

Biblical Church Leadership

Intro:

Having spent a significant amount of time on the regenerate and new covenantal nature of Christ's church, we now move on to the structure of that church, especially with regards to what the Bible teaches about the leadership of local churches.

Though we will endeavor to unpack this at length, we might say that, simply stated, **the NT clearly teaches that each local church is to be led by a plurality of qualified elders and deacons.**

What about apostles, prophets, and evangelists?

There are some current traditions within evangelicalism that believe that these original offices are still in operation today. For example, many charismatic churches make much of and strongly emphasize what is called the "fourfold ministry" of Ephesians 4. Accordingly, or so they assert, churches are unhealthy – even unbiblical – if they do not have active apostles and prophets "operating" in the sphere of their "prophetic ministry."

At first glance, their argument is fair, and many whom I have come across are sincerely just trying to follow what the Bible seems to clearly say.

But as I have often said to others, sometimes what the Bible "says" is not always what the Bible "means." This is why we must always stress the importance of cultivating a good, biblical *hermeneutic* – that is, a system of interpretation that helps us understand what the original authors of the Bible were seeking to convey and teach.

So let's look at the data:

Ephesians 4:11-15 – "And He gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelist, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of the ministry, for the building up of the body of Christ, until we all attain to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to mature manhood, to the measure of the

stature of the fullness of Christ, so that we may no longer be children, tossed to and fro by the waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by human cunning, by craftiness in deceitful schemes.”

Here, Paul is building upon his argument of the necessity of all the parts of Christ’s body – here exemplified by the local church in Ephesus – working together in order for the inward edification (4:16) and outward expansion of Christ’s kingdom to the ends of the earth (cf. 1:22-23),¹ to the praise and glory of God the Father (3:21).

The emphasis in these giftings within the church is clear: these four offices have to do with the ministry of the Word of God.

Though it seems simplest to just assume that all four offices are still operating today, this seems to contravene Paul’s earlier teaching in 2:20-21, where he says that “the household of God” has been “built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord.”

- The tense of the participle “having been built” is important to note. Though the aorist often just denotes an action, there are times in the NT where the aorist functions as a “once-for-all” aorist, which the context seems to favor here.
 - Put simply, when one is converted through faith in the apostolic gospel (cf. 1:13), they are “added” to the already-laid foundation. That is, just as the cornerstone – Christ’s once-for-all death and resurrection – no longer needs to be laid, neither does the foundation that the apostles and prophets – the apostolic gospel revealed exclusively to them and recorded for us in the NT – need to be laid again.
 - ➔ Just as any civil engineer knows, one foundation is enough. In fact, to attempt to lay another foundation in the same “house” is dangerous.

¹¹ There is an important corollary between 4:10 and 1:23 which helps us better understand the necessity of Christ “filling” His church with teachers of the Word and these “word-filled” churches then multiplying and “filling” the world with Christ’s resurrection/reigning presence.

However, though Paul is clearly teaching that foundation of Christ's new covenant house – the church – has been laid once-for-all, the NT nevertheless teaches that there is still *ongoing* construction *upon* that foundation and *within* that house.

- This is the purpose for, and the ongoing, essential ministry of, these new covenant gifts: the evangelists, and the pastors and teachers.
 - This new covenant revelation, which has been given by Christ to His *universal* church through the apostles and prophets, must nevertheless be spread and taught to His *local* churches.

Thus, with the completion of the NT canon, further revelation from prophets and apostles is no longer necessary. In fact, it's dangerous, as we see in the whole Corinthian debacle.

This is why, after Paul, there are no more mentions of “new apostles” in the NT:

- In 1 Corinthians 15:8-9, Paul says that he is not only the “least” of the apostles, he is also the “last” of the apostles.²

This is also why, after Acts 9, there are no more records in Scripture of the church needing to anoint and appoint more apostles:

- In Acts 1, Matthias is appointed an apostle to fill the void left by Judas. The number 12 is important here, as these apostles become the “new Israel” whom the Lord will use to spread His glory to the ends of the earth (cf. Exo. 19:6).
- After the death of the apostle James in Acts 12, there is no mention of appointing another apostle.

