking elder, while simultaneously employed as an engineer, the last ten years as a senior systems analyst engaged in design and integration of very large government systems. In both venues, I have benefited from a clear picture of the extreme contrast between effective team leadership and injurious autocratic control. In the church, as in government and industry, the inappropriate use of power by a leader may produce short-term gains, but always, over time, at the expense of those he is supposed to be serving.

My heartfelt desire is that all churches maintain, not only high standards of theological purity, but biblical leadership and governance. I pray that this study will aid those who sincerely seek to establish or restore biblical governance of the church, especially those who have already embarked on this venture. For the individual Christian or the community of believers, our maturity in Christ is not only measured by what we know and believe, but by who we are and what we do.

With gratitude to those brothers and sisters who have labored faithfully in the frontline trenches with me, and the prayer that our Lord be glorified,

Dick Swartley
January 2005

I am writing these things to you . . . so that you will know
how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God.
1 Timothy 3:14–15

Chapter 1

Biblical Eldership

WHEN THE FIRST NEW TESTAMENT CHURCHES were being established, Paul sent Titus to Crete to “set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). The apostle was explicit and resolute: The development of the early churches was not to occur haphazardly. Paul was determined that these bodies be structured according to his specific instructions and that they be elder-led. A church is a complex organization. Like other complex organizations, it must be managed well—especially so that its God-given mission may be sustained. The household of God is “the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth” (1 Tim. 3:15).

THE PROBLEM

Often these days the governance of the church is intensely frustrating—both for the leadership and for the congregation. From their viewpoint, leaders and pastors complain that their church is stuck in its traditions and culture and, therefore, unable to adapt to the changing environment, or to offer an up-to-date response to the challenge of the Great Commission. Ministry leaders protest that elder boards are unresponsive to their vision, drag their heels, or attempt to micromanage every issue. Entrenched “pillars” of the church struggle with each other and pastors over issues of personal power and influence, instead of seeking Christ’s will for the body.

Consider for a moment the outlook, not of those “in charge,” but of many in the pew who may not have a clue how their church functions. How its affairs are conducted may be so beyond their field of vision as to be invisible, except for awareness of the usual calls for contributions.

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Even if the average attendee understands his church government, he generally feels he has no influence on its leadership. (He or she may also be enjoying irresponsible passivity, but that is another matter.) He says that he does not know any leader who cares about his own particular concern, and no elder comes to his ministry with the express purpose of understanding or overseeing it. When the annual congregational meeting rolls around, “Who cares?” These attitudes and objections should give us pause.

Have some of our evangelical churches supposedly retained the mere form of elder leadership, or given it lip service, while, in fact, we have followed other guidelines for so long that we have lost our way? Have the biblical directions for governance by a plurality of elders been abandoned for the sake of expediency? Are we so mired in those methods of governing which were handed down to us from the past that we cannot even imagine implementing biblical guidelines? Or, do we understand the teachings of the New Testament, but believe that implementing them in the church today is impossible?

INADEQUATE SOLUTIONS

In an interview conducted by *Christianity Today*, Larry Osborne shows how far some churches have strayed from the biblical position. Osborne wrote *The Unity Factor*⁶ which explores the creation of healthy elder boards. He was asked by the interviewer: “What is the purpose of a board? What should members see as their function?” Osborne replied:

That [the purpose of an elder board] changes as the church changes. In a smaller church, the purpose is usually helping the pastor get the job done. In a larger church, it’s helping a pastor make and communicate good decisions. In the largest churches, a board’s primary function is to be the brakes of the organization, the accountability, people who can stop anything. The board is also the wise counsel, because a larger church is staff-led, so the board is more wise counsel than hands-on leaders. They also serve as a crisis team in waiting.⁷

This answer may give an accurate picture of the state of the contemporary church, but it certainly represents clear rejection of Scripture’s teaching on the governance of the church. This will

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become plain as we explore what the New Testament teaches about the role of elders.

Osborne is not alone in his misunderstanding of or departure from biblical instructions on the role of elders. But most just consider the teaching irrelevant and unworkable in the present-day church. This simply need not be the case, because numerous examples exist of churches exemplary in their obedience to the biblical directives for eldership, having healthy, harmonious leaderships and congregations. For many churches, the reexamination of current practices in light of the New Testament design has been the impetus for revival and envisioning of new horizons.

