

A DISCUSSION OF ELDER LEADERSHIP

Dr. Robert A. Singer (RSinger777@aol.com)
Pastor, Cottage Grove Bible Church
Cottage Grove, Oregon

2015

^{ESV} **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. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.

*Feel free to make copies of this paper to give to others,
but please do not alter the contents in any way without permission.*

^{ESV} English Standard Version
^{KJV} King James Version
^{NAU} New American Standard Version ('95 Update)
^{NIV} New International Version
^{NKJ} New King James Version
^{NLT} New Living Translation

TABLE OF CONTENTS

	Page
I. Major New Testament Terms Relating to Local Church Leadership	5
A. Elder	
1. Definitions	
2. References to Age	
3. References to the “Jerusalem Council”	
4. References Primarily to Respect	
5. <u>All</u> References to Elders of the Local Church	
6. References to Jewish Elders	
B. Overseer	7
1. Definitions	
2. <u>All</u> References to Local Church Leadership	
3. Other References	
C. Shepherd (Pastor)	8
1. Definitions	
2. Examples of References to Literal Shepherds	
3. Examples of References to Jesus Christ	
4. <u>All</u> References to Local Church Leadership	
5. Examples of Other References	
D. Deacon/Deaconess	10
1. Definitions	
2. Examples of References to Serving	
3. <u>All</u> References to The Office of Deacon	
4. <u>All</u> References to the Office of Deaconess	
a. One Indirect Reference	
b. One Possible Reference	
E. Four Observations	14
1. “Elders”, “Overseers”, and “Shepherds” refer to the same church leaders	
2. The office of “Elder/Overseer/Shepherd” can be held by any qualified man in the congregation.	
3. The “Elders/Overseers/Shepherds” form the key leadership team of the local church.	

4. The office of “Deacon” is distinct from that of “Elder/Overseer/Shepherd”.

II. Resulting Local Church Polity	16
A. “Elder-Led”	
1. The Elders Should Be the Primary Leadership Team of the Local Church	
2. What We Call Our Leaders Does Make a Difference	
3. A Clarification of “Elder Rule”	
B. “Congregationally Affirmed”	17
1. Biblical Evidence for “Congregational Affirmation”	
a. In Elections	
b. In Discipline	
C. Conclusion	19
1. The congregation recognizes that the elders have the key leadership role and respects their leadership, and...	
2. The elders recognize that the congregation has a real voice in its own affairs and respects that voice.	
III. A Comparison of the Qualifications for Elders/Overseers/Shepherds and Deacons	19
IV. Final Thoughts on Church Leadership	22
A. Plurality of Elders	
B. First among Equals	
C. Unanimity among Elders	
D. Choosing Leaders by Spiritual Qualifications	
E. Titles and Perceptions	
V. Concluding Comment	25

I. Major New Testament Terms Relating to Local Church Leadership

A. Elder

1. Definitions

pres-bu-ter'-i-on (πρεσβυτέριον) “council of elders”

pres-bu'-ter-os (πρεσβύτερος) “elder”

This word may be understood in the sense of age, respect, and/or office.

sym-pres-bu'-ter-os (συμπρεσβύτερος) “fellow elder”

We get our word “Presbyterian” from this word family.

2. References to Age

pres-bu'-ter-os (πρεσβύτερος) “elder”

^{NAU} Luke 15:25 Now his **older** son was in the field...

^{NAU} John 8:9 ... they *began* to go out one by one, beginning with the **older ones**...

^{ESV} Acts 2:17 ...and your **old men** shall dream dreams...

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 5:1 Do not sharply rebuke **an older man**, but *rather* appeal to *him* as a father...

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 5:2 **the older women** as mothers...
(*The Greek word has a distinctly feminine form here.*)

^{NAU} Hebrews 11:2 For by it the **men of old** gained approval.
(*men of a former time, an older time*)

3. References to the “Jerusalem Council”

pres-bu'-ter-os (πρεσβύτερος) “elder”

^{ESV} Acts 15:2 ...some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the **elders**...