² The argument could be made that “last of all” refers to Paul's final point of his argument, the way a lawyer would conclude with his final remarks or evidence before the jury. Though possible, it seems unlikely in the context. In v.5, Paul is talking specifically about *apostles*. Then, in v.7, he clearly says that the resurrected Christ “appeared to James, then to all the apostles.” Paul is defending his *apostolic* ministry in Corinth, for his opponents, claiming to be “super-apostles,” were seeking to undermine Paul's gospel by undermining his apostleship. Paul simply says that they are neither super nor apostles, for not only is their gospel cross-less, but that he is the last of the apostles, which means that, despite all their claims, they are not – cannot be – apostles.

- In fact, by the time we get to Acts 15, we already see the massive structural change taking place, as the elders of the Jerusalem church are as authoritative as the apostles when it comes to the decisions being made concerning the church and how Gentiles were to fit into it.
- Most importantly, we see in Paul's letters, there is no mention of greeting other apostles within each local church, but rather "the elders and deacons" (e.g. Philippians 1:1).
- Moreover, in the NT letters, there are no instructions for, or with regard to, apostles or prophets; but there are plenty of instructions for, say, pastors of the local churches:
 - The qualifications for local church leadership are not given to apostles or prophets, but elders and deacons (1 Timothy 3:1-16, Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-5).
 - Timothy is to not do the work of an apostle or prophet, but that of an evangelist (2 Timothy 4:5).³
 - Members of the church are told not to submit to the apostles of local churches, but the leaders (Hebrews 13:7, 17; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).⁴
 - Paul does not appoint or instruct more apostles or prophets in the church at Ephesus, but rather its elders (Acts 20:17).

So, though it may appear at first glance that the church needs functioning apostles and prophets,⁵ the evidence of the NT seems to be overwhelmingly against this notion.

³ There is debate as to whether the office of "evangelist" is still in existence today. It doesn't get as much "press" as the offices of apostle and prophet. Those who argue that it has ceased appeal to the fact that there are no instructions given in the NT for who is qualified for this office, and what exactly this office "looks like." Others say that it is still in existence, for it is not a "foundational" office, but, like the office of "pastor/teacher," a necessary office in the planting and building up of local churches.

⁴ It seems that Paul is referring to some form of recognized leadership as well in 1 Corinthians 16:16.

⁵ In addition to Ephesians 4:11, proponents of a continuing apostolic and prophetic ministry in the local church appeal to 1 Corinthians 12:27-28. But the same arguments enumerated above apply. Just because "apostles" are "first", that does not mean that they have not ceased. They are "first" in the sense that Christ "gave" them to the church to establish its foundation on apostolic revelation, which has been completed in the NT Scriptures. Thus,

Biblical Eldership

Since the church, as “the household of the living God,” is “the pillar and buttress of the truth” (1 Timothy 3:15), it only makes sense that the leadership of such a household is held to the strictest of standards (3:1-13). God is so jealous and concerned for His household that He goes out of His way to make sure its stewards meet His standards.⁶

Before we look at such qualifications for elders, we need to first understand that the words “elder,” “pastor/shepherd,” and “overseer” all refer to the same “office” and are thus interchangeable.⁷

- Thus, as elders, Nathan and Charles are just as much a “pastor/shepherd” or “overseer” as Ryan.

God gives these various titles to better picture the roles that these men play in God’s household, the local church.

- “Elder” (*πρεσβύτερος, presbuteros*) connotes wisdom, maturity, prudence, discernment, and knowledge. Though not restricted to one’s number of years, the Bible – both old and new testaments – warns of leaders who are young men and not adequately instructed in life.
- “Pastor/shepherd” (*ποιμήν, poimēn*) emphasizes that such men will lead Christ’s sheep as a gentle, loving, nurturing, serving, and sacrificial shepherd. Pastors are commissioned to “feed” Christ’s sheep with the Word of God, teaching it and applying it to their lives (cf. Ephesians 4:12-16; 1 Timothy 3:2). They will guard the sheep from folly and error (cf. Titus 1:9-16), and will protect the flock from the ravages of false teachers (cf. Acts 20:28-30). Ultimately, such shepherds imitate and follow in the steps

though “first,” they are no longer necessary, since we have all the “prophetic revelation” we need in the Scriptures. What the church needs more of, says Paul, is not apostles and prophets, but “love” (ch. 13) and teaching of that revelation (ch. 14).