RESULTS OF OBEDIENCE

Responsiveness and relevance to our local culture need not be achieved at the cost of eviscerating the apostles' intent for the governance of the church. From my own experience—and that of leaders in many other churches of all sizes—I am convinced that obedience to the biblical directives results in thriving local churches, bodies that are active in productive evangelism, planting churches, and sending out missionaries. This occurs—*not despite* being faithful to the instructions of the New Testament, but *as the consequence!* Some will object that while biblical eldership works well for the small church, it is impractical for the large church. I disagree and will subsequently show that the New Testament model is applicable to churches of all proportions.

In his definitive *Biblical Eldership*, Alexander Strauch sets forth an accurate, comprehensive, biblical exegesis and interpretation of biblical eldership. He teaches powerfully on the establishment of elder leadership in the early churches, and I strongly recommend this detailed exegesis of the passages defining the apostles' intent. Here, in my work, the biblical argument for elder governance is merely summarized before I advance the main thesis, that *biblical elder direction of the church can be accomplished in our culture and in an effective, practical manner.*

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The New Testament teaches that certain men were collectively endowed with diverse gifts, furnished by the Lord for the founding and maintenance of the early churches (1 Cor. 12:29–30; Eph. 4:11). He provided apostles, prophets, teachers, evangelists, and apostolic

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delegates like Titus and Timothy. These men participated in the lives of various churches, but none of them ever acted as the permanent head of one congregation. They served multiple churches or labored for a time in a specific place as church planters. The New Testament only mentions two offices, elder and deacon, that were instituted for the management of church affairs. Deacons oversee the collection and distribution of benevolence and do not exercise any governing responsibility. The office of elder is the *sole* position in the church created for the governance of the church. As Strauch, through careful exegesis of Scripture, points out: “Unlike deacons, shepherds [elders] are responsible for the overall leadership, supervision, and teaching of the congregation.”⁸

DISTINCTION IN FUNCTION, NOT DIFFERENT OFFICES

But what about the person called “pastor” today? Until we understand who he was in the historical context, we will not have removed a great barrier to understanding the New Testament elder. Clearly, in the early church, the preacher-teacher (in modern usage, the term has become “pastor”) did not hold a separate office. This description referred only to what was merely the recognition of a *differentiation* in function, a differentiation made between the elders based on their gifting. That is, some elders devoted themselves *primarily* to preaching and teaching. Regrettably, this distinction led instead to the unbiblical creation of a third office, even “the first office of all,” the “pastor.”

Paul made this distinction in function clear: “The elders who *rule well* [lead, direct] are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at *preaching and teaching*” (1 Tim. 5:17; italics added). The apostle asserts that all elders *both* rule (lead*) and teach; this is also stated in the requirements for elders in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3. However, some elders are more gifted than others in leading or in teaching and, therefore, concentrate where God has gifted them. Because of this specialization, some of the early elders were primarily preachers-teachers. This confirms that there was a

* We will show later (p. 20) that “rule” is a misleading translation of *proistēmi*.

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division of labor among those who filled the office of elder, not different offices.

The English word “pastor” comes from the Latin word for “shepherd.” The Greek word *poimēn*, translated either “pastor” or “shepherd,” appears eighteen times in the New Testament. In nine instances, it refers to Jesus, where He is called a shepherd. In eight other cases, it refers to a literal shepherd. *Poimēn* is translated “shepherd” in all these places except Ephesians 4:11: “He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as *pastors* and teachers” (italics added). *This verse is the only mention of “pastor” in most English translations of the New Testament.** The word “pastor” does not show up in the other listings of roles and functions in the New Testament, and its use in translating Ephesians 4:11 has lamentably led to the invalid and unwarranted change from a functional description to an office.

In Ephesians 4:11, *poimēn* occurs with *didaskalos*, the term for “teacher”; unlike the preceding gifts (that of apostle, prophet, and evangelist), in the Greek both words share a single article. Older commentators interpreted this as indicating that both words referred to the same person. This resulted in the “pastor-teacher” terminology. However, studies of all similar grammatical constructions in the New Testament and Greek literature show that reference to the same person can only be true if both nouns are singular and personal.

