

The Bible Definition of Elders

By Craig Cochran

(All scripture quotations are from the ESV)

Definition And Role

The word “elder” is used throughout the English Bible: about twice as many times in the Old Testament than the New Testament. But in the New Testament (ESV) it is used 66 times: 62 in the plural and 4 in the singular. It’s source in the Greek language of the New Testament is πρεσβύτερος (presbuteros) which can mean an *older generation (Acts 2:17), ancestors (Heb. 11:2), honorable officials in local councils, synagogues, etc. (Luke 7:3), lay members of the Sanhedrin from important families (Mark 11.27), leaders who preside over Christian assemblies (Acts 14:23; 15:2) or in Revelation denoting (human) members of a heavenly council around God’s throne (Rev. 4:4)* according to the Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament by Timothy and Barbara Friberg.¹ The word Elder was a term used by those in Jewish synagogues in Jerusalem for their officers before 70 AD.² J.B. Lightfoot, historian, and New Testament commentator from the 1800s says on the book of Philippians that the term elder was transferred from the Jewish synagogue to the church in New Testament times. He says the following: *Over every Jewish synagogue, whether at home or abroad, a council of “elders” presided. It was not unnatural, therefore, that when the Christian synagogue took its place by the side of the Jewish, a similar organization should be adopted with such modifications as circumstances required; and thus, the name familiar under the old dispensation was retained under the new.*³ In the New Testament later usage however, elder, which was of Jewish origin came to have another meaning - something new for believers.

Acts 20:17 says, *Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.* The Greek word here used in Acts 20:17 for elders is πρεσβυτέρους (presbuteros) which is in the plural form. When Paul called for the elders of the church in Ephesus in Acts 20:17 he describes their function or role in this passage in verse 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, which he obtained with his own blood.* (Acts 20:28).

Here he used a different word which is “overseer” as a synonym for elder but also describing the elder’s role. The Greek word for overseer is ἐπίσκοπος (episkopos) sometimes translated as bishop (KJV & NKJV) which means “one who watches over the welfare of others”⁴. This definition matches what Paul says they should be doing for the church! J.B. Lightfoot says of overseer the following: *Episkopos, “bishop,” “overseer,” was an official title among the Greeks. In Athenian language it was used especially to designate commissioners appointed to regulate a new colony or acquisition.*⁵ Overseer was borrowed from Greek culture but it helped to describe what the elder role is. So elder and overseer mean the same thing here!

To add to this there is a 3rd word here in Acts 20:28 to describe elder also used synonymously with its meaning "to care for" which is ποιμαίνω (poimaino). In Ephesians 4:11 this same word (poimenas) as a noun is normally translated "pastor" (KJV, NKJV, NASB, NIV & CSB) while in Luke 2:8 it is translated shepherd! Luke 2:8 says, *And in the same region there were shepherds out in the field, keeping watch over their flock by night.* 1 Peter 5:1-3 uses all 3 words as well to describe the pastor of a church. The passage reads as follows: *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.* The pastor then cares for people like shepherds cares for sheep.

Also in Titus chapter 1 verses 5 – 7a regarding the qualifications for elders (presbuteros), the word overseer (episkopos) are also used interchangeably. The Titus 1:5-7a passage says, *"This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach..."*

1 Tim. 3:1-7 is another list for qualifications for overseer and uses the idea of taking care of God's church as a role for overseer. 1 Tim. 3:2-5 goes like this, *Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church?*

Since 1 Peter 5:1-4 uses all 3 words (pastor/elder/overseer) in the same passage and since Acts 20:17-28 uses all 3 words AND since Titus 1:5-7 uses 2 of the words interchangeably, the scripture is clear that they are referring to the same office of the church which is the pastor! 1 Peter 5:4 adds the following to put the pastoring role in perspective as it relates to Christ: *"So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."*

Only One Type Of Elder Is Defined In Scripture

There are those who say that there is a concept of "Ruling Elders" for one congregation in the Bible. ⁶ There are different reasons why the Bible does not talk of these type of elders in

this writer's view. So let's look at the main scriptures used to support such a concept of a "Plurality of Ruling Elders" used to govern a local church. They are Acts 14:23, 1 Timothy 5:17, James 5:14, Philippians 1:1 and Philippians 4:15.

