



Rule in God's House

A Pastor?

Elders?

A Minister?

A Priest?

The “brethren?”

Ordination?

Who, according to God's word is to have the responsibility for spiritual rule within His local house? Some say it should be a **pastor**; some say a number of **elders**; others believe rule should be in the hands of an ordained **minister** or a **priest**. Then there are those who claim that this is an insignificant matter. As long as the local "ship is running smoothly" and we have "harmony" all is well. In this booklet we appraise the above opinions in the light of Scripture and show that rule in God's house is not an unimportant matter to God seen in that He has set forth a clear pattern for it in His word.

A pastor or a plurality of elders?

Biblical practice

Having *a pastor* oversee the spiritual life of a local church is contrary to biblical practice – as we now note using the Bible as our sole authority.

It is a telling and indisputable fact that there is **not one** instance in the NT where a local church is spiritually overseen by *a pastor*. Scripture records that the spiritual oversight of the local church is invariably undertaken by a **number of elders**. Acts 20 records Paul's concern for the spiritual welfare of the church in Ephesus. Observe that he did not call for a meeting with *the pastor* of the church in Ephesus. He called for the *elders* of that church and he set about reminding them of their *collective* responsibility in spiritual rule (vv 17-35). This plurality of overseeing elders is evident throughout the NT. Paul instructs Timothy concerning the "*elders that rule well*" (1Tim 5:17). In the epistle to Titus we have *elders* appointed in regard to the rule of the local church – not a pastor. "For this cause left I thee (Titus) in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee" (Tit 1:5).¹ James exhorts – "Is any sick among you? let him call for the *elders* of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord" (Js 5:14). We can cite other passages that confirm spiritual rule in the local church is by a plurality of elders. Acts 14:23 – "they had ordained them elders in every church"; Philipp 1:1 – "to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops [elders] and deacons"; 1 Pet 5:1-2 – "The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you." In the light of this consistent testimony of Scripture we cannot

¹ Each church was a lampstand in the city in which it was located. It was not to ordain elders or an elder over the *churches* in Crete.

avoid the conclusion that to have a pastor presiding over the life of a local church is a clear contradiction to God's record of what was done in NT churches. It is God's demonstrated design that His local house is overseen by a plurality of elders.

The elders

What then does the biblical record say about the practice of elders? The term **elder** means *overseer*. It is given by the Jewish word *presbuteros* (in those churches that comprised predominantly Jewish Christians) and by *episkopos* in the Greek, (in churches that had predominantly Gentile believers). *Episkopos* (bishop) likewise means to oversee.²

1. Elders are responsible for *governing* and *shepherding* within the local church. This is clear from Acts 20 where the local church is identified as a *little flock*. "Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the [little] flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers [*episkopos*]" (Acts 20:28). We have this also in the first epistle of Peter where the ruling elders are called shepherds. They are the under shepherds with Christ as their Chief Shepherd. "The elders [*presbuteros*] which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed [*poimaino*] the [little] flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight [*episkopeo*] thereof" (1 Pet 5:1-2).³ In the first epistle to Timothy we have the elders' rule emphasized. An elder must be one who rules his own house well in order that he rules well within the house of God (1 Tim 3:5). The word here is *proistemi* meaning to stand before and lead. In the Hebrew epistle the believers are exhorted to remember and obey those who "rule" over them (13:7, 17). The word rule - *hegeomai* means to guide. They are said to "watch over" their souls - *agrupneo* meaning to be vigilant and watchful as a shepherd (V 17).

2. The sphere of responsibility of the elders was confined to their local church as indicated by the following verses: Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Tim 5:17; Js 5:14. In Scripture elders are appointed in *every church*, never over every church and never over a number of churches.

² In some instances, *presbuteros* refers to aged people as determined by the context. In other cases the terms *presbuteros* and *episkopos* refer to the same *work* as proved in that they are used interchangeably in regard to the same *persons* (Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5,7).

³ Note that these passages repudiate any notion that believers in a local church are the possession of a pastor or minister – "my flock."

Biblical Principle

Having seen that Scripture knows nothing of the practice of having a ruling pastor we turn our attention to why this is the case. A pastor or indeed any one-man system of rule stands contrary to divine principle as well as divine practice.

