

Elder Government in the Local Church.

a draft proposal paper

A strong biblical eldership is the most efficient manner of church government ၂၀

Church practice consciously or sub-consciously reflects its theology.

The key to good ecclesiology is solid theology. Simply, if the person and ongoing work of Jesus is not exceptionally clear and practically integrated in the church then eventually the church will become very sick. Jesus Christ is the apostle who plants a church¹, the senior pastor who leads the church², and the head of the church³ who grows and builds a church⁴ or shuts it down for becoming faithless and/or fruitless⁵. Additionally, it is the Holy Spirit who convicts people in the church of sin, gifts them for service, empowers them for fruitfulness, and selects the elders who are to lead the church.

Even a cursory reading of the Bible reveals that when God wants to get something done He starts by selecting a man to lead that change and works through that dude.

Examples include sparing humanity (Noah), founding a nation (Abraham), liberating a nation (Moses), establishing a throne (David), building a temple (Solomon), preparing hearts (John the Baptizer), reaching Gentiles (Paul), and redeeming creation (Jesus). Therefore, a church cannot be significant if it is not led by men who obediently follow God as He speaks through Scripture and leads through the Spirit. Therefore, in addition to meeting the requirements of an elder, there are additional responsibilities that a church must be willing to embrace and execute if all that God has purposed is to come to pass. They include the following:

Gifts as apostle, leader, evangelist, and teacher

Life of passionately following Jesus that is worth following⁶ and imitating⁷

Ability to pull the church toward God's mission with the strength of an ox⁸

Fight for the purity of the church with the toughness of a warrior⁹

Live a life of discipline so that he can compete with the skill of an athlete¹⁰

Work tirelessly like a farmer who is up before the sun doing his job every day¹¹

Principle 1 – Jesus Christ is the senior pastor and head of the church.

Therefore, church leaders must be fully devoted followers of Jesus before they are qualified to lead anyone else in following Jesus.

Principle 2 – God intends for the church to be comprised of three levels of human leadership: elders, deacons or ministry leaders, and members¹². Elders primarily prepare

¹ Hebrews 3:1

² 1 Peter 5:4

³ Colossians 1:4; 2:10, 19

⁴ Matthew 16:18

⁵ Revelation 2:5

⁶ 1 Corinthians 11:1

⁷ Hebrews 13:7

⁸ 1 Timothy 5:17–18

⁹ 2 Timothy 2:3–4

¹⁰ 2 Timothy 2:5

¹¹ 2 Timothy 2:6

the ministry leaders and members to do ministry through their leadership, oversight, and teaching¹³.

Principle 3 – Words such as “elder,” “bishop,” and “pastor” all describe the varying aspects of a pastor’s role in Scripture¹⁴.

Principle 4 – Staffing must be integrated and in mutual submission to the plurality of leadership as expressed in eldership.

Principle 5 – Alongside a team of elders including the lead pastor there should be a body of seasoned advisors who are available to give counsel, support in ministry and advice in matters of discipline should the need arise.

Principle 6 – Before establishing an elder team the following three key questions must be answered:

- What is the elder team’s primary purpose?
- What are the minimum qualifications?
- How should the gate into eldership be guarded?

Principle 7 – The process of becoming an elder in a church should take time and include the following elements:

- The man must have been faithfully involved in the church for at least a year so that he is known.
- The man must have proven himself loyal, mature, theologically astute, teachable, generous with his service of others, and generous with his financial giving to even be considered.
- The man must already be doing some pastoral work in the church with people looking to him for leadership not because he holds an official position but rather because he naturally leads through holiness and gifting.
- The man must be a functional fit in ministry philosophy, personal style, and relational connection with the Eldership and lead pastor.
- The man must desire to be an elder and make his desire known to the lead pastor.
- The elders must interview him and his wife to see if they qualify for this vital leadership role.
- The lead pastor must be able to consider the candidate a peer, someone he wants his sons to be like and his daughters to marry, with a marriage and family that he wants replicated throughout the church.
- There might be some preparation for eldership that includes leadership, teaching, reading, homework, etc., to test and approve the elder candidate.
- If an elder candidate continues to be agreed within the unity of the existing eldership he should be brought before the church body and introduced. The church should have a few weeks to ask him any questions and raise any concerns to the lead pastor.

¹² Philippians 1:1

¹³ Ephesians 4:11–16

¹⁴ Acts 20:28; Ephesians 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2

- If the elder candidate is found worthy of the position, he and his family should be brought before the church and installed with the laying on of hands.
- Once someone is appointed as an elder they should be referred to with their title to preserve the respect of the man and the office. The lead pastor should set that example.

Principle 8 – Elders must lead the church and never represent factions, agendas, or disgruntled or pushy people within the church.

Principle 9 – There are three types of leaders:

Opportunity Seekers are continually seeking new opportunities and are highly motivated by change and growth.

Goal Setters make plans and break projects into phases to ensure chaos is managed so that success is achieved.

Problem Solvers continually seek potential problems and needs so that barriers to success can be proactively identified and removed.