At least one denomination (Presbyterian) uses this concept of ruling elders to govern their local church.⁷ There has been a strong Presbyterian influence in the United States starting in the early 1700s.⁸ Therefore it is no wonder there are differing opinions on the role of elders today.

The Definition Of The Word "Church"

Acts 14:23 says, *And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.* It looks like each church had more than one elder where Paul and Barnabas had been on their first missionary journey. The word church comes from a Greek word ἐκκλησία (ekklesia) meaning assembly.⁹ But the word church has at least 4 contextual meanings in all of scripture.

The **first** definition is to mean ***all believers of all time everywhere*** shown by Ephesians 5:25 which says, *"Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her,"*.

The **second** definition is seen in Acts 9:31 meaning ***all believers in a region*** which says, *So the church throughout all Judea and Galilee and Samaria had peace and was being built up. And walking in the fear of the Lord and in the comfort of the Holy Spirit, it multiplied.*

The **third** definition is seen in 1 Corinthians 1:2 meaning ***all believers in a city*** which says, *"To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours:"*.

The **fourth** definition is seen in 1 Corinthians 16:19 meaning ***all believers in a certain house*** which says, *The churches of Asia send you greetings. Aquila and Prisca, together with the church in their house, send you hearty greetings in the Lord.*

The word church is further defined in Romans 1:6-7 which says, *"including you who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, To all those in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints:"*. This definition in the book of Romans of the church in Rome is **one** - those called to belong to Jesus, **two** - those called to be saints and **three** - those loved by God. This three-fold definition of the believers in Rome is using scripture to define scripture which is the BEST definition of any biblical word. The unity of God's church is seen by this three-fold definition.

The word church is also translated assembly in at least one instance in Acts 19:32 where the unity is those in the theatre of Ephesus. Acts 19:32 says, *Now some cried out one thing, some another, for the assembly (ekklesia) was in confusion, and most of them did not know why they had come together.* The word church is further defined as God's church because he bought it with His own blood according to Acts 20:28 seen above: *"...which he obtained with his*

own blood.” The commonality of those in God’s church is those who know they have been bought by the blood of Christ!

So what is Acts 14:23 meaning by “church” when Paul appointed elders in every church? The context says that they (Paul and Barnabas) had gone through four towns: Derbe, Iconium, Lystra and Antioch (reverse order) and they appointed elders in every church. The definition of church here is the church in each of the four towns! We know that there would have likely been house churches in each town meaning that there would be more than one house church in each town because not everybody could fit into one house. Here are some references to house churches: Acts 12:12, Romans 16:3-5, Romans 16:23, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:2 and Acts 18:7. So appointing elders in each city-church in each of the 4 towns is what is meant and there would have been multiple elders appointed for each town. Acts 20:17 quoted above says Paul called for the elders of the church in Ephesus. Ephesus was the 4th largest city in the Roman Empire with an estimated population of 250,000 people at the time of Paul’s travels.¹⁰ It would have been especially impossible for all the church there to fit into one house! They didn’t meet on First and Main like we do today. And even though those in Corinth did fit in one house as Paul says in Romans 16:23, it does not mean they also did not also meet in different homes simultaneously. And Titus 1:5 talks about that Titus was to appoint elders in every town instead of every church. Listen to what it says, *“This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—”*. This passage here in Titus helps explain what Paul meant by “church” in Acts 14:23!

One Verse By Itself Cannot Support A Major Teaching

So, when James says to call for the elders of the church in James 5:14 what does he mean? James 1:1 and 5:14 goes like this, *“James, a servant of God and of the Lord Jesus Christ, To the twelve tribes in the Dispersion:” (James 1:1) and “... Is anyone among you sick? 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.” (James 5:14)* It is not for sure that he means for many elders in one house church here. Rather he is addressing Jewish Christians that are scattered and the elders could be called from a wider area than just one particular house church. There could have been elders from other house churches called to come from the same town or city who regularly met. The book of James was also the very first New Testament book written (40-50 AD) which is something to keep in mind here when the term elder was undergoing a redefinition.