1. There are spiritual dangers in one-man overseeing the local church. Liberty is given to the *spirit of Diotrephes* – the case where one person has the preeminence within the local church (3 John 9).
2. There is safety in a multitude of counselors (Pr 11:14; 15:22; 24:6).
3. One-man rule denies the truth that in the local church there are diversities of gifts and there are diversities of operations, the Spirit dividing to every man separately as He wills (1 Cor 12:4-12). Any one person does not have all the gifts of the Spirit as presupposed in the role of a pastor (or a minister). A pastor seeks to act as the representative intermediary between God and His children. This grieves and quenches the Spirit of God who has given gifts to all within the local church to profit withal, i.e., bringing them together for mutual benefit (1 Cor 12:7).
4. Having one person determine the teaching, the order of services, the selection of hymns and theme of worship etc., denies the divine character of God's house and retards the effectual working of the Spirit of God within it. Every believer upon salvation is brought into a *position* and a *responsibility* as a priest – a gracious legacy of the Cross (1 Pet 2:5,9; Rev 1:5-6). In the local church it is the men who are permitted to exercise this priesthood audibly. Where there is a presiding pastor they are denied the opportunity to express a word of praise, a prayer of thanksgiving or give out a hymn because the pastor has taken it upon himself to do all these things on their behalf (and in some cases to do so in spite of his poor condition of heart before God). Priestly exercise increases spiritual growth individually and collectively. This is retarded where one person presides over the church. We take up the denial of priesthood of all believers later in relation to other forms of clerisy and ordination.
5. To have a pastor within the local church is to create a position or an office within it. This is contrary to Scripture. There are no offices or titles in the local church. The AV incorrectly refers to the "office" of a bishop [overseer] (1 Tim 3:1). The original text gives the meaning of a *work* – he who desires the *work*

of an overseer – never the office of an overseer. The reason is clear. There is to be no hierarchy within the house of God, no clergy and laity.⁴ The elders are not to ‘look down’ on the assembly, but to work *among* them (1 Pet 5:1), not becoming lords *over* God’s heritage (1 Pet 5:3). The elders are men raised by the Holy Spirit to do a particular work within the local church, the *spiritual* work of oversight. Similarly the deacons are to be recognized – not appointed to an office or position. Sadly, the work of a pastor as given in Scripture has not only been misinterpreted (Eph 4), but the term pastor itself has been misused in that it is taken to represent a title within the church.

6. Having a one-man ministry has in many cases degenerated into further error - the establishment of a “salaried pastor” over the local church. The spiritual leaders of the old economy – the priests, were not to have an earthly inheritance. Jehovah Himself was their inheritance and they were given portions from *Him* through His ordained offerings and the shewbread laid up before God. Yet there was departure, for we read of the Levite contracting his services to Micah for ten shekels of silver by the year, a suit of apparel and victuals (Judges 17:10). How figurative of the unscriptural pecuniary arrangements among the religious systems of men within Christendom. How sad that many of the redeemed in Christ today support such unbiblical practices! The elders as we are taught in 1 Timothy 5 are to receive honor for the work they do and, where they rule well, they are to be assisted materially if needed. This is a far cry from being contracted salaried office-bearers within the church. An elder’s (an under-shepherd’s) “contract” is with Christ the Chief Shepherd who will reward him in a day to come (1 Pet 5:4).⁵

We see then that biblical practice corresponds with biblical principle. The notion of a pastor (or any one person) presiding over the local church is utterly foreign to God’s design and desire for His churches.

Who are the pastors of Ephesians 4:11?

“And He gave some, apostles; and some, prophets; and some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers” (Eph 4:11). The term **pastors** is *poimenas* which is

⁴ The Lord “hated” the deeds of the Nicolaitans who made such a distinction (Rev 2-3), as noted below.

⁵ In some cases churches seek a pastor who can further the financial and membership prospects of the local church – a CEO. He (or she) has to meet certain performance criteria in order to renew contractual obligations with the church.

quite distinct from the words used for elders. It means essentially shepherds - those who care for the welfare of believers. Some take the term to be “pastor-teachers” due to the word “some” being omitted before teachers. At any rate the work of these pastors is distinct from that of elders within the *local* church – although they can also be elders if raised to such a work by the Spirit. That their work is distinct from that of elders is seen in the following observations.

1. There is no rule associated with their work.
2. Their sphere of responsibility and ministry is not limited to the local church. It involves the church in its *totality* – Christians everywhere. The context of Ephesians 4:1-16 is not the local church but **the** Body of Christ. This is confirmed in two ways. First, the responsibilities of the pastors come within the same “universal” sphere as the others mentioned in this portion – *apostles*, *evangelists* and *prophets*. Their work was for the perfecting [furnishing] of **the Body of Christ** (v 12) as evident in the work of Paul and Peter. Second, the pastors (along with teachers, evangelists, apostles and prophets) unlike the elders of the local church, were **persons** *gifted to the* Body of Christ by *Christ*, its ascended Head. The persons *themselves* were the gift.⁶

