

“THEM THAT HAVE THE RULE OVER YOU”

Some aspects of leadership in New Testament Assemblies

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1 Introduction.

The church of Jesus Christ needs to be more traditional!

Isn't that what Paul said? “Now we command you, brethren, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you withdraw yourselves from every brother that walks disorderly, and not after the TRADITION which he received of us” (2 Thess. 3:6).

Of course, our Lord warned against tradition. “Why do you also transgress the commandment of God by your TRADITION?” he asked the Pharisees (Matt. 15:3). “Thus have you made the commandment of God of none effect by your TRADITION” (Matt. 15:6).

What is the difference between the endorsement of Paul and the warning of our Lord? It is simply this: different traditions are in view. Paul's tradition is not good simply because it is tradition, any more than the Pharisee's tradition is bad just because it is tradition. What matters is whose tradition it is. Tradition developed by years of human experience and rationalization may very well run counter to the Word of God. But apostolic tradition preserves the teachings of the Lord Jesus--directly during his earthly life, and through the Holy Spirit after his ascension. It IS the Word of God, and binding upon God's people today.

What makes up the apostolic tradition? Certainly the commands contained in the epistles are part of this tradition. And in fact, Paul includes just such a command in his explanation of the tradition which he exhorted the Thessalonians to follow (2 Thess. 3:10, cf. v.6). But the tradition is far wider than the explicit commands. Before Paul ever cited a command, he recalled how the tradition in question was communicated through his personal example (2 Thess. 3:7-9).

A life-changing faith, such as Christianity, cannot be adequately communicated only in a series of rules. Example must accompany exhortation. “Be ye imitators of me, even as I am of Christ,” Paul wrote (1 Cor. 11:1, literal translation). The truth is to be passed on by illustration as well as by explicit instruction. Thus it ought to be clear that examples of Christian conduct endorsed in the New Testament are normative today, unless expressly limited by the Scriptures to the first century.

It ought to be clear--but to many who name the name of Christ, it is not. To such people, this paper will have little practical bearing. “You are simply summarizing the practice of first century Christianity,” they will say. “Times have changed. What was practical then is no longer.” But the believer is not bound by what he thinks is or is not practical. God has promised to bless, not feasibility studies, but obedience to his Word. And that includes the examples preserved in the Word, as well as its commandments.

We proceed with our study in five steps. First, in Section 2, we review the main NT *passages* that provide information on leadership in assemblies in the first century. From these passages, Section 3 derives their *qualifications*. Section 4 then focuses on three titles that are used to describe these men, titles that reflect their *function* in the church. Section 5 deals with the question of their *reward*. Finally, Section 5 explores *how* elders should exercise their function.

2 The Sources.

Just what is a "pastor" in a local church? How is he trained? How should a church "call" him? What are his duties? How much should he be paid? Or should he be paid at all? These questions are so basic to church life that they are easily overlooked. Yet the Word of God clearly answers them. It is not necessary to base one's conclusions on tenuous scraps of evidence gleaned from random verses of Scripture. These topics are so important that they are treated in detail in consecutive, logical fashion, in several paragraphs of Scripture. We will survey the structure and purpose of some of the more relevant Scriptures, and then analyze them, together with the rest of the New Testament, to find the answers to our questions. Anticipating what we will find to be the biblical position, we will use the titles "pastor," "elder," "bishop," and "overseer" interchangeably for the same group of leaders.

2.1 Acts 20:17-35.

When Paul turned his footsteps toward Jerusalem at the end of his third missionary journey, the pressure of time made it impossible for him to revisit the churches as thoroughly as he would have wished (Acts 20:16). He did, however, have some words of exhortation for the leaders of the church in Ephesus. Though he did not stop in Ephesus, he asked these leaders to meet with him in Miletus, his nearest port of call. The farewell message which he gave them may be outlined as follows.

I. Paul describes his past ministry among the Ephesians, vv. 18-27.

A. They know how Paul has conducted himself among them, vv. 18-21.

1. They know his manner, vv. 18-19.

2. They know his ministry, vv. 20-21. Note four pairs of contrasts outlining the scope of his work:

a. Method: both showing (proclaiming, heralding) and teaching.

b. Place: both publically and house to house.

c. Objects: both Jews and Greeks.

d. Message: both repentance and faith.

B. The end of Paul's life and ministry is approaching, vv. 22-24.

C. Conclusion drawn from IA and IB together: Paul is not ashamed to be taken from them (IB) because he has discharged his responsibility toward them (IA), vv. 25-27.

II. Paul describes their future ministry among the Ephesians, vv. 28-35.

A. He describes their labor, vv. 28-31. These four verses have chiasmic structure. That is, vv.28 and 31 have the same theme (what the elders are to do), and vv. 29-30 have the same theme (the dangers to the flock that necessitate the actions of vv. 28 and 31).

1. He outlines WHAT the elders are to do, vv. 28, 31

a. Take heed as overseers (28), watching alertly (31).

b. Feed the church (literally, "shepherd" or "pastor") (28), recalling Paul's teachings (31).