^{NAU} Acts 15:4 ... they were received by the church and the apostles and the **elders**...

^{NAU} Acts 15:6 The apostles and the **elders** came together to look into this matter.

^{NAU} Acts 15:22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the **elders**, with the whole church...

^{NAU} Acts 15:23 ... 'The apostles and the brethren who are **elders**, to the brethren in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia...'

^{NAU} Acts 16:4 ... they were delivering the decrees which had been decided upon by the apostles and **elders** who were in Jerusalem...

4. References Primarily to Respect

pres-bu'-ter-os (πρεσβύτερος) "elder"

^{NAU} 2 John 1 The **elder** (*John*) to the chosen lady and her children...

^{NAU} 3 John 1 The **elder** (*John*) to the beloved Gaius...

sym-pres-bu'-ter-os (συμπρεσβύτερος) "fellow elder"

^{NAU} 1 Peter 5:1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* **fellow elder**...

5. All References to Elders of the Local Church

pres-bu-ter'-i-on (πρεσβυτέριον) "council of elders"

^{NIV} 1 Timothy 4:14 Do not neglect your gift, which was given you through a prophetic message when the **body of elders** laid their hands on you.

pres-bu'-ter-os (πρεσβύτερος) "elder"

^{NLT} Acts 11:30 This they did, entrusting their gifts to Barnabas and Saul to take to the **elders** of the church in Jerusalem.

^{NIV} Acts 14:23 Paul and Barnabas appointed **elders** for them in each church...

^{NIV} Acts 20:17 From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the **elders** of the church.

^{NLT} Acts 21:18 The next day Paul went in with us to meet with James, and all the **elders** of the Jerusalem church were present.

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 5:17 The **elders** who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

^{NIV} 1 Timothy 5:19 Do not entertain an accusation against **an elder** unless it is brought by two or three witnesses.

^{NAU} Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint **elders** in every city as I directed you...

^{NKJ} James 5:14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the **elders** of the church...

^{NAU} 1 Peter 5:1 Therefore, I exhort **the elders** among you, as *your* fellow elder...

^{ESV} 1 Peter 5:5 Likewise, you who are younger, be subject to the **elders**...

6. References to Jewish Elders

There are several references to Jewish elders in the New Testament. I have not included these because they do not bear directly on the understanding of the office of “elder” in the local church.

B. Overseer

1. Definitions

e-pis-ko-pe' (ἐπισκοπή) “position or office as an overseer”

e-pis-ko-pe'-o (ἐπισκοπέω) “to oversee, to care for”

e-pis'-ko-pos (ἐπίσκοπος) “overseer”

We get our word “Episcopal” from this word family.

2. All References to Local Church Leadership

e-pis-ko-pe' (ἐπισκοπή) “position or office as an overseer”

^{ESV} 1 Timothy 3:1 ... If anyone aspires **to the office of overseer**, he desires a noble task.

e-pis-ko-pe'-o (ἐπισκοπέω) “to oversee, to care for”

^{NIV} 1 Peter 5:2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, servng as overseers...

e-pis'-ko-pos (ἐπίσκοπος) “overseer”

^{NAU} Acts 20:28 Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God...

^{NAU} Philippians 1:1 ... To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons...

(Greek grammar would indicate that “overseers” and “deacons” refer to two different offices.)

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 3:2 An overseer, then, must be above reproach...

^{ESV} Titus 1:7 For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach...

3. Other References

e-pis-ko-pe' (ἐπισκοπή) “position or office as an overseer”

^{NLT} Acts 1:20 ... And again, 'Let his (*Judas Iscariot's*) position (*KJV* “*bishoprick*”) be given to someone else.'

e-pis'-ko-pos (ἐπίσκοπος) “overseer”

^{KJV} 1 Peter 2:25 For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the Shepherd and Bishop (*Jesus Christ*) of your souls.