A lesson from the OT

As others have noted, the three families of **Levi** (the servants of the priests) in their respective yet related work unto the nation of Israel, present an instructive type of the evangelist, pastor and teacher in their work in regard to the Body of Christ. The *Merarites* were responsible for carrying the foundation and framing materials of the Tabernacle. Upon encampment they would set the silver sockets (which speak of redemption) on wilderness soil. On these they erected the vertical boards with their horizontal bars. This would speak of the work of the itinerant **evangelist** moving as the Spirit leads to proclaim the foundation truth - the gospel of redemption, the boards typifying those redeemed in Christ. The *Gershonites* came next. Their responsibility was to strengthen and shelter the boards and bars with cords, curtains and coverings. When the pastoral work was forsaken among His people, the Lord declared, “My tabernacle is spoiled, and all my cords are broken: my children are gone forth of me, and they are not: there is none to stretch forth my tent any more, and to set up my curtains. For the pastors are become brutish, and have not sought the LORD: therefore they shall not prosper, and all their flocks shall be scattered” (Jer 10:20-21). We have in the Gershonites the work of the **pastors**, as they administer to the

⁶ This does not however preclude them from being elders within the local church as well.
RULE IN GOD’S HOUSE © J W de SILVA

spiritual welfare of the redeemed. Such was the ministry of Paul and of Barnabas whose name means “son of consolation” – “they sent forth Barnabas, that he should go as far as Antioch. Who, when he came, and had seen the grace of God, was glad, and exhorted them all, that with purpose of heart they would cleave unto the Lord” (Acts 11:23). Finally we have the *Kohathites* whose work was to carry and install the sacred vessels within the Tabernacle. Each vessel had to be put in its appointed place and in its proper sequence so as to preserve the fidelity in the approach to God. This speaks of the work of the **teacher**, as he would take the sacred truths and order them before the redeemed that all might grow in grace and in the knowledge of God.

Appointment and the recognition of elders

In the early NT church period the apostles or their delegates (e.g., Timothy and Titus) are seen to “appoint” elders. Some believe that the appointment of elders in the NT local churches was the sole responsibility of the apostles (and their delegates) which was done under apostolic authority. They speak of elders being installed solely by “apostolic appointment.” It is not clear what they mean by this. It may mean it was a task for which only the apostles had authority; or it may mean it was a task done through some special discernment given to the apostles.⁷ Either way it means that when the last apostle and his commissioned delegate died the work of elders in the local churches died with them. The proposition is as follows: No apostles – no apostolic authority – no elders. This is a serious fallacy and sadly it has provided many with the excuse to devise their own form of church rule – usually a form of democracy involving “all the brethren.”

Apostolic authority – what is it?

First we need to be clear about what apostolic authority means. Consider the following apostolic exhortations and directives.

- Acts 2:42: “And they continued stedfastly in the apostles' doctrine and fellowship, and in breaking of bread, and in prayers.

⁷ W Kelly; *The Bible Treasury* Vol 17 p 87 etc. In this article Kelly states “none could appoint [elders] save the apostles... and those commissioned by an apostle for that purpose.” Yet we are not given proof that this is prerogative is explicitly said of the apostles. It is merely inferred – and inferred against the explicit teaching of Scripture (Acts 20:28).

- 1 Corinthians 11:2: “I praise you, brethren, that ye remember me in all things, and keep the ordinances, as I delivered them to you.”
- 1 Corinthians 14:37: “If any man think himself to be a prophet, or spiritual, let him acknowledge that the things that I write unto you are the commandments of the Lord.”
- Ephesians 2:20: “And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets.”
- 2 Thessalonians 2:15 – “Therefore, brethren, stand fast, and hold the traditions which ye have been taught, whether by word, or our epistle.”

Are these and other apostolic injunctions regarding order and conduct within the churches irrelevant because the apostles are all dead? Are we to ignore what is required of us in Acts 2:42 for instance, because the apostles and their delegates are gone? Of course not! We are today under apostolic authority in the sense that we place ourselves under the teaching of the apostles – even though they are no longer among us. It was the apostles who set the foundation order for the churches (1 Cor 12:28). The local assembly is required to teach and pass on the pattern once delivered by the apostles. We are under apostolic “authority” as the apostles were under divine authority. The Spirit passed the order to the apostles; they passed on the teaching to the local churches and to men such as Timothy and Titus. The apostles themselves were appointed by the Lord to reveal truth. In those embryonic days they may well have been given special discernment as to who the elders were. Yet, it is very clear that this was not long confined to them, for they proceeded not only to pass this knowledge on to Timothy and Titus, but to us all in that we have the qualifications set out in Scripture through which we are discern those who are elders among us. It was apostolic **succession** and not apostolic **authority** that died with the last apostle. In the Appendix we take up the matter of apostolic appointment in a little more detail, noting here that it was always the case of the apostles and their delegates *recognizing* – setting apart those who the Spirit of God had *already* raised. It was this fact that the apostles and their delegates were to bring before the local churches. How else would they know whom to “appoint” – “set apart”? Are we to suppose that the apostles and their delegates set apart men according to their own choosing? “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers” (Acts 20:28). Let us observe that such appointment by the Spirit as given in this passage was operative *during* the apostolic period itself and acknowledged by the apostle Paul himself! The completed NT Scriptures contain clear apostolic directives enabling us to discern who have been raised