The Role Of Elders As Defined In Scripture

1 Timothy 5:17 says, *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.* Does this verse teach that there are two

different types of elders or different things that an elder does? In the qualifications for elders there is never a reference to two different types of elders. As a matter of fact, in the two places where these qualifications exist, they are very similar. Let's look at each list. First take a look at 1 Timothy 3:1-7 which says, *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*

Titus 1: 5-9 is the other list. Listen to what it says. *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you— if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.* Both lists talk of their family life, their personal life and the roles they fill. The 1 Timothy 3 passage talks about the elder (pastor) taking care of God's church (vs 5) and being able to teach (vs 2) while the Titus passage says that the elder is to give instruction in sound doctrine and to rebuke those who contradict it (Titus 1:9) all of these being functions of the God-called elder.

1 Peter 5:1-3 talks further about an elder's role, how he is to conduct himself and relate to his flock. Peter mentions there that there are "those in their charge" which is a recognition by the church AND the elder of such a relationship! Listen to 1 Peter 5:1-3 which says, *So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.*

The Holy Spirit Makes Overseers

God calls and makes the overseers/elders/pastors according to Acts 20:28. They are made and placed in their role in order to care for the church! They will desire or aspire to this office as 1 Timothy 3:1 says, *"The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of*

overseer, he desires a noble task.” They will be appointed (as they were by Timothy or Titus) or ordained by a church. But they are placed there by God first! (Ephesians 4:11 and Acts 20:28) The rest of the God’s people just recognize what God has already done! Listen to Acts 20:28 which says, 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, which he obtained with his own blood. Ephesians 4:11 says, “And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers,”. The role of pastor first starts with God and is seen when they are caring for God’s church!

Those who speak of elders ruling a local congregation talk of voting on them on a regular basis as if they were called then later uncalled. It appears that God places elders in their role for life not being a short-term time frame.

Church Government

The biblical pattern for church decisions was to let God lead by the Spirit with the pastors/elders and the church to be involved in church decisions. Acts 13:1-3 says, *Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off.* The church in Jerusalem prayed together when Peter and John was threatened by the authorities in Acts 4:24 which says, “And when they heard it, they lifted their voices together to God and said, “Sovereign Lord, who made the heaven and the earth and the sea and everything in them,”.

The early church made the decision of the first seven deacons by the whole church. Even the Apostles did not make this decision by themselves. Acts 6:2-3 says, *And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, “It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty.* The Jerusalem conference which was of great importance was attended by the Apostles and Elders but the whole church was involved as seen in the following passage. Acts 15:22 says, “Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers,” If a local congregation votes on representatives (elders) to make the decisions for a year they forfeit the privilege and responsibility they should exercise! The scripture shows that the congregation should have a say in the decisions that a local church faces with the Holy Spirit leading all to the decisions that are made.

Solidarity And Cooperation Is The Biblical Example

One of the strongest arguments that each local church should have a plurality of elders is thought to be in the church of a city or town working together as a unit to accomplish the same goals as Alexander Strauch says in his book called Biblical Eldership.¹¹ It is true that Paul in addressing the Philippians in Philippians 1:1 mentions the overseers in the plural form of the word and then in chapter 4:15 calls all of them a church in the singular. Listen to Philippians 1:1 : *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons.* Now listen to Philippians 4:15-16: *And you Philippians yourselves know that in the beginning of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church entered into partnership with me in giving and receiving, except you only. Even in Thessalonica you sent me help for my needs once and again.* We have already seen that the word church in the singular is used to describe all believers in a town like when Paul called for the elders of the church in Ephesus in Acts 20:17. We find that the Philippians worked together to send help to Paul in Thessalonica after he left Philippi as seen in Philippians 4:16. Acts 11:22 also shows that the church in Jerusalem meaning all believers there (8000 plus) acted in solidarity by sending Barnabas to check out the new gentile believers in Antioch. Listen to Acts 11:22: *The report of this came to the ears of the church in Jerusalem, and they sent Barnabas to Antioch.*