C. Shepherd (Pastor)

1. Definitions

ar-chi-poi'-men (ἀρχιποίμην) “chief shepherd”

poi-mai'-no (ποιμαίνω) “to shepherd”

poi-men' (ποιμήν) “shepherd”

2. Examples of References to Literal Shepherds

poi-mai'-no (ποιμαίνω) “to shepherd”

^{ESV} Luke 17:7 Will any one of you who has a servant plowing or **keeping sheep**...

poi-men' (ποιμήν) “shepherd”

^{ESV} Luke 2:8 And in the same region there were **shepherds** out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.

3. Examples of References to Jesus Christ

ar-chi-poi'-men (ἀρχιποίμην) “chief shepherd”

^{NAU} 1 Peter 5:4 And when the **Chief Shepherd** appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

poi-mai'-no (ποιμαίνω) “to shepherd”

^{NKJ} Matthew 2:6 'But you, Bethlehem, *in* the land of Judah, Are not the least among the rulers of Judah; For out of you shall come a Ruler Who **will shepherd** My people Israel.'

poi-men' (ποιμήν) “shepherd”

^{ESV} Matthew 26:31 Then Jesus said to them, "You will all fall away because of me this night. For it is written, 'I will strike the **shepherd**, and the sheep of the flock will be scattered.'

^{NAU} John 10:11 "I am the good **shepherd**; the good **shepherd** lays down His life for the sheep.

^{KJV} 1 Peter 2:25 For ye were as sheep going astray; but are now returned unto the **Shepherd** and Bishop of your souls.

4. All References to Local Church Leadership

poi-mai'-no (ποιμαίνω) “to shepherd”

^{ESV} Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, **to care for** the church of God...

^{NIV} 1 Peter 5:2 **Be shepherds** of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...

poi-men' (ποιμήν) "shepherd"

^{KJV} Ephesians 4:11 And he gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, **pastors** and teachers;

(Greek grammar indicates that the terms "pastors" and "teachers" in this verse refer to the same individuals. Also, this is the only occurrence in most English translations of our word "pastor.")

5. Examples of Other References

poi-mai'-no (ποιμαίνω) "to shepherd"

^{NAU} John 21:16 He said to him again a second time, "Simon, son of John, do you love Me?" He said to Him, "Yes, Lord; You know that I love You." He said to him, "**Shepherd** My sheep."

poi-men' (ποιμήν) "shepherd"

^{ESV} Mark 6:34 When he went ashore he saw a great crowd, and he had compassion on them, because they were like sheep without **a shepherd**.

D. Deacon/Deaconess

1. Definitions

di-a-ko-ne'-o (διακονέω) "to serve, to minister"

di-a-ko-ni'-a (διακονία) "service, ministry"

di-a'-ko-nos (διάκονος) "servant, minister"

There are 100 New Testament references to these words (**di-a-ko-ne'-o** is used 37 times, **di-a-ko-ni'-a** 34, and **di-a'-ko-nos** 29).

2. Examples of References to Serving

di-a-ko-ne'-o (διακονέω) "to serve, to minister"

^{NIV} Matthew 4:11 Then the devil left him, and angels came and **attended** him.

NAU Mark 10:45 "For even the Son of Man did not come **to be served**, but **to serve**...

ESV Luke 4:39 And he stood over her and rebuked the fever, and it left her, and immediately she rose and **began to serve** them.

NIV Luke 10:40 ..."Lord, don't you care that my sister has left me (*Martha*) **to do the work** by myself?...

NAU John 12:2 So they made Him a supper there, and Martha **was serving**; but Lazarus was one of those reclining *at the table* with Him.

NAU Acts 6:2 So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order **to serve** tables.

NKJ Romans 15:25 But now I am going to Jerusalem **to minister** to the saints.

NKJ 2 Corinthians 3:3 clearly *you are* an epistle of Christ, **ministered** by us, written not with ink but by the Spirit of the living God...

NIV 2 Timothy 1:18 ...You know very well in how many ways he (*Onesiphorus*) **helped** me in Ephesus.