⁶ I love my daughters. Therefore I hold the strictest of standards for any would-be suitor who feels called to shepherd them as the head of a new household.

⁷ E.g. see how different titles are applied to the same person in the following three texts: Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; 1 Peter 5:1,2. For further reading, see Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel, 2008), 79-83.

of the “chief Shepherd” (ἀρχιποίμην, *archipoimēn*) of the sheep, the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:4).

- “Overseer” (ἐπισκοπή, *episkopē*) means literally that, one who watches over the flock.

Qualifications for Elders

Interestingly, the first qualification is that every local church be led by a *plurality* of elders:

- Paul’s own practice was to appoint elders – plural – “in every church” (Acts 14:23).
- The local churches in Acts are always described as having elders – plural (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23; 16:4; 20:17).
- The NT letters always refer to elders – in the plural (1 Timothy 4:14; 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1, 5; cf. “leaders” in Hebrews 13:7, 17 and “those” – plural – “who are over you in the Lord” in 1 Thessalonians 5:12).

Second, those who are elders, must have a personal “desire” for this office. That is, they are not shoe-horned in against their will.

- 1 Timothy 3:1 – “The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.”
 - The Greek word for “aspire” (ὀρέγω, *oregō*) literally means to “stretch out for something.”
 - ➔ That Paul uses a present tense emphasizes that this is an abiding and undiminishing desire.
 - ➔ That Paul uses a middle voice emphasizes that the individual is actively and emotionally involved in this desire to shepherd Christ’s flock; elders are not impassionate robots but loving shepherds.

Third (though perhaps better second), elders are men.

- 1 Timothy 3:2 – “Therefore, an overseer must be above reproach, the husband (*ἄνδρα, andra*) of one wife.”
 - If it wasn't clear enough that all the pronouns in 3:1 were all masculine, Paul makes it crystal clear in 3:2.
 - ➔ It could be argued that Paul is simply emphasizing an elder's faithfulness here (i.e., “a one-woman man” can easily be applied and transferred to a female pastor who is “a one-man woman”).
 - ➔ However, that is not what the text says. To say otherwise is erroneous and irreverent at best, and deceitful and blasphemous at worst. Paul could have easily used a neuter and could have easily said “must be faithful to their spouse.” But he didn't.
 - Despite what our culture says, and despite what many churches practice, the Bible is clear: men alone are qualified as pastors of God's household.
- 1 Timothy 2:11-12 – “Let a woman learn quietly with all submissiveness. I do not permit a woman (*γυνή, gunē*) to teach or exercise authority over a man (*ἄνδρα, andra*); rather, she is to remain quiet.”
 - The context to which Paul is writing is gathered worship in the local church (2:1-10).
 - ➔ That is, this command is not forbidding a woman from ever talking; specifically, it means that when the church has gathered, women are not to exercise teaching leadership or authority over men, for this is only granted to the elders of the church (3:2b), who themselves are men (3:2a).
 - Since the local church is likened to a household (3:14), and since households are to be led by the husband (1 Corinthians 11:3; Ephesians 5:22-24), it only makes sense – consistently – that the exercise of

authority in the church through teaching is limited to men who have been called and qualified by God.⁸

→ Despite what many churches assert,⁹ this is not a passage limited to Paul's own time or culture. The very fact that it is grounded in God's creation of the household (2:13; cf. Gen. 1:27; 2:8, 18, 22) reminds us that it is an enduring truth for us today.

Fourthly, an elder must be, in an overall and general sense, a spiritually mature and holy man who functions as a role-model of godliness to the church.¹⁰

- In both 1 Timothy 3, the “first” proper adjective Paul uses of the elder is that of being “above reproach.” This then is “unpacked” with a larger list of what it looks like for such a man to be above reproach:
 - a. A one-woman man¹¹
 - b. Sober-minded (CSB, NLT = “self-controlled”; NET, NIV = “temperate”)
 - c. Self-controlled (NLT = “live wisely”; CSB = “sensible”; NASB = “prudent”)
 - d. Respectable (BDAG = “well-arranged”; “modest”)
 - e. Hospitable (BDAG = “stranger-loving”, i.e., kind to strangers)
 - f. Not a drunkard
 - g. Not violent, but gentle

⁸ This is exactly what Paul argues in 1 Timothy 3:5, using the exact same Greek word for “household.”