Marks of a man

This is clearly identified in 1 Timothy 3:1–7 ¹⁵

Relation to God

- A masculine leader
- Above reproach – without any character defect
- Able to communicate effectively from God’s word.
- Not a new convert – mature Christian

Relation to Family

- Husband of one wife – one-woman man, sexually pure
- Has obedient children – successful father
- Manages family well – provides for, leads, organizes, loves

Relation to Self

- Temperate – mentally and emotionally stable
- Self-controlled – disciplined life of sound decision-making
- Not given to drunkenness – without addictions
- Not a lover of money – financially content and upright

Relation to Others

- Respectable – worth following and imitating
- Hospitable – welcomes strangers, especially non-Christians for evangelism
- Not violent – even-tempered
- Gentle – kind, gracious, loving
- Not contentious – peaceable, not quarrelsome/divisive
- Good reputation with outsiders – respected by non-Christians

The duties of the elders are many according to Scripture and include the following:

¹⁵ For further study on this subject, please read Alexander Strauch’s Biblical Eldership.

- Prayer and Scripture study (Acts 6:4)
- Ruling/leading the church (1 Timothy 5:17)
- Managing the church (1 Timothy 3:4–5)
- Caring for people in the church (1 Peter 5:2–5)
- Giving account to God for the church (Hebrews 13:17)
- Living exemplary lives (Hebrews 13:7)
- Rightly using the authority God has given them (Acts 20:28)
- Teaching the Bible correctly (Ephesians 4:11; 1 Timothy 3:2)
- Preaching (1 Timothy 5:17)
- Praying for the sick (James 5:13–15)
- Teaching sound doctrine and refuting false teachings (Titus 1:9)
- Working hard (1 Thessalonians 5:12)
- Rightly using money and power (1 Peter 5:1–3)
- Protecting the church from false teachers (Acts 20:17–31)
- Disciplining unrepentant Christians (Matthew 18:15–17)

The Unity Factor.

Principle 1 – Elder unity should be a priority for the following reasons:

- Jesus prayed for it often
- As leadership goes so goes the rest of the church
- Without unity, spiritual growth cannot be maintained
- Unity is fragile and can be quickly lost
- Paul commands it in the church (e.g., 1 Corinthians 1:10; 2 Corinthians 13:11; Ephesians 4:3; Philippians 1:27)

Principle 2 – The lead elder must define unity in the following aspects:

- Theological agreement on what will and won't be fought over
- Relational warmth and sincere friendships
- Philosophical oneness and agreement on ministry methods
- Missional partnership to stay on task

Principle 3 – Spiritual obstacles to unity must be identified and removed.

- Pride/sin (e.g., bitterness, jealousy)
- Heresy, including legalism
- Distrust and faithlessness

Principle 4 – Sociological obstacles to unity must be identified and removed.

- Meeting in a location that is corporate and formal instead of familial and informal
- Focusing on business at the expense of relationships
- Not scheduling one or two all-day retreats each year
- Not taking time before or during a meeting to eat together
- Infrequent meetings which hurts cohesiveness
- A lack of mutual respect and trust
- Meetings that are too long, often because of infrequency
- Constant turnover (timescales)
- Not correcting or removing troublesome leaders

Principle 5 – Elder teams tend toward either suspicion or trust and someone who is a watch dog, foot-dragger, meeting-misser, micromanager, or extreme detail-nut will become a bottleneck and cause the team to lose both their joy and mission.

Principle 6 – The lead pastor is primarily responsible for building team by practicing the following kinds of protocol:

- Sending out an agenda before the meeting so that everyone else is aware of the issues to be discussed
- Closing the gap between himself and his elders by respectfully training them so that they understand his theology, vision, language, etc.
- Bringing drafts, not final proposals, to be considered and altered
- Keeping no secrets from the teams
- Submitting to the teams authority
- Having another pastor and accountability partner with himself and his wife
- Being generous with meals, books, conferences, and other resources to build up the other elders, their marriages and families
- Not acting like a domineering dictator

Principle 7 – Every elder team needs a meeting for prayer, training, and friendship that does not include minutes, business, voting, formality, or a tight schedule. The team should be able to pray for people in the church with candour and confidentiality.

Principle 8 – Care for the elders' families by allowing the children to play together and wives to meet together for love, prayer, friendship, and accountability in a safe situation where they can be honest with one another.

Principle 9 – Know when your game is changing:

The leadership team grows - Miscommunication increases

2 People = 2 lines of communication

3 People = 6 lines of communication

4 People = 12 lines of communication

6 People = 30 lines of communication

Leaders complain they are out of the information loop

Conflict arises over who makes what decisions

Know your options when your game is changing:

Accept the new game and play it

Play the new game by the old rules until a crisis or serious conflict arises and the group shrinks back to a comfortable size and the church is limited in its size and efficiency by the bottleneck at the elder level

Principle 10 – Divide decision-making.

- Day-to-day decisions must be pushed out to the front lines
- Detailed decisions over areas of ministry need to be made by ministry leaders overseeing those areas and not the whole elder team
- Decisions about direction and vision need to be made by an ever-narrowing group of primary leaders

Without this, tragedy eventually occurs:

- Relation overload
- Jockeying for power
- Bogging down
- A fight to be heard
- Burnout
- Increasing number of things falling through the cracks

Further Reading:-

Biblical Eldership by Alexander Strauch

Elders and Leaders by Gene Getz



Johnny Douglas
Lead Pastor:- Sawyers Church vii.2006
version 1 – Eldership Discussion Paper