

# “The Essentials Of Our Faith”

## Session XXIX

May 15, 2011

### “The Church”:

### The “Body” and “Bride” Of Jesus Christ!

#### Part Five: “The Uniqueness Of True Elder Leadership”

In our previous study we considered the teaching of the New Testament regarding the spiritual and practical leadership of the “Local Church”. Some of the key factors were:

A. It is clear that the local “Assembly” of N.T. Believers had an organizational structure of leadership. (Charles Ryrie, see Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5)

*“After they had preached the gospel to that city (Derbe) and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith . . . 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.”* Acts 14:21-22, 23

B. This organizational structure had God’s authority to lead and administer the affairs of the local Church, but there was no indication of organizational structure above or beyond the leaders of the local Church.

*“That ultimate authority rests in the local church under Christ headship does seem to be clearly taught in the New Testament. This does not preclude fellowship with other congregations, but it does not allow for organizational structure above the local church.”* --Charles C. Ryrie

C. The organizational structure of the local “Assembly” involved two distinct offices:

#### 1. “Elder” →

--Two equal or synonymous terms were used to describe this local Church office, Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7.

a. “Presbuteros” – translated “elder” or “presbyter”.

1) Meaning: “to stand before” or “maintain rule over” by appointment; (Acts 20:17; I Pet. 5:1)

2) Emphasis: “age” and “maturity”, leading to “respect” → “Dignity”.

*“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. Live in peace with one another.” I Thessalonians 5:12-13*

- 3) Responsibility: To provide “spiritual leadership” in the N.T. Church;  
(Acts 6:2,4; 20:17; I Pet. 5:1-5; Heb. 13:17)

*“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.” Hebrews 13:17*

b. **“Episkopos”** – translated **“elder”** or **“bishop”** or **“overseer”**.

- 1) Meaning: A “watcher” or “seer” – one who observes, examines, or looks after someone or something.
- 2) Emphasis: The faithful exercise of “oversight” → The **“Duty”** of the office.
- 3) Responsibility: To “oversee” the N.T. Church, focusing on the “spiritual well-being” of the Body while being “examples” to the Flock;  
(Acts 20:28; Thess. 5:12; I Pet. 5:2-3)

*“For I did not shrink from declaring to you the whole purpose of God. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopos), to shepherd (feed) the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves men will arise, speaking perverse things, to draw away disciples after them. Therefore, be on the alert, remembering that night and day for a period of three years I did not cease to admonish each one with tears. Now I commend you to God and to the word of His grace, which is able to build you up and to give to you the inheritance among all those who are sanctified.” Acts 20:27-32*

2. **“Deacon”** → **diakonos**.

a. Meaning: “a servant or helper.”

b. Responsibility:

- 1) To “serve” the needs of the Body.

*“ . . . a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the native Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving of food,” Acts 6:1.*

- 2) To “help” with the workload of the Elders.

*“ . . . it is not desirable for us to neglect the Word of God in order to serve tables . . . but we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the Word,” Acts 6:2, 4.*

c. Emphasis: A “servant-spirit”, showing the privilege of service, like a king’s attendant, as opposed to the resentment of service performed by a slave.

# “Authentic Biblical Eldership”

An Observation:

*“Literally tens of thousands of churches worldwide practice some form of ‘eldership’ because they believe it to be a Biblical teaching. Unfortunately, because the advocates of eldership have been so terribly delinquent in adequately articulating this doctrine, a great deal of confusion and unbiblical thinking surrounds the topic among most elder-led churches. There are persistent, crippling misconceptions about eldership that hinder churches from practicing authentic Biblical eldership.”* --Alexander Strauch

## Five Distinguishing Features Of N.T. “Eldership”

(Quotations from Alexander Strauch)

### I. “Pastoral” Leadership:

*“When most Christians hear about church elders, they think of an official church board, lay officials, influential people within the local church, or advisors to the pastor. They think of elders as being policymakers, financial officers, fund-raisers, or administrators. I call these types of elders ‘Board Elders’. People don’t expect ‘Board Elders’ to teach the Word or be involved pastorally in people’s lives.”*

*“Such a view, however, not only lacks scriptural support but flatly contradicts New Testament Scriptures. A person doesn’t need to read Greek or be professionally trained in theology to understand that the contemporary, ‘Church Board’ concept of eldership is irreconcilably at odds with the New Testament definition of eldership. According to the New Testament, elders lead the church, teach, preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers, exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine, visit the sick and pray, and judge church issues. In Biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.”*

*“Therefore, when Paul and Peter directly exhort the elders to do their duty, they both employ shepherding imagery. It should be observed that these two giant apostles assign the task of shepherding the local church to no other group or single person but the elders.”*

