

Leadership of Local Churches

In these studies, we will not be following the practices and doctrines of the various denominations developed over the centuries, but we will be looking at **what the Apostles taught, as recorded in our Bibles**, and what **the early churches practised** during the first century of the church era.

I have proven in church planting in Australia and East Africa that we can return to what was practised by the early church and it really works. God’s ways are better than those devised by man.

Please note this important distinction:

You will notice that in these studies we use the word ‘Elder’, ‘Overseer’, ‘Deacon’ and ‘Teachers’ instead of ‘Bishop’, ‘Priest’, ‘Father’, ‘Reverend’ or ‘Pastor’. We use these words as ‘Elder’, ‘Overseer’ and ‘Teachers’ are the words the Bible uses for the leaders, shepherds and servants of the churches.

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Autonomy and leadership of local churches

Each local church mentioned in the New Testament was **autonomous and self governing**, and was **answerable to the Lord alone**. In Revelation chapter 1 the Lord Jesus walked among **the golden lampstands** which **represented the seven churches** that He addressed in Chapters 2 and 3. Notice what He said to these churches; He did not place one church over another. **So each was responsible to Him alone**. Paul addressed his epistles to individual churches. He did not place one over another. **This is an important principle.**

Please note the God given order for leadership in the first churches as set forth in Ephesians 4:11

First, Apostles – Read Mark 3:14; Acts 2:14; Eph. 3:1-6.

Second, Prophets – Read Acts 11:27-30; 13:1-3

Third, Shepherd - (translated ‘pastors’ in most versions) Eph. 4:11.

Forth, Teachers – Read Acts 13:1;

“But now God has set the members, each one of them, in the body just as He pleased” (1 Cor. 12:18).

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First, Apostles, meaning ‘sent ones’. Note the way we can recognise true apostles from false:

1. **Chosen and appointed** by the Lord – Mark 3:13-14
2. **Named** ‘apostles’ by the Lord – Luke 6:12-16.
3. **Sent** by the Lord to bear **witness** to the Lord – John 15:26-27
4. **Present with Him** from the **baptism of John to His ascension** - Acts 1:21-22
5. They had **‘seen’** the Lord – 1 Cor. 9:1
6. They were granted **signs and wonders** to authenticate their apostleship.

All the Apostles **had known and ‘seen’ the Lord**, except Paul, who **‘saw’** the Lord at his conversion (Acts Ch. 9).

No one today has ‘seen the Lord’ and can claim to be an ‘apostle’. The Bible says; *“For such are false apostles, deceitful workers, transforming themselves into apostles of Christ”* (2 Cor 11:13).

The Apostles laid the foundations of the Church by **how they lived** (Acts 20:17-30); and by **what they taught** (1 Cor. Chapter 3). What they taught is called the **apostles doctrine (or teaching)**: *“And they continued steadfastly in the apostles’ doctrine and fellowship, in the breaking of bread, and in prayers”* (Acts 2:42); *“And as they went through the cities, they delivered to them the decrees to keep, which were determined by the apostles and elders at Jerusalem”* (Acts 16:4). This is now recorded in our Bibles, the inspired word of God.

Laying Foundations (1 Corinthians 3:9-23).

The **apostles** and **prophets** belonged to the **foundation period of the Church** (Eph. 2:19-20). They were **taught by the Lord**, and after His ascension they **received revelations** from the Lord to complete the doctrines.

They and their special gifts of miracles, healings and tongues are no longer with us, since we have the completed Scriptures.

Please note 1 Cor. 13: 8-13: That which is **‘perfect’** (Greek neuter gender) had come – the **‘perfect’** and **‘complete’** word of God. **‘Perfect’ is not a person, it is some ‘thing’**. The scriptures are the only **‘perfect’** ‘thing’ in the world today (**‘perfect’** means **‘complete’**). This is the **near view**; the **far view** will be when His **‘perfect’** kingdom is established on earth.

These gifts are not necessary today for the normal functioning of the local church. They were **temporary** in nature, used by God primarily for purposes of **confirmation** and **authentication** of the apostle’s message. They were strictly limited in use in 1 Corinthians Chapter 14. However, we do believe that miracles and healings do happen at times today in answer to prayer and as it pleases the Lord.

The apostles appointed elders in all the churches to carry on their work. Timothy and Titus were also instructed to see that elders were appointed in churches. Believers were to **recognise** and **esteem their elders highly** in love (1 Thess. 5:12-13). They were also to **submit** to them (1 Peter 5:5).

The apostles passed their baton to ‘elders’ – Acts 14:23. Today, we are instructed to appoint elders in the churches, but not apostles.

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Second, Prophets

Prophecy came through gifted **prophets**. Prophecy is the **declaration** of what cannot be known by **natural means**. It contained warnings about **future events** and **revelation of doctrine**. Its purpose was to **edify** (build up), **exhort** (stir up) and **comfort** (to bind up) the believers - 1 Cor. 14:1-3.

The prophets gave **inspired messages** from God in the churches **because the believers did not have Bibles**. Scrolls of the Old Testament books were rare, costly and bulky and few existed. The first books of the New Testament were not written for some years after Christ's resurrection and ascension. The book of Revelation written by John about 96 AD completed the canon of Scripture. Nothing is to be added to the completed revelation in our Bibles (Revelation 22:18-19; Jude 3). **So the Bible as we know it came much later.**

Today elders and teachers have taken the place of the prophets, and they are to edify, exhort and comfort as they gather from, and unfold the treasures in the completed scriptures.