and fitted by the Spirit of God to undertake the work of oversight. The First Epistle to Timothy and the Epistle to Titus are among the latter epistles (AD 65-68) and contain the qualifications relating to those who oversee the spiritual rule of the local church. These qualifications are given so that the sheep can recognize the shepherds among them. We have the Spirit of God together with the Word of God for our instruction.

If we claim there is no biblical validity for elders today because of the absence of the apostles, then we must also claim that the work belonging to the elders is also irrelevant today, i.e., there is no need for spiritual oversight in regard to the house of God. It means that the true saying of 1 Timothy 3:1 is no longer true – “if a man desire the work of an overseer, he desireth a good work.” All this is at odds with Scripture and the purpose of the local church, which is “pillar and ground” of the truth. Scripture gives ample evidence of the spiritual chaos where each man does that which is right in his own eyes. If however we say that the local assembly *does* require spiritual guidance but not through elders, who then is responsible for it? Who has the responsibility of meeting Paul’s exhortation of Acts 20:25-31? There are two alternatives to spiritual elders in the NT. One is condemned by John in his third epistle – rule by the spirit of Diotrephes; the other is hated by the Lord – the doctrine of the Nicolaitanes, which we now take up.

The clergy, the ordained minister and the priest

All that Scripture says about the error of having a pastor rule over God’s heritage noted above applies in these cases. There are further remarks to be made however concerning these particular categories of unscriptural rule.

Denial of the priesthood of all believers

In some quarters of Christendom there is an official ruling *class* called “the clergy.” Those over whom they rule are known as “the laity.” Scripture identifies this distinction as the **doctrine of the Nicolaitanes**. It was a doctrine that the Lord said He *hated* – twice noted (Rev 2:6; 15).⁸ The term Nicolaitan means *conquering the people* which is a composite of *nikao* (to conquer) and *laos* (the people or laity). This meaning is borne out in the man-made system of

⁸ There are no records outside God’s word concerning the “Nicolaitanes.” We rest on what Scripture reveals concerning them, and avoid speculation that they were a sect of Nicolaus, a deacon of Antioch.

clerisy and ordination. Emphasis is on subjugation of the people and taking superiority over them. This is not the same thing as *corrupting* the people.⁹

Why did the Lord hate such a thing? It was because it denied that He has rent the veil and His shed blood brings all in Him nigh unto God. No priest can hope to enter a higher place than the holiest. What need then do those in Christ have for a priest, for all in Christ are priests and have “boldness to enter into the holiest by the blood of Jesus, by a new and living way, which he hath consecrated for us, through the veil, that is to say, his flesh” (Heb 10:19-20)? Anything that denies the “priesthood of all believers” and its blood-bought privilege is a very serious error and we are to *hate* it because the Lord hates it! “Through thy precepts I get understanding: therefore I hate every false way” (Ps 119:104).

The very nature of clerisy - its system of “ministers of religion” runs counter to God’s design and His desire. In OT days God intended that every Israelite should be a priest unto Him. “And ye shall be unto me a kingdom of priests, and an holy nation. These are the words which thou [Moses] shalt speak unto the children of Israel” (Ex 19:6). Israel broke the covenant and this privilege was denied them. Israel’s failure distanced them from God. However, God in grace established a class of priests to act on their behalf before Him. The Aaronic priesthood was set up and the Israelites were able to approach God through them. This, then, was the character of Judaism – a failed people distanced from God having to approach Him through an intermediate and representative priesthood. What Israel forfeited under a conditional covenant Christians have inherited unconditionally under grace in Christ. So Peter says of every Christian, “But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvellous light” (1 Pet 2:9 cf Rev 1:6). The intermediate and representative priesthood of clerisy whatever its shade – *pastor, prelate, priest or pope* puts believers in Christ under the failure of the

⁹ In the letter to Pergamos (Rev 2) we have both the doctrine of the Nicholaitanes and the doctrine of Balaam mentioned. These cannot be one and the same. The latter we know from the Book of Numbers refers to a spiritual *corruption* of the people. It is not conquering the people of God by setting up a ruling class *over* them; it is *destroying* the people of God by casting a stumbling block *before* them. “Behold, these [the heathen women] caused the children of Israel, through the counsel of Balaam, to commit trespass against the LORD in the matter of Peor, and there was a plague among the congregation of the LORD” (Num 31:16). Balaam counseled intermarriage with the heathen which brought idolatry among the Israelites. It is not without significance that these two errors are seen together in Pergamos, representative of the era which saw the marriage between the church and the pagan state under Constantine.