ESV 1 Peter 1:12 It was revealed to them that they **were serving** not themselves but you, in the things that have now been announced to you...

NAU **1 Peter 4:11** ...whoever **serves** *is to do so* as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies... (*speaking of spiritual gifts*)

di-a-ko-ni'-a (δῆακονία) "service, ministry"

NAU Luke 10:40 But Martha was distracted with all her **preparations**...

NAU Acts 6:1 ...because their widows were being overlooked in the daily **serving** *of food*.

KJV Acts 6:4 But we will give ourselves continually to prayer, and to the **ministry** of the word.

NLT Acts 11:29 So the believers in Antioch decided to send **relief** to the brothers and sisters in Judea, everyone giving as much as they could.

^{KJV} Acts 12:25 And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem, when they had fulfilled *their* **ministry**...

^{NAU} Acts 20:24 ...so that I (*Paul*) may finish my course and the **ministry** which I received from the Lord Jesus...

^{NAU} Romans 12:7 if **service**, in his **servicing**; or he who teaches, in his teaching;

^{NAU} 1 Corinthians 12:5 And there are varieties **of ministries**, and the same Lord.

^{ESV} 2 Corinthians 5:18 All this is from God, who through Christ reconciled us to himself and gave us the **ministry** of reconciliation;

^{NIV} 2 Corinthians 8:4 they urgently pleaded with us for the privilege of sharing in this **service** to the saints.

^{ESV} Ephesians 4:12 to equip the saints for the work **of ministry**, for building up the body of Christ,

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 1:12 I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who has strengthened me, because He considered me faithful, putting me into **service**,

^{NAU} 2 Timothy 4:5 But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your **ministry**.

^{NAU} Hebrews 1:14 Are they (*angels*) not all ministering spirits, sent out to render **service** for the sake of those who will inherit salvation?

di-a'-ko-nos (διάκονος) "servant, minister"

^{NKJ} Mark 9:35 ..."If anyone desires to be first, he shall be last of all and **servant** of all."

^{NIV} John 2:9 and the master of the banquet tasted the water that had been turned into wine. He did not realize where it had come from, though the **servants** who had drawn the water knew...

^{NAU} Romans 13:4 for it (*civil authority*) is **a minister** of God to you for good. But if you do what is evil, be afraid; for it does not bear the sword for nothing; for it is **a minister** of God, an avenger who brings wrath on the one who practices evil.

^{NIV} Romans 15:8 For I tell you that Christ has become **a servant** of the Jews on behalf of God's truth...

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 3:5 What then is Apollos? What is Paul? **Servants** through whom you believed...

^{NIV} 2 Corinthians 11:15 It is not surprising, then, if his **servants** masquerade as **servants** of righteousness...

^{NAU} Galatians 2:17 is Christ then **a minister** of sin? May it never be!

^{ESV} Ephesians 3:7 Of this gospel I was made **a minister** according to the gift of God's grace...

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 4:6 In pointing out these things to the brethren, you will be **a** good **servant** of Christ Jesus...

3. All References to The Office of Deacon

di-a-ko-ne'-o (διακονέω) "to serve, to minister"

^{NKJ} 1 Timothy 3:10 But let these also first be tested; then **let them serve as deacons**...

^{NKJ} 1 Timothy 3:13 For those who **have served** well **as deacons** obtain for themselves a good standing and great boldness in the faith...

di-a'-ko-nos (διάκονος) "servant, minister"

^{NAU} Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and **deacons**:

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 3:8 **Deacons** likewise *must be* men of dignity...

^{NKJ} 1 Timothy 3:12 Let **deacons** be the husbands of one wife...