David B. Wallace, professor of New Testament Studies at Dallas Theological Seminary, wrote his Ph.D. dissertation at the same institution on this matter. Wallace states that the omission of the article in Ephesians 4:11 indicates that, rather than “pastor” and “teacher” being the same person, “one group overlaps with the other in some sense (either partial overlap for both, or one is a subset of the other). . . . The first group (pastors) belongs to the second group (teachers). That is, all who have the gift of pastor also would have the gift of teacher.”⁹ He points out that it is presumed that a man who has the gift of pastoring would also, but not necessarily, have the gift of teaching. But he says the reverse is not true: it is not true that all those gifted as teachers are gifted as pastors (shepherds).¹⁰

Even older commentators agree that Paul is referring to the gift (or gifts) rather than to a position or office. The verse asserts that the shepherding gift is to be expressed in part through teaching. Pastoring (Greek, *shepherding*) is required of all elders (1 Peter 5:1–2). All

* *KJV, RSV, NAS, NIV, and NASB*, among others.

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elders must have the ability to teach. However, not all elders may be gifted as teachers. In a similar vein, all elders must shepherd even though only some are specifically gifted as shepherds.

The term “pastor” (shepherd) cannot be equated with, or be replaced with, the word “elder,” since *poimēn* (like the English “shepherd”) does not imply a “ruler” or “overseer”; it does not indicate status or a position. Therefore, Ephesians 4:11 cannot be used to state that *all* pastors (shepherds) are elders.

If Paul had intended that “pastor” be a distinct position in the church, it is inconceivable that he would *fail* to delineate the requirements for that position.

Paul spelled out explicit requirements for elders and deacons (1 Tim. 3:1–13; Titus 1:5–9). If he had intended that “pastor” be a distinct position in the church—which is for many now the most important position—it is inconceivable that Paul would *fail* to delineate the requirements for that position. Therefore, using the title “pastor” to distinguish that particular elder who is charged with the task of preaching-teaching from the other elders—especially those who are tent-making elders—conveys the wrong impression to the congregation and the watching world.

AN INVALID DISTINCTION

Probably the greatest threat to biblical elder leadership is the careless use of the term “pastor” to distinguish between those elders who preach and the other so-called “lay,” tent-making elders.* Though designed to clarify roles, this separation—really an elevation of one type of elder and devaluation of another type of elder—actually results in confusion. Moreover, it creates two other serious difficulties: It sets up a division within the elder council, and it deprecates the efforts of the elders who have gifts other than preaching.

* Because the term “lay” implies two classes—“clergy” (elevated, having a special spiritual status), and “lay” or “laity” (second-class status), I do not use or endorse this terminology. However, some quotations cited herein contain this inappropriate terminology.

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A professional seminary degree, or the practice called ordination, does not make a man who is called “pastor” *different* from others who are pastoring (that is, shepherding). The use of the title “Reverend” is an unbiblical attempt to elevate a professionally trained class to a priestly class.

**Probably the greatest threat to biblical elder leadership
is the careless use of the term “pastor.”**

Both the Old Testament (“You shall be to Me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation,” Ex. 19:6), and the New Testament (“But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for God’s own possession,” 1 Peter 2:9), teach that all Christians are priests. Furthermore, Jesus *forbade* the use of elevating titles:

“But do not be called Rabbi; for One is your Teacher, and you are all brothers. . . . Do not be called leaders [guides]; for One is your Leader, that is, Christ. But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted” (Matt. 23:8, 10–12).

Neither the custom of ordaining, meaning the conveying of or recognizing spiritual status or power, or the word “ordain” appear in the New Testament. Note that the words *poieō* (Mark 3:14), *kathistēmi* (Titus 1:5), and *cheirotoneō* (Acts 14:23) are translated in the King James version as “ordain”, however most later versions translate them as “appoint,” their true meaning.* Also, note that the New Testament practice of laying on of hands signified *only* the appointment to a specific assignment, as in the sending of Paul and Barnabas on the first missionary journey: “When they had fasted and prayed and laid their hands on them, they sent them away” (Acts 13:3). Retaining “pastor” as an honorific title to designate a man engaged in ministry full time is without biblical warrant and just perpetuates misconceptions.