⁹ A favorite text to defend such an erroneous view is Galatians 3:28 – “There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is neither male nor female, for you are all one in Christ.” Unfortunately, such proponents fail to concede that the context of Galatians 3 has nothing to do with roles within the home or church. Rather, Paul has been dealing with the fact that “in Christ” we are all equal in worth and value before God. This verse has nothing to do with who and how the church is to function. If we want to follow this kind of thinking, why should we listen to – or obey – Paul anymore than anyone else? Yes, he is an apostle and prophet. But really, he has no authority over me, right? This is a dangerous and self-refuting argument that appeals not to exegesis, but acceptance in an increasingly feminist-militant and anti-male culture.

¹⁰ Generally speaking, all Christians are to aspire to a character that is “above reproach,” both in the church and out of the church. The elders are to model godliness in both their teaching *and* living before the church. As Carson says, “An elder does what an ordinary Christian should do extraordinarily well.”

¹¹ Though this translation allows for an elder to be a single man, it doesn't necessarily mandate it. I hold to this translation, not because it “opens the door” for single men, but because it seems to emphasize more of the heart and health of a man's marriage. A husband can have “one wife,” but that doesn't necessarily mean he is a good husband, or that he doesn't have ‘wandering’ eyes or thoughts. The NLT seems to intimate this, translating it, “He must be faithful to his wife.”

- h. Not quarrelsome
- i. Not a lover of money
- j. He must manage his own household well

In addition to these qualifications in 1 Timothy 3, there are a few more that we can add when we look at Titus 1 and 1 Peter 5:

- His children are faithful,¹² and do not “have a reputation of being wild or rebellious” (NLT).¹³
- Not arrogant
- A lover of good
- Upright, holy, and disciplined
- Willingly, eagerly, and gladly serves
- Not domineering

Fifthly, he must not only communicate the gospel in his life and family; he must also be able to communicate it – clearly and correctly – with his lips and teaching. He must be, in the words of Paul, “able to teach” (1 Timothy 3:2).

- In the words of Paul to Titus, elders must “hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound (lit. “healthy”) doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”
- The “word” – that is “the good news” that is preached and believed upon in justification (cf. 1 Peter 1:25), must subsequently be taught and believed upon in sanctification (cf. 1 Peter 2:2).

¹² Some translations (ESV, NLT, NASB, NIV) translate the Greek (τέκνα ἔχων πιστά) as “believing children.” That is, if a man has unbelieving children, he is not qualified to be an elder in a local church. This all depends on whether one takes this adjective “believe” as active or passive. As BDAG says, used actively, it means having faith (i.e. being a Christians); used passively, it means being faithful (i.e. someone who is faithful, trustworthy, dependable). Both are entirely possible. However, the parallel in 1 Timothy 3 (“keeping his children in control”) seems to argue more for the passive translation (cf. NET, KJV, NKJV), namely that the children are faithful and submissive to their father’s leadership.

¹³ This may fall under the “managing his own household well” of 1 Timothy 3:4-5.

- The saints “grow up into their Head – Christ” and “equipped for the work of the ministry” as these pastors teach them “the faith” (cf. Ephesians 4:11-16). Without such doctrinal gospel teaching, they remain spiritual infants, and thus vulnerable and susceptible to dangerous and damning deception (4:14; cf. Titus 1:10ff.).
- 1 Timothy 5:17 – “Let the elders who rule well¹⁴ be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”

Sixthly, he must be recognized and approved by the local church.

- This is what is referred to as the “external call.”
- Many men feel the “inward” call or compulsion to pastoral leadership, but have never been “tested” in and by a local church to verify if such a call is from God or not.
- 1 Tim. 3:10 – like deacons, elders must be “tested” or “approved¹⁵ first.”¹⁶
 - The location of this examination is not the seminary classroom, but the local church, where the sheep will recognize not only the Shepherd, but also His under-shepherds.
 - ➔ This is why elders ought to be voted in by a regenerate membership.
- 1 Tim. 5:21-22 – “In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus and of the elect angels I charge you to keep these rules without prejudging, doing nothing from partiality. Do not be hasty in laying on of hands – and take part in the sins of others.”