Note: Acts 6:1-7 does not specifically mention the office of deacon, but words from this group do appear three times in this passage. I have already cited each of them, but again here is where they appear:

^{NAU} Acts 6:1-4 Now at this time while the disciples were increasing *in number*, a complaint arose on the part of the Hellenistic Jews against the *native* Hebrews, because their widows were being overlooked in the daily **servicing** (**di-a-ko-ni'-a**) of food.² So the twelve summoned the congregation of the disciples and said, "It is

not desirable for us to neglect the word of God in order to **serve** (**di-a-ko-ne'-o**) tables. ³ "Therefore, brethren, select from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task. ⁴ "But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the **ministry** (**di-a-ko-ni'-a**) of the word."

4. All References to the Office of Deaconess

There are no clear and direct references to this office, but there is one indirect reference and a second possible reference.

a. One Indirect Reference

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 3:11 Women *must* likewise *be* dignified, not malicious gossips, but temperate, faithful in all things.

The word translated "women" in this verse could be translated "wives". However, there is no personal pronoun in the original linking these women to the deacons of verses 8-10 (i.e. "their" wives). Since the same form of **di-a'-ko-nos** was used to refer to both men and women (cf. Romans 16:1) it would have been necessary to use a word like "women" to distinguish a woman deaconess from a male deacon.

Also, if deacon's wives were in view instead of deaconesses, this would raise the question as to why there were no qualifications given earlier in the chapter for the wives of overseers.

b. One Possible Reference

di-a'-ko-nos (δίακονος) "servant, minister"

^{NAU} Romans 16:1 I commend to you our sister Phoebe, who is **a** **servant** of the church which is at Cenchrea;

E. Four Observations

1. "Elders", "Overseers", and "Shepherds" refer to the same church leaders

These three terms are used almost interchangeably with each other in a couple of passages. On the other hand these terms are *never* used interchangeably with the office of deacon.

^{NAU} Acts 20:17, 18, 28 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** (**pres-bu'-ter-os**) of the church. ¹⁸ And when they had come to him, he said to them... ²⁸ "Be on guard for yourselves and for

all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers (e-pis'-ko-pos)**, **to shepherd (poi-mai'-no)** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.

^{NAU} Titus 1:5-7 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint **elders (pres-bu'-ter-os)** in every city as I directed you, ⁶ *namely*, if any man is above reproach, the husband of one wife, having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion. ⁷ For the **overseer (e-pis'-ko-pos)** must be above reproach as God's steward...

^{NIV} 1 Peter 5:1-2 To **the elders (pres-bu'-ter-os)** among you, I appeal as a **fellow elder (sym-pres-bu'-ter-os)**, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: ² **Be shepherds (poi-mai'-no)** of God's flock that is under your care, **servng as overseers (e-pis-ko-pe'-o)**-- not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve;

2. The office of "Elder/Overseer/Shepherd" can be held by *any qualified man* in the congregation.

There is no indication anywhere in the New Testament that this is an office limited to vocational ministers!

And, unlike deacons, there is never any hint that women held this office.

3. The "Elders/Overseers/Shepherds" form the key leadership team of the local church.
4. The office of "Deacon" is distinct from that of "Elder/Overseer/Shepherd".

^{NAU} Philippians 1:1 Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers (e-pis'-ko-pos)** and **deacons (di-a'-ko-nos)**:

^{NAU} **1 Timothy 3:2, 8** An **overseer (e-pis'-ko-pos)**, then, must be...
⁸ **Deacons (di-a'-ko-nos)** likewise *must be*...

II. Resulting Local Church Polity

A. “Elder-Led”

1. The Elders Should Be the Primary Leadership Team of the Local Church

This is clearly seen from the meanings of the three titles themselves (“elder,” “overseer,” “shepherd”) and the multiple contexts in which these titles appear.

In contrast is the office of deacon, *clearly* appearing *only* in 1 Timothy 3:8-13 (their qualifications) and in Philippians 1:1 (an address). Deacons and deaconesses are still leaders in their ministries, but should not be the primary leaders in the local church.

2. What We Call Our Leaders Does Make a Difference

The qualifications required for elders are much more extensive than those required for deacons. *Who* we choose as the primary leaders in our churches will have a direct bearing on *how* they lead. (A little later I will compare the qualifications for these two offices from 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.)