The cooperation of the Philippian believers of the whole town in sending financial help to Paul as well as the Jerusalem church sending Barnabas to Antioch shows that we are always to work together with other believers in a locality like the Baptist associations of the SBC (Southern Baptist Convention). It is interesting that the “you” in Philippians 4:15 is in the plural (you all as we say in English sometimes) And even though church is in the singular in that same verse doesn’t mean that they always assembled together regularly but rather worked together for the glory of Christ as God’s people from that locality. The Jerusalem church met in the temple (Acts 5:12) for a time until persecution broke out among them (Acts 8:1) and then after that there was evidence of them meeting in homes there in Jerusalem (Acts 12:12). The church in Ephesus met for 2 years (Acts 19:9) in the Hall of Tyrannus with Paul until there came a controversy from the idol makers who were upset with Christianity since it threatened their economic situation. Paul would say that he had taught them publicly and from house to house (Acts 20:20). There was no way after the uproar in Ephesus (Acts 19:23-41) that they could meet all together in there unless in homes. And there is the situation in Romans 16:23 which says that Gaius was host to the whole Corinthian church at least at the time Paul wrote his letter to the Romans.

Even in situations like Corinth where it is mentioned that the whole church met in 1 home there is evidence in other places that they met on 2 levels: All together and then also in

homes in smaller groups. What is forgotten at this point is that house churches existed (Acts 12:12, Romans 16:3-5, Romans 16:23, 1 Corinthians 16:19, Colossians 4:15, Philemon 1:2 and Acts 18:7) and were common among the towns referenced in these scriptures and that serious persecution existed in the times of the New Testament which is why house churches existed in the first place. In the book “40 Questions About Elders And Deacons”, the author says that the existence of house churches in a town seen in scripture does not seem to have any impediment toward the idea that a congregation today should have its own plurality of elders.¹² But it would have been appropriate for Paul to address the believers in the whole town who had believed by calling them the church in the singular (1 Cor 1:2, 2 Cor 1:1, Phi 1:1 with 4:15) since they had believed during Paul’s visit to each town and were God’s people in that locality.

There was a plurality of elders mentioned in 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 which says: *We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves.* There was as well a plurality of leaders to be subject to in 1 Cor 16:15-18 which says: *Now I urge you, brothers—you know that the household of Stephanas were the first converts in Achaia, and that they have devoted themselves to the service of the saints— be subject to such as these, and to every fellow worker and laborer. I rejoice at the coming of Stephanas and Fortunatus and Achaicus, because they have made up for your absence, for they refreshed my spirit as well as yours. Give recognition to such people.* And not to mention Hebrew 13:17, 24 where it says that the Hebrew readers were to obey and submit to their leaders: vs 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.* Vs 24- *Greet all your leaders and all the saints. Those who come from Italy send you greetings.* Some people will see a mandate to have a plurality of elders in a local congregation from the scriptures. But the plurality of elders in each town we see in scripture does not prove that each single congregation today should have a plurality of elders rather it mainly proves that we should work together for Christ and the spread of the Gospel!

Conclusion

There is strong evidence from the whole of scripture that the definition of elder is that of a pastor and that there is only one kind of elder. Philippians 1:1 says, *“Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:”*. Only two church roles are mentioned here in this passage – overseers and deacons! The church in all definitions is under the head and leadership of Jesus! Ephesians 1:22 says, *“And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church,”*. 1 Peter 5:4 calls Jesus the Chief Shepherd and the elders/pastors/overseers are

shepherds under Him as implied in that verse! 1 Peter 5:4 says, *“And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.”* Pastors must give account and they know it, to Christ for those in their care according to Hebrews 13:17 which says, *Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.*

If men are set apart as elders who do not meet the biblical definition and qualification of elders then problems can arise even if we are trying to “help” the pastor or the church. Paul told Timothy not to be in a hurry to lay hands on someone meaning to ordain (1 Tim. 5:22)! He referenced Timothy’s own ordination in 1Tim. 4:14 using the terminology of “the laying on of hands”. In referring to deacons he said that they should be tested first (1 Tim. 3:10). Listen to 1 Tim. 5:22,24 & 25: *Do not be hasty in the laying on of hands, nor take part in the sins of others; keep yourself pure. ... The sins of some people are conspicuous, going before them to judgment, but the sins of others appear later. So also good works are conspicuous, and even those that are not cannot remain hidden.* He is saying let God take care of what is already his work anyway! We are only to recognize what God is doing! Listen to what Paul says about the roles God gave to the church for building the church up in Eph. 4:8,11-12: *“Therefore it says, “When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men.”... And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ,”*

In this writers view the biblical evidence leans toward a single or lead pastor with associates for each area a church may have, being of the biblical example for different reasons articulated here.

