

Eldership and the Church

Detailed Outline

Part 3 of 9

I. The New Testament Teaches and Models Both Plurality of Elders and Pastoral Eldership (cont.)

C. The New Testament Established Pastoral Eldership by the Plurality of Elders

5. Eldership Promotes the True Nature of the Church

The local church is not an undefined mass of people; it is a particular group of people that has a unique character, mission, and purpose.

I am convinced that the elder structure of government best harmonizes with and promotes the true nature of the local church as revealed in the New Testament.

We will consider four ways in which the elder structure of government complements the nature and theology of the local church.

- a) The Church is a Close-knit Family of Brothers and Sisters
 - 1) The word “ekklesia” is not sufficient to explain the nature of the church.
 - 2) Of the different New Testament terms used to describe the nature of the church—the body, the bride, the temple, the flock—the one most frequently used is the family, particularly the fraternal aspect of the family—brothers and sisters. The local Christian church, then, is to be a close-knit family of brothers and sisters.
 - 3) The elder structure of government suits an extended family organization like the local church. It allows any brother in the community who desires it and qualifies for it to share fully in the leadership of the community.
 - 4) In obedience to Christ’s teaching on humility and brotherhood, the first Christians resisted special titles, sacred clothing, chief seats, and lordly terminology to highlight their community leaders.
- b) The Church is a Humble Servant Community
 - 1) I am convinced that one reason the apostles chose the elder system of government was because it enhanced the loving, humble-servant character of the Christian family.

- 2) The New Testament offers a consistent example of shared leadership as the ideal structure of leadership in a congregation where love, humility, and servanthood are paramount. When it functions properly, shared leadership requires a greater exercise of humble servanthood than does unitary leadership.
 - 3) In order for an eldership to operate effectively, the elders must show mutual regard for one another, submit themselves one to another, patiently wait upon one another, genuinely consider one another's interests and perspectives, and defer to one another.
 - 4) Eldership, then, enhances brotherly love, humility, mutuality, patience, and loving interdependence—qualities that are to mark the servant church.
- c) The Church is under Christ's Headship
- 1) Most importantly, Biblical Eldership promotes the preeminence and position of Christ over the local church. Jesus left his disciples with the precious promise that "where two or three have gathered together in my name, there I am in their midst" through the empowering work of the Holy Spirit (Matt. 18:20).
 - 2) During the first century no Christian would have dared to take the position or title of sole ruler, overseer, or pastor of the church.
 - 3) The apostles knew that Jesus Christ is the Ruler, Head, Lord, Pastor, Master, Overseer, High Priest, and King. They chose a form of government that reflected this distinctive, fundamental, Christian truth.
 - 4) To symbolize this truth, one church places an empty chair at the table next to the chairman during all elders' meetings. This is a visual reminder to the elders of Christ's presence and lordship, of their position as his undershepherds, and of their dependence on him through prayer and the Word.
 - 5) For the same reason, the apostles devoted themselves to prayer and the Word of God (Acts 6:4). They knew that they were completely dependent on Christ and his blessing. May we understand these priorities, that any good and any blessing that happens are because of Christ's presence with us and his guidance.
 - 6) Our goal is to promote Christ and to serve others, not to bring attention to ourselves.
- d) Eldership Promotes the Protection and Sanctification of Spiritual Leaders
- 1) Eldership Accountability

The shared leadership structure of eldership provides necessary accountability protection from the particular sins that plague spiritual leaders.

"Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely." (Lord Acton, English historian)

- (a) Because of our biblical beliefs in the realities of sin and human depravity, we should understand well why people in positions of power are easily corrupted. If anyone that should believe in accountability, it should be us!
- (b) The collective leadership of a biblical eldership provides a formal structure for genuine accountability. Shared, brotherly leadership provides needed restraint concerning such sins as pride, greed, and “playing god.”
- (c) The concept of the pastor as the lonely, trained professional—the sacred person presiding over the church who can never really become a part of the congregation—is utterly unscriptural. Not only is this concept unscriptural, it is psychologically and spiritually unhealthy.
- (d) We as elders are to be interdependent, holding each other genuinely accountable.
 - (i) This is not simply talk or being accountable to someone far away who only knows what you tell them, or people you select to be by your side who are weak and won’t speak up against you.
 - (ii) True accountability is hard. No one really wants it.
 - (iii) When someone tells you, “You are not going to do that,” or “You are not going to act that way,” we begin stressing that we are in charge or that we don’t need them.
 - (iv) You have to see how weak and sinful you really are and feel the need for true accountability.

2) Peer Relationships

The eldership structure provides peer relationships to help balance elders’ weaknesses and correct their character, an essential component in the sanctification process of spiritual leaders.

- (a) Men who have served as elders attest that they deeply enjoy the fellowship of sharing the pastoral leadership of a church with a team of dedicated pastor-elders. This has been one of the greatest joys of my life!
- (b) As partners in the work of shepherding God’s precious people, elders sharpen, balance, comfort, protect, and strengthen one another through nearly every conceivable life situation. They help each other in the sanctification process.
- (c) I believe that traditional, single-church pastors would improve their character and ministry if they had genuine peers to whom they were regularly accountable and with whom they worked jointly.

(d) I do not hesitate to say that the relationship with my fellow elders has been the most important tool God has used, outside of my marriage relationship, for the spiritual development of my Christian character, leadership abilities, and teaching ministry. The eldership has played a major role in the sanctification process of my Christian life.