3. A Clarification of “Elder Rule”

This term comes from 1 Timothy 5:17.

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 5:17 The **elders** who **rule** well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

It is an *incorrect* understanding of the word “rule” in this verse that the Elders *alone* have the authority to make decisions for the local church, and that the congregation has no voice in those decisions. Consider the following brief word study:

The word translated “rule” here is **pro-is'-te-mi** (προϊστημι). It is a combination of the preposition **pro'** (πρό, “before”) and the verb **his'-te-mi** (ἵστημι, to stand). A very literal translation would be “to stand before.”

Here are some examples of the various translations of this word in the New Testament.

^{NAU} Romans 12:6-8 Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly*: if

prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith; ⁷ if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching; ⁸ or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who **leads**, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

There is clearly a spiritual gift “leadership.” However we wouldn’t recognize the spiritual gift of “*rulership*” in anyone!

^{NAU} 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 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, ¹³ and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 3:4-5 *He* (an overseer) *must be* one who **manages** his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity ⁵ (but if a man does not know how to **manage** his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?),

^{NAU} 1 Timothy 3:12 Deacons must be husbands of *only* one wife, *and* good **managers** of *their* children and their own households.

Could you imagine what our wives would say if we announced that we would henceforth “*rule*” them and our children?

Other possible translations of this word are “to be at the head of”, “to direct”, “to conduct.”

These verses emphasize leading, not ruling. Therefore the concept of “Elder Rule” in 1 Timothy 5:17 should more appropriately be understood as “Elder Leadership.”

B. “Congregationally Affirmed”

As the elders seek to lead a congregation, how much of a voice should be given to the congregation in leadership decisions? What mechanisms should be present in the by-laws to define that voice? This is always a balance between 1) Scripture, 2) non-profit corporation law, and 3) the character of each individual congregation.

The CB Northwest Identity Document states, “Affirmation can be done in a variety of ways: voting, consensus, obedience, etc.” *All* of these ways, not just one of them, are properly evidenced at times in healthy congregations.

1. Biblical Evidence for “Congregational Affirmation”

a. In Elections

^{NAU} Acts 1:15, 23, 26 At this time Peter stood up in the midst of the brethren (a gathering of about one hundred and twenty persons was there together)...²³ So **they put forward** two men, Joseph called Barsabbas (who was also called Justus), and Matthias...²⁶ And **they drew lots** for them, and the lot fell to Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles.

^{NAU} Acts 6:3, 5 "Therefore, brethren, **select from among you** seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task...⁵ The statement found approval **with the whole congregation**; and **they chose** Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, Prochorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas and Nicolas...

^{NAU} Acts 15:2-3 And when Paul and Barnabas had great dissension and debate with them, **the brethren determined** that Paul and Barnabas and some others of them should go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and elders concerning this issue.³ Therefore, being sent on their way **by the church**, they were passing through both Phoenicia and Samaria...

^{NAU} Acts 15:22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, **with the whole church**, to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas...

b. In Discipline

^{ESV} Matthew 18:15-17 "If your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault, between you and him alone...¹⁶ But if he does not listen, take one or two others along with you...¹⁷ If he refuses to listen to them, tell it **to the church**. And if he refuses to listen even **to the church**, let him be to you as a Gentile and a tax collector.

^{ESV} 1 Corinthians 5:4-5 **When you are assembled** in the name of the Lord Jesus and my spirit is present, with the power of our Lord Jesus,⁵ **you are to deliver** this man to Satan for the destruction of the flesh, so that his spirit may be saved in the day of the Lord.

^{NAU} 2 Corinthians 2:6-7 Sufficient for such a one is this punishment which *was inflicted* **by the majority**,⁷ so that on the contrary you should rather forgive and comfort *him*, otherwise such a one might be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow.