*“**Paul** reminds the Asian elders that God the Holy Spirit placed them in the flock as overseers for the purpose of shepherding the church of God, Acts 20:28. **Peter** exhorts the elders to be all that shepherds should be to the flock, I Peter 5:2.*

*“If we want to understand Christian elders and their work, we must understand the Biblical imagery of ‘**shepherding**’:*

*A. Protecting the Flock:*

*“A major part of the New Testament elder’s work is to protect the local church from false teachers. . . . The essence of Paul’s charge is this: **guard the flock – wolves are coming!**” (Acts 20:17, 28-31)”*

*“According to Paul’s required qualifications for eldership, a prospective elder must have enough knowledge of the Bible to be able to refute false teachers. (Titus 1:5,6,9)*

*B. Feeding the Flock:*

*“Unlike modern, church-board elders, all New Testament elders were required to be ‘able to teach’, I Tim. 3:2.”*

*“In an extremely significant passage on elders, Paul writes about some elders who labor at preaching and teaching and thus deserve financial support from the local church, I Tim. 5:17-18.*

*C. Leading the Flock:*

*“Elders are to lead, direct, govern, manage, and otherwise care for the flock of God, I Tim. 5:17.”*

*“In Titus 1:7, Paul insists that a prospective elder be morally and spiritually above reproach because he will be ‘God’s steward’. A steward is a household manager, someone with official responsibility over the master’s servants, property, and even finances. Elders are stewards of God’s household, the local church.”*

*D. Helping to Meet the Flock’s many Practical Needs:*

*“As shepherds of the flock, the elders must be available to meet the sheep’s needs. This responsibility includes: visiting the sick and comforting the bereaved; strengthening the weak; praying for **all** the sheep; visiting new members; providing counsel for couples who are engaged, married, and/or divorcing; and managing the many, day-to-day details related to the inner life of the congregation.”*

**Observation:**

*“When the church eldership is viewed as a status or board position in the church, there will be plenty of volunteers. When it is viewed as a demanding, pastoral work, **few** people will rush to volunteer. One reason there are so few ‘shepherds’ or good church ‘elderships’ is that, generally speaking, men are spiritually lazy. That is a major reason why most churches never establish a Biblical eldership. Men are more than willing to let someone else fulfill their spiritual responsibilities, whether it be their wives, the clergy, or church professionals. . . . We Bible-believing Christians are becoming a lazy, soft, pay-for-it-to-be-done group of Christians!”*

***“Biblical eldership . . . cannot exist in an atmosphere of nominal Christianity!”***

## II. “Shared” Leadership:

“The New Testament reveals that the pastoral oversight of many of the first churches was committed to a **plurality of elders**. . . . It is odd that most Christians have no problem accepting a plurality of deacons, but are almost irrationally frightened by a plurality of elders that is far more evident in the New Testament.”

### A. A Council of Equals:

“By definition, the elder structure of government is a collective leadership in which each elder **shares equally** the position, authority, and responsibility of the office. . . . The opposite of collective leadership is unitary leadership, monarchical rule, or one-man leadership.”

### B. Leaders among Leaders:

“Although elders are to act jointly as a council and share equal authority and responsibility for the leadership of the church, all elders are not equal in their giftedness, Biblical knowledge, leadership ability, experience, or dedication. Therefore, those among the elders who are particularly gifted leaders and/or teachers will naturally stand out among the other elders as leaders and teachers within the leadership body. . . . The advantage of the principle of ‘first among equals’ is that it allows for functional, gift based diversity within the eldership team without creating an official, superior office over fellow elders. Just as the leading apostles, such as Peter and John, bore no special title or formal distinctions from the other apostles, elders who receive double honor form no special class or receive no special title.”

**Note:** “To call one elder ‘pastor’ and the rest ‘elders’ . . . is to act without **Biblical precedence.**”

## III. “Male” Leadership:

“There is much about Biblical eldership that offends churchgoing people today: the concept of elders who provide pastoral care, a plurality of pastors, and the idea of so-called ‘lay’ or non-clerical pastor elders. Yet nothing is more objectionable in the minds of many contemporary people than the Biblical concept or an **all-male** eldership. **A Biblical eldership, however, must be an all-male eldership.**”

“Just as Paul teaches male headship in the family, he teaches male headship in the local church (I Tim. 2:8 - 3:7). . . . First Timothy 2:11-15 should settle the question of women elders. Paul prohibits women from doing two things: 1) teaching the men of the church; and 2) exercising authority over the men.”