¹⁴ Paul uses an interesting Greek word (προΐστημι, *pro'istēmi*) here, and literally means “to stand before.” This likely portrays the pastor as a shepherd standing before and leading the flock. BDAG notes the word means “protective leadership of/over,” and often means “care for, help.” BDAG also notes that the word carries the sense of “lead, direct, rule.” Again, elders are shepherds, and their crook for the sheep is the Word of God.

¹⁵ The Greek word (δοκιμάζω, *dokimadzō*) literally means to prove by testing.

¹⁶ It could be argued that the context says that only deacons are to be tested before being accepted into office. The “and” (καί, *kai*) is important. Like the “likewise” (ὡσαύτως, *hōsautōs*) in 3:8, it refers the reader back to the previous section on elder qualifications, reminding us that there is much overlap between elder and deacon qualifications.

- In Scripture, “laying on of hands” most often connotes and pictures the recognition of current leaders that God is bestowing authority upon an individual for leadership over God’s people in some capacity.¹⁷

To summarize succinctly, an elder must have all these qualifications:

1. The inward call of the Holy Spirit
2. Live a visibly, consistently holy life
3. The gift of being able to clearly, accurately and faithfully teach the Word
4. The outward call of a local church

The Elder’s Authority

As we have seen, God has ordained and instituted various levels of governance within His creation, be it the family, the government, or the local church. In each of these “spheres,” there is a form of leadership that God has Himself authorized, and as such, demands that – within the confines of Scripture – people submit to.¹⁸

- For example, I have heard people say that they do not need to submit to anyone but God alone. As pious as this may initially sound, it is, to put it mildly, unbiblical:
 - Romans 13:1-2 – “Let every person be subject to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those that exist have been instituted by God. Therefore, whoever resists the authorities resists what God has appointed, and those who resist will incur judgment.”¹⁹

¹⁷ In the OT, this is clear when Moses “passes on the mantle” to Joshua (see Numbers 27:15-23); in the NT, Paul commissions Timothy as his authoritative protégé (see 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6). The church, after prayer and fasting, recognizes and publicizes Paul and Barnabas for missions by laying their hands on them (Acts 13:3). Understanding “laying on of hands” this way keeps us from abusing passages like Acts 8:17.

¹⁸ What I mean is that we are to submit to these God-ordained “leaders” insofar that we are not contravening Scripture by doing so. And thus, if say the government or a husband or a pastor mandates us to overtly sin against God, we must not only *not* submit to government, but resist it. Peter’s words to the Sanhedrin are appropriate: “We must obey God rather than man!” (Acts 5:29; cf. 4:19).

¹⁹ See also Titus 3:1 and 1 Peter 2:13-14.

- Though we must ultimately submit to “the Father of spirits,” this does not annul our necessary submission to our earthly fathers (see Hebrews 13:9-11).

Since the local church is described as a “household,” we should not be surprised then that the Lord of the church has not only instituted various levels of leadership, but also entrusted those leaders with a measure of authority in order that they might lead the church and shepherd the flock.

We must remember that the authority of elders comes not from the congregation, but from God Himself. As NT scholar Benjamin Merkle says, “Although the congregation affirms the elders’ calling and authority, theirs is an authority with a divine origin.”²⁰

- Acts 20:28 – “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, *in which the Holy Spirit has made*²¹ *your overseers*, to care for²² the church of God, which He obtained²³ with His own blood.”
- Ephesians 4:11 – “And [*Christ*] *Himself*²⁴ *gave*...the shepherds and teachers...”.

And so, in God’s eternal economy²⁵ of salvation, He has sovereignly ordained and designed the church to have various levels of leadership and authority structures. We might say that the NT teaches that the church has a “top-down” leadership ladder:

²⁰ Benjamin Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Academic, 2008), 97.

²¹ A better translation for the Greek word (τίθημι, *tithēmi*) is “appointed” (cf. CSB, NLT).

²² A better translation for the Greek word (ποιμαίνω, *poimainō*) is “to shepherd.”

²³ BDAG defines the verb as “gain or acquire for oneself with much effort,” “pay the price for.”

²⁴ The Greek is emphatic here. The pronoun (αὐτός, *autos*) emphasizes that it is the resurrected Christ *Himself* (and not anyone else) who is bestowing these gifts upon His church. The CSB and NIV pick up on this: “He Himself gave.”