C. Conclusion

Rather than “Elder Rule” or “Congregational Rule”, a better description is “Elder Leadership” and “Congregational Affirmation”. A good balance then exists when:

1. The congregation recognizes that the elders have the key leadership role and respects their leadership, and...
2. The elders recognize that the congregation has a real voice in its own affairs and respects that voice.

The governing documents of a church should reflect a healthy balance between both of these, but the specifics of that balance need to be decided by each congregation.

III. A Comparison of the Qualifications for Elders/Overseers/Shepherds and Deacons

A quick glance at 1 Timothy 3:1-13 and Titus 1:5-9 may give you the impression that the qualifications for Elders/Overseers/Shepherds and Deacons are nearly the same, but a detailed look proves otherwise.

(These references are followed by the essential wording from the NAU/NIV.)

	Elders/Overseers/Shepherds	Deacons
1	1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6, 7 Above reproach / Blameless	1 Timothy 3:10 Beyond reproach / Nothing against them
2	1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6 Husband of one wife / Husband of but one wife	1 Timothy 3:12 Husbands of only one wife / Husband of but one wife
3	1 Timothy 3:2 Temperate	
4	1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8 Prudent, Sensible / Self-controlled	

5	1 Timothy 3:2 Respectable	1 Timothy 3:8 Men of dignity / Men worthy of respect
6	1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8 Hospitable	
7	1 Timothy 3:2 Able to teach	
8	Titus 1:9 Holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict. / He must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught, so that he can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it.	
9	1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7 Not addicted to wine / Not given to drunkenness	1 Timothy 3:8 Not addicted to much wine / Not indulging in much wine
10	1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7 Not pugnacious / Not violent	
11	1 Timothy 3:3 Gentle	
12	1 Timothy 3:3 Uncontentious / Not quarrelsome	
13	Titus 1:7 Not self-willed / Not overbearing	
14	Titus 1:7 Not quick-tempered	
15	1 Timothy 3:3 Free from the love of money / Not a lover of money	

16	Titus 1:7 Not fond of sordid gain / Not pursuing dishonest gain	1 Timothy 3:8 Not fond of sordid gain / Not pursuing dishonest gain
17	1 Timothy 3:4 One who manages his own household well / He must manage his own family well	1 Timothy 3:12 Good managers of their own household / Must manage his household well
18	1 Timothy 3:4 Keeping his children under control with all dignity / See that his children obey him with proper respect	1 Timothy 3:12 Good managers of their children / Must manage his children well
19	Titus 1:6 Having children who believe, not accused of dissipation or rebellion / Whose children believe and are not open to the charge of being wild and disobedient	
20	1 Timothy 3:6 Not a new convert / Not be a recent convert	
21	1 Timothy 3:7 Must have a good reputation with those outside the church / Must have a good reputation with outsiders	
22	Titus 1:8 Loving what is good / One who loves what is good	
23	Titus 1:8 Just / Upright	
24	Titus 1:8 Devout / Holy	
25	Titus 1:8 Self-controlled / Disciplined	

26	1 Timothy 3:8 Not double-tongued / Sincere
27	1 Timothy 3:9 Hold to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience / Must hold to the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience

IV. Final Thoughts on Church Leadership

A. Plurality of Elders

The New Testament Clearly Indicates a Plurality of Elders

^{NAU} Acts 14:23 When they had appointed **elders** for them in every church...

^{NAU} Acts 20:17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the **elders** of the church.

^{NAU} Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint **elders** in every city as I directed you,

^{NAU} James 5:14 Is anyone among you sick? *Then* he must call for the **elders** of the church...

^{NAU} 1 Peter 5:1 Therefore, I exhort the **elders** among you, as *your* fellow elder...

B. First among Equals

Dr. William F. Kerr (Professor of Systematic Theology, Emeritus of Western Conservative Baptist Seminary) presented a paper at the 1977 CBA of Oregon Annual Meeting in which he wrote,

“Plurality does not mean equality. For if, as most scholars feel, the eldership of the new Testament may have developed along the pattern of the elders in the synagogue, then since there was a chief of the synagogue there is good reason to believe that one elder can be elevated to the position of senior or head elder over the others.”