Israelite and sets them at a distance from God. Israel was inside the camp but outside the veil. All in Christ are outside the camp but inside the veil. What a miserable system it is that robs those in Christ of their privilege in priesthood which was purchased by His blood – a system that places the believer under Judaism – inside the camp and outside the veil. Little wonder this thing is hated by the Lord. Beloved in Christ, let us not become like Esau, selling our birthright – our priesthood for a bowl of pottage (Gen 25). “Wherefore Jesus also, that he might sanctify the people with his own blood, suffered without the gate. Let us go forth therefore unto him without the camp, bearing his reproach” (Heb 13:12-13).

Ordination

We noted earlier that men are raised by the Spirit of God to oversee the spiritual life of the local church. The notion that people are “ordained into the ministry” by men is foreign to Scripture. The persons listed in Ephesians 4 – *pastors, teachers* etc., were never the subject of ordination. They were persons *gifted* to the Church from its ascended Head, *Christ*. The *gift* of teaching (ministering the word of God) is a bestowal of the *Spirit of God* to those whom *He* chooses (1 Cor 12). Paul’s apostleship was “not of men neither by man” (Gal 1:1). It was of and by Christ and His Spirit – “separate me Barnabas and Saul for the work whereunto I have called them” (Acts 13:2).¹⁰ The existence of the clergy, their powers, rank and jurisdiction are determined according to the charters of men.¹¹ Where there is ordination there is subjugation of the believer’s birthright – his/her privileges and responsibilities before God. The whole idea of ordination is to have a “qualified” person *administer* certain things to others, such as the Lord’s Supper and baptism.

Forgiveness of sins

The notion that a priest can impart forgiveness of sins is blasphemy. It denies the righteous prerogative of God as the only One who can forgive sins – through the work of His Son at Calvary (Mark 2:7).

¹⁰ Cf Mark 3:14: The Lord “*ordained [appointed] twelve.*”

¹¹ The truth of the priesthood of all believers renders any debate over the *ordination* of female ministers and priests utterly irrelevant. There is, of course, the biblical doctrine of divine headship, which teaches that a woman is not to have authority over a man. She is not to teach and she is to be silent within the churches of God (1 Cor 11; 14; 1 Tim 2:9-15).

Democratic rule?

Spiritual rule in God's house is not by **autocracy** (rule by one person - be it a pastor, an elder, a minister, or a priest). Neither is it by **democracy** (rule by the people). Democracy has never been God's way in secular or church government. The world will see first hand God's design in government – a theocracy when Christ returns to earth as King of kings and Lord of lords. He will reign for one thousand years as the Shepherd-King.¹²

Where the voice of the people is given occasion men will boast that they have “liberty, transparency and truth.” Some place assembly matters before “all the brethren” because they want to be “open and honest” with one another. Here, as occurs all too often, the flesh finds a faithful friend in a seemingly “commendable motive.” It is taken as a sign of “spiritual maturity” that all the brethren come together and determine assembly matters in the cause of brotherly love and harmony. In reality it is a mark of gross spiritual immaturity, because it fails to bow to Scripture and submit to the Spirit's work in raising brethren – *elders* to oversee the matters relating to the assembly. God's word declares such democratic design as lawlessness. It has nothing to do with the Spirit. May we guard against every shade of democracy in the house of God. It was because of the voice of the people that God gave Israel Saul – their fair choice – who God later took away in His anger. It was the voice of the people that railed against Moses in the wilderness. It was the voice and judgment of the people that chose Barabbas instead of Christ. It was the spirit of democracy – the “judgments (voice) of the people” that put the Lord outside the church at Laodicea, such that He would spew them out of His mouth (Rev 3). If we gather according to our way and will then like Laodicea we will glorify ourselves – we say “have need of nothing” and the Lord is outside even though we may claim that He is within. God cannot dwell where His divine order is rejected. He is after all a God of order!