²⁵ Paul loves to use the word οἰκονομία (*oikonomia*), which is usually translated “stewardship.” God, in His economy of salvation, “appointed” Paul to be His “steward” of grace to the Gentiles (e.g. 1 Timothy 2:7; Titus 1:3; cf. Galatians 1:15), which accorded with His eternal purposes of election. After Christ’s death and resurrection, God had planned for the apostles to “oversee” this phase of redemption (i.e. the establishment of the church). Now that the church has been established (see the book of Acts; cf. Ephesians 2:20), this “apostolic stewardship” has now ceased. The church, however, is not “stewardless”: those who now “steward” God’s “house” with Christ’s authority are pastors, whose authority is not over *every* church, but only a particular church, and whose authority is not themselves, but the apostolic witness of the gospel as revealed in the Scriptures (which is why their authority and shepherding roles are always linked to teaching and preaching the Word of God).

- The Lord/Christ → the apostles/prophets → the pastors/teachers
 - And thus, pastors are to be submitted to *only insofar* that they are leading in step with the apostolic gospel and the teachings derived from it, which always point back to Christ (e.g. 1 Timothy 1:11; 6:2b-3²⁶; cf. 2 Timothy 4:2; 1 John 4:1).

The Lord Christ and the apostolic witness (i.e. the NT Scriptures) rule over *every* church, but that authority is then localized in *each* congregation²⁷ by a plurality of elders, who then shepherd that flock *with* and *by* the Scriptures.

Though a derived authority, it is an authority nonetheless, and one that *every* member of the local church is called to submit to:

- Hebrews 13:17 – “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”²⁸
- 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 – “We ask you, brothers [and sisters], to respect those who labor among you and are *over*²⁹ *you in the Lord* and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.”
- 1 Timothy 5:17 – qualified and faithful elders are to be “considered worthy” by the congregation. Note the link between their authority and the their “preaching and teaching” the Scriptures.

²⁶ In 1 Timothy, Paul was writing against a band of self-promoting and self-appointed “leaders” who had crept into the congregation in Ephesus. Unfortunately, they were “out of step with the gospel” (see 1 Timothy 1:8-15), and thus were not to be submitted to (cf. Galatians 1:8,9). This also seems to be the case in 1 and 2 Corinthians, where some self-proclaimed “super apostles” were lording their “authority” over the congregation. Sadly, though, they were not “recognized” by Christ (cf. 1 Corinthians 14:37; 2 Corinthians 10:18), and thus not to be submitted to.

²⁷ Just as a wife is to be submissive only to her husband, and not every other husband she meets. He has been granted an authority from God to lead *her* well within that particular household. The same language and idea is transferred into the realm of the “household of God”, namely local churches. Unlike Jesus or the apostles, pastors cannot go around commanding Christians everywhere to submit to their authority, any more than a husband can stand up in the church and demand every wife submit to his authority because he is a husband.

²⁸ Some assert that “leaders” do not refer to “pastors” here. The NT does not allow for this kind of thinking though, for the language of “submission” and “obedience” within the local church is always with reference to those who have been appointed as pastors, and thus those who have been granted authority for the purpose of shepherding.

²⁹ NASB = who “have charge over you”; NET = “preside over you.” The NIV’s “care for you” picks up the “shepherd” language of the Greek word, but undercuts the authority that Christ has given His under-shepherds to “care for” His flock.

- Titus 2:15 – “These things, keep speaking and keep exhorting and keep rebuking with official authority; let no one disregard you.”³⁰
- 2 Timothy 4:1-2 – “I³¹ charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by His appearing and His kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching.”

Perhaps the words of Merkle are an apt way to conclude this section:

The elders’ authority is not absolute. They derive their authority from the Word of God, and when they stray from that Word, they abandon their God-given authority. As an apostle of Jesus Christ, Paul possessed nearly unmatched authority. Yet, Luke tells us that the Bereans were more noble than others because they not only received the preached Word with eagerness, but they examined the Scriptures daily to see if Paul indeed spoke the truth (Acts 17:11). Paul himself states that even if he or an angel preached a gospel other than the true gospel, “let him be accused” (Gal. 1:8). The authority that the elders possess is not so much found in their office but in the duties they perform. That is, the elders are not to be obeyed simply because they are elders. Rather, they are to be obeyed because they have the responsibility of shepherding and teaching the congregation. They shepherd because the Word calls upon