Elders can have different roles that can vary according to their position, gifting, character, abilities, experience, education, etc. It is most appropriate that the individual the community identifies as “the pastor” of the church be the senior elder.

C. Unanimity among Elders

I have always appreciated the statement made by the Jerusalem Council.

^{KJV} Acts 15:28 **For it seemed good to the Holy Ghost, and to us,** to lay upon you no greater burden than these necessary things

The elders need to make decisions as a united team. (Notice that several of the biblical qualifications for elders would encourage this team relationship.) If decisions are made this way the congregation will understand that “the elders made the decision” instead “some of the elders pushed through the decision.”

A simple majority vote may not be the best avenue to achieve this. Here are three options among many:

1. Establish a supermajority vote requirement for the elders.
2. Have the understanding among the elders that the vote may not be unanimous, but when we walk out of the meeting this was our decision.
3. Our church has a constitutional requirement that all decisions by the elders must be made by unanimous consensus. *(An elder can be removed from the consensus only if a) the vote is about him, and b) he is the only one standing in the way of consensus.)*

D. Choosing Leaders by Spiritual Qualifications

Be careful to choose leaders primarily by their spiritual qualifications! Churches have experienced so many difficulties when they don't follow this caution.

Pay special attention to your nominating process here. It is almost impossible to arrive at a good outcome when a man, who the elders don't feel is spiritually qualified to serve as an elder, has already been asked by a nominating committee to serve in that position.

Special Note: Notice that a biblical qualification for both an elder and a deacon is that they be the “husband of one wife” (literally a “one woman man”). However you understand that qualification you need to be consistent

in your theology and apply that qualification to both offices. Do these words convey “never has been divorced”? Our church congregation and our elder board are split on this, but we have chosen a middle ground to which we all can agree. Let me explain this from a personal viewpoint. I am convinced that these three words (“one woman man”) describe a man’s character and values in his marriage, as well as his commitment to his spouse before God. I also know that the main problem is with the office of elder and not the office of deacon. So, we have chosen to go beyond the clear statement of scripture and restrict the office of elder to those who have never been divorced. Other churches arrive at different solutions, and you will need to arrive at one.

E. Titles and Perceptions

1. Both the congregation and the senior elder should understand that an “elder” is also a “pastor”. Members of an elder board then are co-pastors of the church. 21st century American culture would only identify the pastoral staff as pastors of the church, but the congregation and the senior elder should consider all of the elders as having that respect, not just the title. This may bring some interesting changes to how your board functions.

Every elder should seek to have a shepherd’s heart. Each should seek the Holy Spirit’s help in living out the quality of character described in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, proving to be examples to the congregation. We will fail on occasion because we are not perfect, but we should always seek to live out these qualities.

2. The title “Minister” is used *in our culture* to refer to ordained pastors, though it is really a translation of the word **di-a’-ko-nos** (διάκονος), which is translated “servant” or “deacon” depending on context. So, our culture adds to the confusion of biblical titles. Elders/Overseers/Pastors are surely “servants” of Christ and the congregation (servant-leaders), but they are not “Deacons.”

Keeping this in mind, be careful about giving the title “Youth Pastor” to a young buck who is 20 years old, unless you consider him qualified as an elder. A more biblical title may be ‘Youth Minister”.

3. The titles “President of the Corporation”, “Chairman of the Board”, “Director”, “Trustee”, “Registered Agent”, etc. are secular terms arising from corporation law and parliamentary procedure. Though these are real positions that must be accounted for in the governance of a church, the biblical offices of Elder/Overseer/Shepherd and Deacon, along with a biblical understanding of elder leadership and congregational affirmation, should be the primary driving force in how a church is structured.

V. Concluding Comment

Change is always a little scary or risky, but well thought out change can bring new excitement and new life. As you pray about your church and the things presented in this paper I pray that the Holy Spirit will lead your every step.