2. He warns WHY the elders must do this, vv. 29-30. Men will arise seeking to enrich themselves at the expense of the church. These fall into two groups.

- a. “Wolves” will invade the flock from without, v. 29 (cf. Matt. 7:15).
- b. Even some from within the assembly may serve from selfish motives, v. 30.

B. He describes their reward, vv. 32-35. Because of the great danger that some will abuse the flock for selfish reasons, the legitimate leaders must take every caution against giving example or precedent for such abuse.

1. He tells what their reward is. v. 32. Their reward is from God, through his Word, and consists in two parts.

- a. As they labor in the Word they will enjoy, in the present time, the edification and spiritual growth that it brings.
- b. As they live in obedience to it, they may look forward to the inheritance laid up for them in heaven (cf. 1 Pet. 1:4).

2. He tells what their reward is not, vv. 33-35. It is not material pay from the flock.

- a. Paul gave them an example for this, by working for his own keep while he was among them, vv. 33-34.
- b. They are to labor in the same way, so that far from being paid by the flock, they might have sufficient to help support more impoverished members of the community, v. 35 (cf. Paul's instruction to this same church at large in Eph. 4:28).

2.2 1 Tim. 3:1-13; 5:1-6:2; Tit. 1:5-9.

Because of such passages as those listed, which deal particularly with pastoral responsibilities, the epistles to Timothy and that to Titus have come to be called “pastoral epistles.” That name sometimes gives the impression that Timothy and Titus were pastors. But this is nowhere clearly stated in the New Testament.

What is clear is that both men were among Paul's associates and helpers, delegated by him from time to time with special “chores” in connection with his missionary work. Titus, for instance, was sent to the church at Corinth (2 Cor. 12:18), perhaps to help deal with the immorality that had sprung up there, and certainly to assist in the collection for the poor saints at Jerusalem (2 Cor. 8:6). Timothy was Paul's younger companion on his second and third missionary journeys, as John Mark had been on the first. Like Titus, he was from time to time charged with “troubleshooting” local assemblies, as at Thessalonica (1 Thess. 3:2) and Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3).

How shall we describe these men? Do their counterparts exist today? The apostles themselves, who had been first-hand witnesses of the resurrected Christ (Acts 1:21, 22, cf. 1 Cor. 9:1), held an office unique in the history of the church. Some might suggest that as there are today no apostles, so there can be no apostolic delegates in the manner of Timothy and Titus.

But while the office of apostle, like that of prophet, was limited to the first generation of the church, the missionary work that the apostles did in obedience to the Lord's commission (Matt. 28:19,20) is an ongoing responsibility of the church. Paul made this clear in the very way in which he prepared younger men (such as Timothy and Titus) to carry on that work after his departure. And his charge to Timothy in 2 Tim. 2:2 gives the basis for a continuing succession of men spreading the gospel.

We will, then, consider the "pastoral epistles" as instructions for younger missionaries in the problems and responsibilities of establishing local churches. In order to establish a church properly, the missionary must understand the qualifications involved in the offices of the church.

Tit. 1:5-9 is just such a list of qualifications given to aid Titus in appointing elders in the churches of Crete. 1 Tim.3:1-7 gives a similar list for elders, followed (verses 8-13) by requirements for another office, that of "deacon." The distinction between the two offices is not the burden of this paper. In passing, two details may be noted. First, the deacons seem to be younger men than elders, since their administrative ability is evaluated by looking carefully at their wives, while the elders' children are more in focus. Second, if Acts 6:1-8 does indeed describe the institution of the diaconate (though the word "deacon" is nowhere there used), the deacons bore responsibility for the temporal responsibilities of the assembly, under the supervision of the elders, who were thus freed to concentrate on ministering the Word of God.

I Tim. 5:1-6:2 is especially valuable in showing the place of the elders within the entire church family. Paul follows a careful outline in calling Timothy's attention to certain problem groups within the assembly.

I. He lists the four divisions of the assembly, 5:1-2.

- A. Elder men
- B. Younger men
- C. Elder women
- C. Younger women

II. He discusses the problems within each division, 5:3-6:2

- A. Problems among the elder women concern widows, 5:3-10.
- B. Problems among the younger women also concern widows, 5:11-16.
- C. Problems among the elder men concern leaders in the church, 5:17-25.
- D. Problems among the younger men concern slaves, 6:1-2.

2.3 Heb. 13:7, 17, 24.

The epistle to the Hebrews concerns the superiority of Christ over the institutions of the Old Testament. He is better than the angels (1:4), better than Moses (3:3), better than Aaron as a priest (7:28), ministering a better covenant (8:6) in a better sanctuary (9:11) through a better sacrifice (9:13-14). Yet it is apparently not written to unbelievers, even to Jewish unbelievers, but to those who have trusted Christ (cf. 6:9; 10:39).