³⁰ This is my own literal translation of the Greek text. The “these things” refer to the gospel indicatives and imperatives Paul has just laid out in the immediately preceding context, and may also refer to the following commands Paul is going to give to Titus to give to the newly formed local church in Crete. Providing a “wooden,” or a literal translation, is sometimes helpful. Here, the three-fold repetition “keep” picks up that all three commands from the apostle Paul are in the present tense, and thus are to be obeyed continually. Moreover, most English translations have “authority” for the word (ἐπιταγή, *epitagē*). I am following BDAG’s definition here: “as the exercise of official leadership authority.” Clearly here, Titus is “deriving” his authority from the apostle Paul himself as his official ambassador and delegate.

³¹ We must not quickly overlook who the “I” is here: it is the apostle Paul, whom the risen Lord Jesus has appointed to be His official steward to promulgate the furtherance of His gospel (see e.g. Galatians 1:15-16). Paul is here giving his emissary – Timothy – his official apostolic authority over the congregation while he is absent (see 1 Timothy 1:3ff.). Therefore, to reject the apostolic gospel/doctrine Timothy preaches and teaches is to reject the apostle Jesus has sent (that is, Paul). And to reject the apostle Jesus has sent is to reject Jesus Himself (See 2 Corinthians 5-6, where Paul articulates this very thing. Though in a very real sense *all* Christians have been commissioned with the gospel, Paul says that the apostles ultimately have [note the “us” in 5:19b and the “we” in 5:20, which, in context refers to the apostle Paul himself {especially of the “we” is a “royal” we}]. See Murray Harris’ fine treatment of this section in his *New International Commentary on the Greek New Testament*).

elders to shepherd. They teach because the Word calls upon elders to teach. But when their shepherding and teaching stray from Scripture, their authority as shepherds and teachers is no longer binding on the congregation.³²

The Role of Deacons in the Local Church

“Deacon” is a translation of the Greek term *διάκονος* (*diakonos*), which normally means “servant.” Only context can determine whether this term is being used in its ordinary usage or as the technical designation of a church officer.

The word is used 29 times in the NT, but only three or four of those occurrences refer to an office holder (Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12).³³

Acts 6 as a Model for Deacons

Merkle is helpful here: “The origin of the deacon is not known for certain, but many scholars believe that the seven chosen in Acts 6 provide the prototype of the New Testament deacon...Acts 6 [appears to] provide a pattern or paradigm that seems to have been continued in the early church.”³⁴

Simply put, the deacons were appointed and commissioned with the task of supporting the leaders of the church in such a way as to allow them to focus on prayer and prioritize their administration of the Word to the flock.

As we saw earlier, the foundational office of apostle and prophet as the was phased out, and the stewardship of God’s house was eventually to be entrusted to the ongoing stewards Paul calls “shepherds and teachers” – that is, pastors.

- Thus, just as these deacons were appointed for the purpose of allowing the stewards – the apostles and prophets – of the early church to “devote themselves” to the Word of God and prayer, so too deacons are to be

³² Merkle, *40 Questions*, 97-98.

³³ Many evangelicals – complementarians included – believe that Phoebe is a deacon (Romans 16:1). The ESV is ambiguous in translating *diakonos* simply as “servant.” Though I am not persuaded that the office of deacon may be occupied by women, this is not a hill I am willing to fight for.

³⁴ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 227.

appointed for the same purpose for the stewards – the elders – to focus on the same things.

We saw in 1 Timothy 5:17-18 that the elders “rule best” by faithfully and competently teaching the Word of God to the flock. Thus deacons serve best when they come along side the elders to allow and support them in this essential and crucial endeavor.³⁵

In his excellent book, *Budgeting for a Healthy Church*, Jamie Dunlop nicely summarizes the importance, role, and necessity of biblical deacons for a healthy, united, and functioning local church: the pastors *lead*, the deacons *support*, and the congregation *actively follows*.³⁶

- The pastors are to identify the spiritual priorities at stake in the church and then lead the process of administering them.
- The deacons assist by helping to implement the priorities that the pastors have established.
- The congregation is not static, voiceless, or inactive in church affairs. Rather, they are to joyfully join the leadership in the decisions and directions the leaders have ascertained will best produce a healthy church, and thus a healthy gospel witness.