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Third, ‘Shepherd - Teachers’, who are the Elders, who ‘Oversee’ the flock

Most Bible translation of Ephesians 4:11 translate ‘...pastors and teachers’. In the Greek the teachers are linked to the ‘pastors’. So it should be ‘pastors who are teachers’, or better ‘shepherds who are teachers’.

Each church should have a number of **elders** (shepherds) who are also **teachers** as it grows. *“Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counsellors there is safety”* (Proverbs 11:14). Please note that Paul called the **elders** of the church at Ephesus (not the Pastor, Minister or Bishop) to meet with him at Miletus (Acts 20:17; Phil. 1:1). To these **elders** Paul said, *“Take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you **overseers**, to **shepherd** the church of God which He purchased with His own blood”* (Acts 20:28).The qualifications and service of Elders:

The word ‘elder’ describes one who is **spiritually mature**, and the **‘work’** of elders is to **‘overseer’** and to **‘shepherd’** the flock. **These are ‘doing’ and ‘caring’ words and not names to be taken as badges of authority.** Sadly, The word **‘shepherd’** has been translated as **‘pastor’** while the word **‘overseer’** is translated **‘bishop’** in some old versions of the Bible.

These words are now used as **titles for church leaders**, but this has **no authority** to do so from the word of God. *“And He (Jesus) sat down, called the twelve, and said to them, “If anyone “desires to be first, he shall be last of all and servant of all”* (Mark 9:35).

Dignity and Duty

The word 'elder' indicates the dignity of the office.

The words 'overseer' and 'shepherd' the duties of the office.

The duties of elders are to 'oversee' and 'shepherd' the flock.

Overseer is the far view: The word 'overseer' means to 'stand in a prominent place' and 'oversee' the flock', watching out for good pasture, water, and any danger from wild animals. **Elders** are to protect the flock from danger. It is the 'far view' of caring for the sheep. Note Psalm 23.

Shepherd, is the near view: The word 'shepherd' means to 'feed the flock from God's Word with other acts of special care'. It is the 'near view' or caring for the flock. **Note:** Peter uses similar words in 1 Peter 5:1-5 to what Paul says in Acts 20:28.

The word 'pastor' is taken from Ephesians 4:11 and should be translated 'shepherd'. The same word is used by Jesus when He said "*I am the good shepherd...*" (John 10:11) and it is never translated "*I am the good Pastor*"! The word 'Pastor' has been given a meaning beyond what the Bible teaches and often places a man **above** his fellow believers. The elders are 'shepherds' "*among the flock*" and lead by **example**. Please note what Peter wrote:

"The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock" (1 Peter 5:1-3).

These words were never meant to be used as titles or badges of distinction. Jesus warned against this in Matthew 23:1-12, "*But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.*"

Elders lead by example and not by force. In this way they gain the respect of the flock who are to esteem them highly in love for their works sake and submit to them (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; Hebrews 13:7, 17).

An elder is one who is spiritually mature, his gift and work is to teach, oversee and shepherd the flock.

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Deacons, who support the Elders

The **deacons** (meaning 'servants') support the elders in the work of the local church. The qualifications for elders and deacons are found in 1 Timothy chapter 3 and Titus chapter 1. They must have a good testimony in the community and in the church, be of good behaviour, having only one wife. The wives of elders and deacons are to be godly women of discretion.

A deacon is one who supports the elders in the various activities of the local church.

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Forth, Teachers

Today gifted teachers gather and glean from the Word of God. A gifted teacher waits on God as he meditates on the word of God. The Spirit of God can impress on his heart what scriptures to read and what to teach the flock. Teachers have replaced the prophets. Elders are also to be able to teach: "*An overseer (elder) then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded ..., able to teach*" (1 Tim 3:2).

The prophets passed the baton to gifted teachers who edify, exhort and comfort the flock.

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The importance of a functioning oversight (a meeting of elders)

Functioning:

The **ideal number** of elders caring for a local church is **three or more**. Elders should meet regularly to wait on the Lord for direction in all matters concerning the flock. Each elder has his own strengths and weaknesses, and so this is balanced out as each contributes, and in this way the mind of the Lord can be prayerfully arrived at.

One elder is not to rule over his fellow elders, but all to meet in humility thinking of others as better than themselves. The local church is a theocracy with the Lord as the head.

Financial support for elders

For the most part elders are **self supporting**, except for those who '*labour in the word and doctrine*' – that is, those elders who give all their time to caring for and teaching the flock. These were '*counted worthy of double honour*' and were to be supported by gifts from the churches and believers (1 Tim. 5:17).

Transparency and Accountability:

The Bible gives strong warning about money: "*For the love of money is a root of all kinds of evil, for which some have strayed from the faith in their greediness, and pierced themselves through with many sorrows*" (1 Tim 6:10).

Money can be a temptation to some to covet and misuse or even steal church funds. So all offerings should be counted **by two or more elders or deacons**, and safely banked with **good records kept** and signed. The elders and deacons also meet to decide what aspect of the Lord's work should be supported.

Great care should be taken with the offerings of the Lord's people, because it has been given to the Lord.

Paul wrote this about gifts given by churches to be delivered to the poor believers in Jerusalem: "***avoiding this: that anyone should blame us in this lavish gift which is administered by us; providing honourable things, not only in the sight of the Lord, but also in the sight of men. And we have sent with them our brother whom we have often proved diligent in many things, but now much more diligent, because of the great confidence which we have in you***" (2 Cor. 8:20-22).

"**An overseer (elder) then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behaviour, hospitable, able to teach; not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money, but gentle, not quarrelsome, not covetous**" (1 Timothy 3:2-3)

Elders and teachers should instruct church members about honesty in all aspects of their lives.