#1- The word church is used city-wide sometimes (Acts 20:17, Phi 1:1 with 4:15, 1 Cor 1:2 with 16:19 & 2 Cor 1:1) and that house churches would have had to have an elder / pastor / leader and that explains why many elders would exist in a town or city. Cooperation is the take-away of a town or city with many elders working together for one purpose to glorify Christ and spread the Gospel.

#2- The pastor / elder is God-called for life (Acts 20:28) and accountable to Christ as the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4) and therefore does not need to be voted on repeatedly. He is called of God and not the church. (Acts 20:28)

#3- An elder board can keep the congregation from being involved in decisions of the church. According to scripture (Acts 6:2-6, Acts 11:22, Acts 15:22) the whole church should be involved in its decisions. The priesthood of the believer is at stake here. When an elder board rules, leaving the whole church out, they can become in effect the church themselves! The final appeal of authority is seen in scripture to be the whole church. (Mat 18:17, 2 Cor 2:6)

#4- Each elder / pastor will have a flock according to 1 Peter 5:1-4 and that they have the charge of the flock who also recognizes them as their shepherd.

#5- A pastor / elder is called by God and knows how to teach according to 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9. An elder who doesn't teach and shepherd but is only elected to make decisions is not a biblical elder.

#6- Elder boards can seem to be the answer where there is the problem of church members not acting in line with the Lord's direction nor the scriptures. The problem here is not that the structure is faulty but rather that there is a Lordship issue on hand. The church should always be seeking the Lord's direction together! (Acts 13:1-3)

#7- A board of elders elected regularly really becomes a 3rd office: Pastors, Deacons and Ruling Elders. Pastors are not set apart continuously in scripture because only one time is sufficient. And Elders and Pastors are the same office as we have seen in the scripture. The scripture speaks only of 2 offices. (Phi 1:1, 1 Tim 3:1-13 & Titus 1:5-9)

Of course, being teachable and listening to others especially those that are spiritual is obviously wise for a pastor (Prov 12:15, 15:22). Every pastor and anybody for that matter would be wise to listen to advice! There is a wide range seen today of leadership in each church congregation. There is on the one hand the pastor of a congregation who can act as a dictator and then on the other hand there is the elder board of another that votes themselves on who the elders will be or an elder board who makes ALL the decisions both leaving the congregation out of the loop. It is clear that neither of these examples are biblical!

One observation is that if church government could be separated from the discussion of elders and that the whole church could be involved in the church decisions meaning all the members have ownership in the church decisions, then we could still talk of multiple elders in a single congregation. Many large churches need multiple pastors / elders / overseers because of their size. But there really are 2 issues here. Having multiple elders in a single congregation is NOT wrong as long as a few things would be in place according to scripture.

#1 An Elder/Pastor meets the scriptural qualifications of 1 Tim 3:2-8 & Titus 1:5-9.

#2 He is recognized by the congregation as such as in 1 Peter 5:1-4.

#3 Each member takes part in the churches decisions. (Acts 6:1-6)

#4 There is a clear understanding of each elder's relation to the other Elders/Pastors in a local congregation and especially where there would be an overlap of roles. (1 Cor 4:5-7, 21-23)

It seems that in scripture there was a plurality of elders in the city-churches and that a house church may have had only one. If a church has many pastors / elders in their congregation, it is important that we let the scripture be our guide. It would be unbiblical to rush to fill a certain number of pastors / elders because "we have to have an odd number or the number we think we should have". This kind of thinking can also be done when setting apart deacons and it is worldly causing a church a lot of problems for their future. This kind of thinking can place people in a position when they are not God-called whether we are talking about Pastors / Elders or Deacons. And it is also unbiblical to leave the whole church out of

ownership in the church and it's decisions something we do not see in scripture at all. All scripture should be looked at when making any decision or coming to understand any doctrine. 2 Timothy 3:16-17 says: *All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work.* Each church makes their own decisions on deacons and pastors/elders/overseers because each church is autonomous, but it must be remembered that everyone in a church is accountable to Christ for their decisions as seen in Revelation chapter 2 and 3. May God's Word be our guide and Christ's glory our goal!