The local church is to be governed under a **Theocracy**. It is “house of God” signifying its divine character (1 Tim 3:15) which comports with the truth of His Spirit raising overseers; the Chief Shepherd reigning through His Spirit-led under-shepherds (1 Pet 5). Where there is submission to the word of God and liberty given to His Spirit, the Spirit will raise men so fitted and there will be no difficulty accepting those He raises. May we abhor independence

¹² We do have certain advantages living in a democratic nation. But let us not be deluded. Democratic regimes by their nature rest on a propensity for ungodliness, for they are subject to the voice of the people. That voice has legalized practices that are an abomination to God. History shows that there are benevolent despots and diabolical democracies.

and self-will. “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you” (Heb 13:17). God’s way has not always been observed – even by some claiming to be elders, but the failure of men is never a reason to forsake the path that God has clearly laid down for His people when they come together as His house.

An historical glimpse of the rise of error

There is no biblical practice or principle supporting a pastor or a minister presiding over the local church (or any number of churches). The early NT Church period comprised local assemblies, in which spiritual rule was undertaken by a plurality of spiritually recognized elders. There was no church “official” and each brother was at liberty to lead and participate in the meetings. “How is it then, brethren? when ye come together, every one of you hath a psalm, hath a doctrine, hath a tongue, hath a revelation, hath an interpretation?” (1 Cor 14:26). And again, “For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted” (1 Cor 14:31). Such instruction and the universal priesthood it mirrors does not envisage any distinction between clergy and laity, nor does it anticipate a pastor and “his” flock as we have noted. The rule of the elders was through the Holy Spirit. It was moral not “official” rule, evincing the work of shepherds among the little flock of the Great Shepherd.

After the apostolic period the professing Church grew numerically but declined spiritually. As “grievous wolves” entered and many “crept in unawares” tares were sown among the wheat. Men perverted the simple scriptural practices relating to the Lord’s Supper, baptism and rule within God’s house (Rev 2 & 3 – the 7 churches). We have already noted the error of the Nicolaitanes within the professing Church in the latter NT period. By the 2nd century a form of church government known as **Episcopacy** was well established.¹³ Today Roman Catholic, Orthodox and many Protestant churches (i.e., Anglican) embrace episcopacy in various forms. Church government is divided into three levels. A bishop (*episkopos*) rules over a number of churches and their presbyters (*presbuteros*), who in turn preside over the deacons (*diakonos*) within the local church. Some Episcopalians believe the additional

¹³ A little more than a decade after the last of the Apostles, Ignatius wrote to the Ephesians stating, “we ought to look upon the Bishop even as we look upon the Lord Himself” (Igna. Ad. Eph. vi); “do ye nothing without the Bishop, whether ye be Presbyters, or Deacons, or layman” (Igna. Magn. vii).

error that Episcopacy is linked to apostolic succession and, because of this only bishops have the authority to ordain. The claim by Episcopalians that James, Timothy and Titus are NT examples of episcopacy is without biblical foundation. James was certainly *prominent* in the affairs of the Church (Gal 2:9; Acts 12:17; 15; 21:18), and Timothy and Titus were appointed to undertake special *tasks*. But to suggest this meant they held a *pre-eminent* position *over* their brethren who were accountable to them is pure fiction and runs counter to the grammar and experience of the NT noted above.¹⁴ To suggest 1 Timothy 5:19 teaches that Timothy had episcopal responsibilities is contrary to the context. The exhortation “against an elder (*presbuteros*) receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses”, is a moral principle to be observed by *all* believers within a local church.

Episcopacy and its excesses are found within the Church of Rome. In the early centuries the professing Christian Church split into Eastern and Western divisions and were ruled by their respective bishops. As time passed many bishops within the West surrendered authority to Rome and the Bishop of Rome became all-powerful. He assumed the title of “Pope” giving the Roman Catholic Church a papal government. Centuries later, the Protestant Reformation opposed the ascendant position of Rome and many of its practices, including Episcopacy. At this time Calvin laid down the basis of **Presbyterianism**. This denomination takes its name from a form of Church government opposing Episcopacy, which was endemic within 17th century Scotland and Anglicanism. Presbyterianism asserts there is no distinction between *presbuteros* and *episkopos*. Elders are graded and integrated into a hierarchical system of government called *presbyteries* and *synods*. This is contrary to the autonomy of the local church and along with Episcopacy, Presbyterianism perpetuates the error of clerisy. Some disagreed with Episcopacy and Presbyterianism and so another denomination arose within Protestant ranks known as **Congregationalism**. Here each congregation (local church) has freedom over its own affairs. The office of bishop and presbyteries were eliminated. However, Congregationalists persist with ordained ministers and lay officers, embracing the error of clerisy. In later years other “offices” were added within Christendom to serve the ecclesiastical institutions men were building and to preserve their authority within them. These offices were integrated into hierarchical systems and their members organized into

¹⁴ To claim that Epaphras (Col 4:12) and Epaphroditus (Phil 2:25) undertook episcopal duties is also fanciful. The former was one of many "fellow bond-servants" of Paul – evangelists, who took the gospel to the Colossians (Col 1:7). The latter was a fellow worker who ministered to Paul’s needs, as did Phoebe (Rom 16:2).