**Also:** “Note that immediately following his instruction in I Timothy 2:11-15, that prohibits women from teaching and leading men, Paul describes the qualifications for those who oversee the local church, I Timothy 3:1-7. Significantly, the qualifications **assume a male subject**. . . . Paul gives no suggestion of women elders.”

#### IV. “Qualified” Leadership:

*“In a letter to a young presbyter . . . dated A.D. 394, Jerome (A.D. 345-419) rebukes the churches of his day for their hypocrisy in showing more concern for the appearance of their church buildings than the careful selection of their church leaders: ‘Many build churches nowadays; their walls and pillars of glowing marble, their ceilings glittering with gold, their altars studded with jewels. Yet to their choice of Christ’s ministers no heed is paid.’ . . . Multitudes of churches today repeat similar error.”*

*“The overriding concern of the New Testament in relation to church leadership is to ensure that the right kind of men will serve as elders and deacons. The offices of God’s church are not honorary positions bestowed on individuals who have attended church faithfully or who are senior in years. . . . The church offices – both eldership and diaconship – are open to **all men** who meet the apostolic, Biblical requirements. The New Testament unequivocally emphasizes this!” (I Tim. 3:1-7, 10,14-15; Titus 1:5-9; I Pet. 5:2-3) **Note: See last week’s handout for a list of N.T. qualifications for elder and deacon.***

#### V. “Servant” Leadership.

*“Citing pagan influences on early Christianity, Kenneth Scott Latourette –renowned Church historian and professor of Christian missions – states that the Roman concepts of power and rule corrupted the organization and life of early churches. He observes that ‘the Church was being interpenetrated by ideals which were quite contrary to the Gospel, especially the conception and use of power which were in stark contrast to the kind exhibited in the life and teaching of Jesus and in the cross and the resurrection.’ . . . This, Latourette goes on to say, proved to be ‘the menace which was most nearly disastrous’ to Christianity.”*

*“An unscriptural clerical and priestly caste arose that was consumed by the quest for power, position, and authority. . . . The pristine character of the New Testament church community was lost.”*

*“New Testament, Christ-like elders are to be “**servant leaders**”, not rulers or dictators. . . . Like the servant Christ, they are to sacrifice their time and energy for the good of others. Only elders who are loving, humble servants can genuinely manifest the incomparable life of Jesus Christ to their congregations and a watching world.”*

*“The humble-servant character of the eldership doesn’t imply, however, an **absence of authority**. . . . As shepherds of the church, elders have been given the authority to lead and protect the local church (Acts 20:28-31). The key issue is the attitude in which elders exercise that authority.”*



## Conclusions

### **A. The Word of God speaks clearly concerning leadership by “plurality” of elders.**

*“Christians who profess the Bible to be God’s infallible, all-sufficient Word agree that they must establish their church practices and doctrines on the teachings of the Bible.”*

*--Danger: “Many contemporary scholars say, however, that the New Testament is ambiguous or silent regarding the topic of church government and conclude that **no one** can insist upon a Biblical model of church government for all churches because the Bible doesn’t. . . . there was **no normative pattern** of church government.”*

*--Truth: “In its major features, local church leadership (or government) by the **plurality of elders** is plainly and amply set forth by the New Testament. . . . it is not as much as hinted in the New Testament that the church would ever need – or indeed should ever want or tolerate – any other local leadership than that of the eldership group.” (J. Alec Motyer)”*

### **B. The N.T. Church is a “non-clerical” community:**

*“The distinguishing mark of Christianity was not found in a clerical hierarchy, but in the fact that God’s Spirit came to dwell within ordinary, common people and that through them the Spirit manifested Jesus’ life to the believing community and the world.”*

*“It is an immensely profound truth that no special priestly or clerical class that is distinct from the whole people of God appears in the New Testament. . . . The New Testament, however, stresses the **oneness** of the people of God (Eph. 2:13-19) and the dismantling of the ‘**sacred-secular**’ concept that existed between priest and people under the Old Covenant (1 Pet. 2:5-10; Rev. 1:6).”*

*--Danger: “Biblical eldership **cannot exist** in an environment of **clericalism!**”*

*--Truth: “. . . Paul provides the non-clerical, elder structure of government – a form of government that would not demean the lordship of Christ over His people or the glorious status of a priestly, saintly body of people in which **every** member ministered.”*

### **C. The implementation of “Biblical Eldership” by a plurality of qualified pastor elders is DIFFICULT, if not IMPOSSIBLE, in actual human experience!**

#### **--The Requirements:**

- 1. “Each local church and its leaders must be firmly convinced that ‘Eldership’ is a Scriptural teaching.”*
- 2. “The local church must be committed to make the difficult, personal changes necessary in order to make ‘Eldership’ work for God’s glory.”*