Churches of the SBC (Southern Baptist Convention) adhere to the following statement of faith regarding the definition of the church.

The Baptist Faith & Message (2000) on the Church ¹³

VI. The Church

A New Testament church of the Lord Jesus Christ is an autonomous local congregation of baptized believers, associated by covenant in the faith and fellowship of the gospel; observing the two ordinances of Christ, governed by His laws, exercising the gifts, rights, and privileges invested in them by His Word, and seeking to extend the gospel to the ends of the earth. Each congregation operates under the Lordship of Christ through democratic processes. In such a congregation each member is responsible and accountable to Christ as Lord. Its scriptural officers are that of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture.

The New Testament speaks also of the church as the Body of Christ which includes all of the redeemed of all the ages, believers from every tribe, and tongue, and people, and nation.

[Matthew 16:15-19; 18:15-20; Acts 2:41-42,47; 5:11-14; 6:3-6; 13:1-3; 14:23,27; 15:1-30; 16:5; 20:28; Romans 1:7; 1 Corinthians 1:2; 3:16; 5:4-5; 7:17; 9:13-14; 12; Ephesians 1:22-23; 2:19-22; 3:8-11,21; 5:22-32; Philippians 1:1; Colossians 1:18; 1 Timothy 2:9-14; 3:1-15; 4:14; Hebrews 11:39-40; 1 Peter 5:1-4; Revelation 2-3; 21:2-3.](#) ****Note: This article was amended June 14, 2023, by action of the 2023 Southern Baptist Convention****

All scripture underlines are mine.

End Notes

- 1 – *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* by Timothy and Barbara Friberg, 2nd Edition based on the USB 5th Revised edition 2014 (Second Corrected printing 2015) used in Olive Tree Bible Study App
- 2 – *A Greek-English Lexicon Of The New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature, Second Edition* by Walter Bauer pg. 700
- 3 – *Crossway Classic Commentary – Philippians (CCC)*, by J.B. Lightfoot
- 4 – *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* by Timothy and Barbara Friberg
- 5 – *Crossway Classic Commentary – Philippians (CCC)*, by J.B. Lightfoot

- 6 – *Why Elder Rule?* (<https://www.qty.org/library/questions/QA203/why-elder-rule>) by John McArthur
Also *Biblical Eldership* (<https://www.desiringgod.org/messages/biblical-eldership-session-1>) by John Piper
- 7 – *Handbook Of Denominations In The United States*, pg. 247, 259 by Frank S. Mead revised by Samuel S. Hill
- 8 – *Handbook Of Denominations In The United States*, pg. 247-248 by Frank S. Mead revised by Samuel S. Hill
(The author mentions on page 248 that from 1710 until the middle of the century that 3000 – 6000 Presbyterians were arriving to America annually first settling in New England and then later in the middle colonies.)
- 9 – *Analytical Lexicon of the Greek New Testament* by Timothy and Barbara Friberg
- 10 – *Holman Bible Dictionary*, pg. 425
- 11 – *Biblical Eldership An Urgent Call To Restore Biblical Church Leadership* by Alexander Strauch 1988 Second Edition pg 86,99-100 (notes on #1 & 132)
- 12 – *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* by Benjamin Merkle pg 162
- 13 – *The Baptist Faith And Message 2000*, excerpt from section 6 on *The Church* (<https://bfm.sbc.net/bfm2000/#vi>), accessed June 19, 2024

For Further Reading

Elder Rule and Southern Baptist Church Polity (https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/jbtm/03-1_188.pdf)