“councils.” The councils ruled on matters relating to the churches commensurate with their appointed man-made jurisdictions. The divine blueprint for church order given in the word of God is forsaken for models based on contemporary theories in corporate management. So we have churches governed by “boards” and galvanized by “mission statements.”

Christendom today has evolved into a composite of sprawling *denominational institutions*, ruled by titled and garbed officials empowered by charters, having an eye to security of office, institutional survival and fiscal prosperity rather than to biblical fidelity.¹⁵ Unlike biblical truth, error evolves, evidenced in the ordination of women and sanction of practices which are abominable to God (Lev 18; Rom 1:24-27). How removed all this is from the sublime sovereignty and primitive purity of the local church functioning as *body* of Christ, with each believer dependent upon each other and equally vital to the operation of the whole before the Lord who is in the midst (1 Cor 12). May we covet and jealously contend for the God-honoring heritage given to the children of God in the NT pattern of assembly life and rule, which has been set down for our spiritual good and to the glory of God.

Appendix

No apostle in the NT of himself ever “appointed” an elder. **First**, such a notion contradicts the biblical principle of *accountability*. We are accountable to those who choose us for service. If the apostles through their own discretion chose or nominated the elders, the elders would be wholly accountable to the apostles. “You chose him – he is your responsibility.” It is the prerogative of God through His Spirit to choose His servants as noted earlier. **Second**, it contradicts the biblical principle of God’s *sovereignty*. He alone appoints His servants because He alone “searcheth all hearts, and understandeth all the imaginations of the thoughts” (1 Chron 28:9; Jer 17:10). “Jesus answered them, Have not I chosen you twelve, and one of you is a devil?” (Jn 6:70). The Godhead alone does the nominating, the choosing, the picking. This is borne out by the grammar as we observe below. If the apostles appointed or nominated the elders they would need God’s sovereign eye to discern hearts, minds and the very purposes of God – even the end from the beginning. **Third**,

¹⁵ For example, *The Canons of the Church of England* (1993) states, “No person shall consecrate and administer the holy sacrament of the Lord’s Supper unless he shall have been ordained priest by episcopal ordination” The Presbyterian Church USA has “Commissioned Lay Pastors”, who upon permission by the presbytery can administer the Lord’s Supper, the Sacrament of baptism and vote in the hierarchy.

it contradicts the clear biblical principle of *spirituality*. God raises elders through His Spirit. “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood” (Acts 20:28). We are told here explicitly (no assumption or conjecture is needed) that it is the Spirit of God who appoints elders – leads, calls and equips them. It is a work of the Spirit. We have two truths brought together. First, God’s sovereignty seen in that His Spirit does the nomination – the appointment and calling. Second, man’s responsibility seen in that he is called to do the recognition of that calling. The apostles were to recognize as elders those whom the Holy Spirit had made – and then commend them. Some might say though there may be no apostolic appointment required there must then be apostolic recognition i.e., no apostles no apostolic recognition – no elders!” But this why we have the qualifications of the elders recorded in Scripture - so that *we* today can recognize them among us. It was not just the apostles who were required to recognize spirituality for service. “Wherefore, brethren, look ye out among you seven men of honest report, full of the Holy Ghost and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business” (Acts 6:3). It is strange that those who deny the existence of elders today because there are no apostles do not reject the existence today of servants of the Lord who are seen here to be appointed [kathistemi] by the apostles. We have here another illustration of recognition of those raised by the Holy Spirit. **Fourth**, the notion that the apostles had sole and peculiar discernment over the appointment of elders would speak of their spiritual *infallibility* – this is nothing short of popery.

If the qualifications noted for elders were *only* for the apostolic period, then where is this stated in Scripture and, further, where in Scripture do we have an alternative to elders within the local church? The qualifications for elders were recorded for the instruction of all churches throughout the age. The church at Thessalonica were to do this very thing. “And we beseech you, brethren, to know [recognize] them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you” (1 Thess 5:12). Paul did not say, “And we beseech you, brethren, to obey them which labour among you, who have been *appointed by us to be* over you in the Lord to rule and admonish you...”