Contrary to the practice of many churches, the deacons are not the primary decision makers in the church. In many churches, the board of deacons provides the spiritual leadership in partnership with the “lead” pastor.

³⁵ There seems to be an OT precedent for this kind of “supportive” ministry. With regards to care for the tabernacle, and later the Temple, only certain Levites – the descendants of Aaron – were allowed to offer sacrifices on behalf of the Israelites. But, since this required much time and effort, God instituted “helpers” for the priests, namely the Levites. Before a permanent Temple was constructed in Jerusalem, these Levites – the Gershonites, the Merarites, and the Kohathites – each were assigned various responsibilities with respect to the setting up, transporting, and taking down of the Tabernacle. Only the priests could handle the articles in the Holy of holies; the Levites were in charge of the other elements. Moreover, they helped the priests to “guard” the Tabernacle. Moses thus likens the Levites to “helpers” or those who support the Priesthood, which was central to the OT community of Israel, and thus the well-being of God’s testimony through His people.

³⁶ Jamie Dunlop, *Budgeting for a Healthy Church* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2019), 39-40.

But based on the writings of the New Testament, the role of the deacon is mainly a servant role. Deacons are needed in the church to provide logistical and material support so that the elders can concentrate their efforts on the Word of God and prayer.

Merkle nicely summarizes the role of a deacon:

Whereas elders are charged with the tasks of teaching and shepherding the church, deacons are given a more service-oriented function. That is, they are given the task of taking care of matters related more to the physical or temporal concerns of the church. For example, they might have responsibility over areas such as facilities, benevolence, finances, and other matters related to the practical logistics of running a church.³⁷

Qualifications of Deacons

There is only one passage that gives us a list – or picture – of the moral qualities that are prerequisite for those who are to serve in the office of deacon.³⁸

Immediately after outlining the qualifications for those who would steward God's house as elders in 1 Timothy 3, Paul naturally moves from them to deacons.

As we noted from our study on the office of elders, there is much overlap between these two offices when it comes to the necessity of a godly character and witness before others.

The one primary difference between elders and deacons is that elders "must" be able to teach (3:2).

As they "serve well," says Paul, they will not only gain respect from others, their own confidence in the power of the gospel will also be strengthened (3:13, NLT).

³⁷ Merkle, *40 Questions*, 241-42.

³⁸ Again, every Christian is to strive to be a better servant of all. Like the pastor, the deacon is to exemplify to the rest of the church what it looks like to serve one another in love for the advance of the gospel in and through the local church.

Conclusion

When the leaders of local churches “keep a close watch on their life and doctrine” (1 Timothy 4:16a, NIV), Paul says that the result is salvation and deliverance (4:16b).

John Stott has famously said, “The church lies at the very center of the eternal purpose of God. It is not a divine afterthought. It is not an accident of history.”³⁹ If Stott is correct – even partially – how seriously ought we to take the leadership of Christ’s church?

Part of Israel’s plight throughout the OT was her horrific history of lacklustre leaders, who, instead of pointing them and the nations to God to inherit His blessing, led them away from God to invoke His cursing. Tragically, such false shepherds, instead of feeding the sheep, were caught feeding *on* the sheep.⁴⁰

Thankfully, God, in His eternal purpose and goodness, promised His people a Shepherd who would come from heaven to earth to save them.

Additionally – and amazingly – He also promised His sheep under-shepherds who would help them on their journey from earth to heaven: “And I will give you shepherds after My own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding” (Jeremiah 3:15).

Praise the Lord. Christ has come. By His death, He has established a new covenant with His people, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:16; Because of His resurrection and ascension, He has poured out His Spirit from Jerusalem to the ends of the earth, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:17; Through the gospel He is uniting His people in Himself, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:18-19. And finally, as the Lord of His church, He is giving His bride “gifts” – pastors and teachers, fulfilling Jeremiah 3:15.

May the Lord of the church, in His great love for His church, continue to raise up such shepherds, who, like Him, love the church and give themselves up for her!!

³⁹ John Stott, *The Living Church* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2007), 19.

⁴⁰ One could turn to passages such as Jeremiah 23 or Ezekiel 34, or even to books as a whole, like Malachi.

Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly than all that we ask or think, according to the power at work within us, to Him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, forever and ever. Amen.⁴¹

⁴¹ Ephesians 3:20-21