When Paul went to the Jerusalem conference recorded in Acts 15 (also 16:4), the church leadership was listed as consisting of apostles and elders. In Acts 20, Paul called for the elders of the Ephesian church, and in Acts 21:18, he reported to the Apostle James and all

* *NAS, RSV, NIV, NASB, NKJV.*

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the elders. In Philippians 1:1, Paul greeted “all the saints, . . . including the overseers and deacons.” And in 1 Timothy, Paul instructed Timothy on the qualifications of elders and deacons. In any of these situations, where were the men we call “pastors” today? They were there: They were called elders! Obviously, this pastoring, that is, shepherding, and teaching of the local church, was provided by its elders, or overseers, not by a separate clergy.*

“Overseer” is not an additional office. Acts 20:17 and 28 make it clear that both the terms *episkopos*, “overseer” (sometimes translated *bishop*), and *presbyteros*, “elder,” refer to the same position.† The term “overseer” refers to the function of the office, and the term “elder” emphasizes the spiritual maturity of the man (a seasoned shepherd) and the dignity of his office. (In the Old Testament, the word “elder” incorporated both connotations.) This conclusion is reinforced by Titus 1:7, where the term “overseer” is used in a passage that describes the qualifications of elders. In 1 Timothy 3:1–13, Paul lists the requirements to be fulfilled by men aspiring to be overseers; later in the letter (5:17), he refers to these same men as “elders.” Finally, in 1 Peter 5:1–2, Peter charges the elders to *episkopeō*, “oversee,” the church.

**It is contrary to the teaching of Scripture to consider
“pastor” and “elder” as separate offices.**

While distinguishing between elders because of their areas of specialization is valid, it is contrary to the teaching of Scripture to consider “pastor” and “elder” as separate offices. Equally erroneous is the creation of the separate positions of “ruling elder” and “teaching elder,” since all elders both lead and teach. The conclusion that “pastor” in Ephesians 4:11 refers to a function, rather than a position, is reinforced by Peter’s direction that his fellow elders (all elders) be

* This does not imply that all “pastors,” or those engaged in shepherding, are elders. Shepherding is a larger category. See pages 32–34, *Who Governed the New Testament Churches?*

† Note: 1 Timothy 4:14 refers to the elders collectively as *presbyterion*. The *KJV*, *NKJV*, *NASB*, and *NIV* translate *presbyterion* “presbytery,” but this should not be confused with Presbyterians’ usage of “presbytery” to refer to a hierarchical body over the local churches. This is not taught by, or implied by, 1 Timothy 4:14. Both Arndt and Gingrich, and Kittel and Friedrich give the meaning of *presbyterion* as a council of elders.¹¹

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involved in pastoring, that is, shepherding, the church (1 Peter 5:1–2). Paul issues the same instruction, “shepherd the church of God,” to overseers (elders) in Acts 20:28.

In criticizing some uses of the title “pastor,” I do not imply lack of honor for the high and valid calling and work to which many men have devoted their lives. And, to those faithful men who have long served under their calling as pastors, I again emphasize that I do not question their calling, only the terminology used to describe the calling. My argument is only with the use of a distinction that essentially devalues the high and valid calling and work of other elders.*

PLURALITY AND LEADERSHIP

As we have seen, Paul instructed Titus to “set in order what remains and appoint elders in every city as I directed you” (Titus 1:5). Notice that Paul and Peter did not intend the appointment of only one elder per church or city. As Acts 14:23 indicates, “They had appointed elders for them in every church”—in other words, *plural*, that is, *several* elders who were to shepherd and administer each early church. From this precedent the principle of a plurality of elders in each local church is established.

Some try to escape the implications of Acts 14:23 by saying that each house church had an elder, and that these elders functioned collectively at the city level. This sometimes may have been the case. A church in a small community may have operated only as a collection of house fellowships, and, therefore, that church had plural elders only in that sense. But the principle remains the same: Elders always acted collectively; their decisions were not made unilaterally, but were made *with* their brother elders. It simply cannot be argued that we may extrapolate from one elder presiding over a house church to a single elder (senior pastor) ruling a church of several hundred congregants today. The verse is explicit—“elders in every church.” Therefore, whatever it is that constitutes a church, it is to be led by a plurality of elders.

* In describing the contemporary scene herein, at times the conventional practice of employing the word “pastor” to refer to the staff (salaried) preaching elder will be followed.