Many who claim “no apostles - no elders” base their notion on a false premise evident in the following remark. “The churches had not the power to make them [i.e., elders], for the institution is expressly based on apostolic authority, and, instead of commanding the churches to appoint any, the apostle sent Titus to establish them” (*TBT* Vol 8 p 341). But it is not said where in Scripture this is “expressly based”. We can agree that the churches have never

had the power/authority to appoint elders – but then neither did the apostles have that power/authority. It is the Holy Spirit that makes elders. The apostles, Titus and the churches are called upon to *recognize* those who the Spirit has raised. The churches never had that power/authority - not because it was given to the apostles, but because it belonged exclusively to the all-seeing Spirit of God. There is also the erroneous claim that because the Church is in a “state of ruin” elders are not applicable. This is interpreting Scripture on the basis of some subjective assessment of the spiritual condition of the Church. One thing is clear – it is a certain path *to* ruin that stifles the work of the Spirit – His appointment of elders.

Specific words used in regard to the appointment of elders

We look into the three words used in the NT in regard to the appointment or ordination of elders. The first, *tithemi* is in Acts 20:28; the second, *kathistemi* is found in Titus 1:5; the third, *cheirotoneô* is in Acts 14:23.

Tithemi - nominating by divine prerogative

Where divine choice is in view the word **tithemi** is used. It refers to the person spoken of as doing the nomination, the selecting, the “picking” out or “putting into.” It is essentially choice in relation a *work*. John 15:16: “Ye have not chosen me, but I have chosen [*eklego*, same essence as *tithemi* but to pick out with emphasis unto “one’s self”] you, and ordained [*tithemi*] you, that ye should go and bring forth fruit.” Note the consistent use of *tithemi* with the prerogative of the **Godhead**.

First in regard to elders. Acts 20:28: “Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you [*tithemi*] overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.” The Holy Spirit – not the apostles, “picked out” [*tithemi*] the elders for a work. Interestingly, nowhere in Scripture is it said that the apostles were “picked out” to appoint elders. Neither is it said about any other person. In Titus 1:5 Paul is said to have appointed Titus to ordain elders in Crete. But the word here is *diatasso* – to arrange. Paul had arranged this matter with Titus.

Second, in relation to Paul’s ministry. 1 Timothy 1:12: “And I thank Christ Jesus our Lord, who hath enabled me, for that he counted me faithful, putting [*tithemi*] me into the ministry.”

Third, Paul as a preacher to the Gentiles (cf Rom 15:16). 1 Timothy 2:7: “Whereunto I am ordained [*tithemi*] a preacher, and an apostle, (I speak the truth in Christ, and lie not;) a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and verity.” 2 Timothy 1:11: “Whereunto I am appointed [*tithemi*] a preacher, and an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles. **Fourth**, Christ. Hebrews 1:2: “God...Hath in these last days spoken unto us by his Son, whom he hath appointed [*tithemi*] heir of all things, by whom also he made the worlds.” (cf “appoint” in Matt 24:51; Lk 12:46; 1 Pet 2:8).

Kathistemi and Cheirotoneô - identifying by recognition

In these passages concerning the appointment of elders *tithemi* is not used because it would teach that the apostles themselves picked out or nominated the elders. God “picks out”; men are to “recognize” His choice. We must remember the historical context. The NT scriptures were not yet complete and the saints in these early churches had to be shown the divine pattern of gathering. This is why the apostles came among them and identified those who are to oversee the assembly – those who had demonstrated the required qualities. And so two other words are used which are consistent with the apostles identifying by recognition who the elders were.

a. **Kathistemi** – to **set apart** by formal **recognition**, so needful in the early Church where the complete Scriptures were not available. Paul writes to Titus, “For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain [*kathistemi*, set apart by formally recognizing] elders in every city, as I had appointed [arranged]” (Titus 1:5). Having observed those raised by the Holy Spirit by their work (Acts 20:28), Titus was to set them apart and identify them for the benefit of the saints. Titus was to “ordain” elders in every city. “Not a form of ecclesiastical ordination is in view, but the appointment, for the recognition of the churches, of those who had already been raised and qualified by the Holy Spirit, and had given evidence of this in their life and service” (W E Vine: *Expository Dictionary of NT Words*; p 67).

b. **Cheirotoneô** (from cheirotonos, extending the hand, cheir, hand, and teinô, to stretch) – to stretch out the hands in order to recognize those whom the Holy Spirit had called and picked out and who were doing the work of elders. Again, so needful in the early Church period where the complete Scriptures were not available. This word is used only twice in the NT. **First**, in Acts 14:23 in regard to elders. “And when they had ordained [*cheirotoneôthem*, stretched out

the hand - recognized] elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. **Second**, 2 Corinthians 8:19. “And not that only, but who was also chosen [*cheirotônêtheis*] of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and declaration of your ready mind.”

J W de Silva 2003/4