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Paul is definite: Elders are not simply members of a board of directors, as they are in many churches today, but are men active in ministering among the people of the congregation. If Paul were to adjust to our contemporary church, he would have to advise: “Appreciate the Board that meets in secret and makes decisions for the congregation.”

“They had appointed elders for them in every church”—in other words, *plural*, that is, *several* elders who were to shepherd and administer each early church.

What Paul did in fact ask for is: “But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate those who diligently labor *among you*, and *have charge over you* in the Lord and *give you* instruction, and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work” (1 Thess. 5:12–13, italics added). “Have charge over” is the translation of the same Greek word used in 1 Timothy 5:17, where Paul speaks of the elders who “rule” well. The Greek word *proïstēmi*, translated here as “rule,” has the sense of leading by virtue of being out in front of or caring for others,¹² rather than leading by virtue of position, as does a king. Paul could have used the word *archō* (rule), but he did not. *Proïstēmi*, in contrast to *archō*, never implies a power relationship. Elders’ authority is seen in their leading, teaching, and caring for God’s household, not ever in domination, usurpation, or proud self-importance.

Hebrews 13:17 sets a standard for elder leadership that cannot be met by a board of directors that simply rubber stamps staff decisions: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give account.” This picture of intimate, vital care, “watch over your souls,” is reinforced by the choice of the Greek word *peithō*, which is translated here “obey.” It means, “Let yourselves be convinced or persuaded by.”¹³ Thus we have the picture of elders lovingly persuading the flock through teaching, not by handing down decisions.

Jesus Christ is the Head of the church. In order to honor His preeminence in the way we operate and also be obedient to the Apostle Paul’s specific directions, we need to put in place the correct biblical structure to govern our local church. Most churches say they acknowledge the headship of Christ. In actual governance, however, not many adhere to the principle that each elder is *directly responsible to Christ*, and never to a chairman, or moderator, or to a senior pastor. Paul’s behavior is consistent with his assertion that the Head of the

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church is Christ. He never, by precept or example, singles out one elder as having authority over other elders. Therefore, to be true to the teaching of the New Testament, the local church and its elder council must function in such a manner that these two truths—*the supreme headship of Christ and the equality of all elders*—are honored and demonstrated in practice, not just in principle.

This brief study substantiates the claim that the three fundamental and nonnegotiable aspects of truly biblical church governance are:

- The plurality of the elders
- The equality of those elders who are responsible for preaching with their fellow elders, in both *principle* and practice
- The essential, integral involvement of the elders in the leadership of all of the church's ministries

These three elements are permanent features of the biblical church. The elimination of any one component causes basic deviation from the apostles' intent for the church. Of course, the three indispensable fundamentals may differ in appearance as each church works out its response to its local culture, but they must be present in essence. As we examine how our churches can be governed biblically, we will see clearly that obedience to the New Testament directives unlocks great reservoirs of talent and initiative within our congregations. In fact, it already has.

Eldership *in* Action

This insightful resource explains in detail how a church can be truly biblical in its governance and leadership, while simultaneously fulfilling the Great Commission.

The focus is on the elders' collective responsibilities as well as practical aspects of putting biblical structures and methods to work. Also explored are implementation techniques: from the small church, to the church plant, to the large church with many members and ministries.

“Dick Swartley has spent a lifetime thinking about the issues of biblical church government, and has been at the forefront of establishing a biblically ordered church that has a worldwide outreach. He sets forth a positive, practical vision for effective church eldership. I highly recommend this valuable work as standard reading for church leaders. It fills a big gap.”

Alexander Strauch, author of *Biblical Eldership*

“I have not read any other book on church leadership and governing that so fully integrates the biblical and wisely practical! It will be immensely helpful to those who will have to give an account to Jesus Christ for their leadership role in His Church.”

Walt Russell, Ph.D., Professor of New Testament,
Talbot School of Theology

“While there are good books on the theology of eldership, Dick Swartley’s work carefully addresses the practice of eldership. It is clarifying, challenging, and convincing, and I commend its common sense linking of solid biblical insight with the real-life struggles those of us in church leadership all share.”

Doug Goins

Former Pastor Elder; now Pastor-At-Large and Missionary,
Peninsula Bible Church, Palo Alto, California

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