Why would Christians need to be persuaded of the superiority of Christ over the Mosaic system? The answer is found in the harsh persecutions that the Jews waged against the early

Christians. Paul, before his salvation, had been a prominent example of this. Apparently, Christians were tempted to hide their faith in Christ, and to pretend that they were still Jews, so as to avoid persecution. To them the author of the epistle outlines the foolishness of forsaking the new and better way for the old types. Rather, they ought to be willing to take a stand for Christ outside the camp of Israel, bearing his reproach (13:10-13).

The need for church order would be particularly noticeable in such circumstances of persecution and temptation to deny the Lord. Thus, three times in the closing chapter of Hebrews, the writer reminds his readers of their responsibilities toward “them which have the rule over you” (13:7, 17, 24). These references are submerged somewhat in the argument of the chapter. But the schematic form that they take, each referring to (literally) “your leaders,” suggests that they reflect some systematic understanding of these rulers in the writer's mind.

2.4 1 Pet. 5:1-7.

Like Hebrews, 1 Peter is written to Christians undergoing persecution and suffering. Like Hebrews, 1 Peter closes by drawing some attention to the church structure as a means ordained by God to help believers in times of trial. Unlike Hebrews, 1 Peter addresses the elders (5:1-4) as well as the congregation (eye younger,” 5:5-7).

2.5 Summary.

The four groups of verses selected for survey here thus give descriptions of the elders from several points of view. The “pastorals” describe the missionary's attitude and responsibility toward elders in local churches under his responsibility. Acts 20 and 1 Pet. 5 give instructions to the elders themselves on how to conduct their duties. Hebrews 13 suggests some of the responsibilities that the people bear toward the elders.

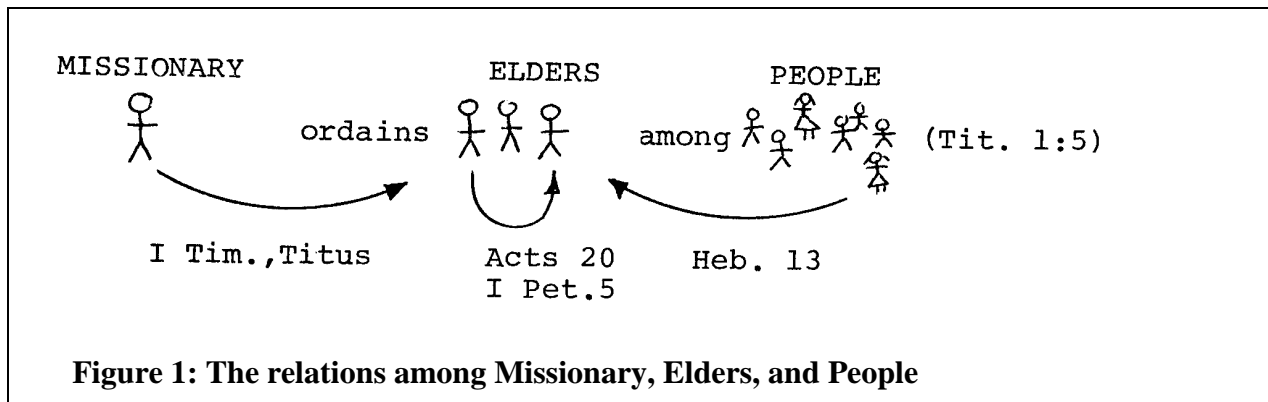
Figure 1 shows the relationships among these three groups. The arrows suggest the perspective or viewpoint from which church leaders are viewed in each of the passages.

3 Identity of the Elders.

Who are the leaders of a local assembly? Several details are clear in the New Testament examples.

3.1 They come from within the assembly itself.

The New Testament knows nothing of an assembly “calling” a pastoral staff, on the basis of



a few interviews and trial sermons, from another assembly. No suggestion is ever made that an elder is anyone other than one who has been in fellowship with a particular assembly for a considerable time before being charged with responsibility.

Timothy and Titus, if they were indeed pastors, might be counterexamples. And since their work was basically an extension of Paul's, so might Paul. But careful study of the Scriptures will show that neither Paul nor his protégés is ever identified as pastor, elder, or overseer. They were itinerants, traveling from place to place either to plant new churches, or to strengthen existing ones with counsel and teaching from the Word of God. But (as we will see) the eldership requires that the people know a prospective elder far better than transient contact would allow. Perhaps the transient nature of their ministry was the very reason these gifted individuals did not assume responsibility for eldership.

1 Pet. 5:1,2 describes the relationship between elder and flock in precisely reciprocal terms. The elders “which are among you” are to feed the flock “which is among” them. The elders are among the flock just as the flock is among them. That is, they are first of all part of the flock.

And surely, only thus can a church “know them which labor among you” (1 Thess. 5:12) so as to approve their role as leaders. The requirements of 1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1 are far too intimate to be verified by anything less than extended observation. How can the church know that a man is “given to hospitality” unless it has observed him ministering to others in this way? Can it be sure of the negative qualifications—“*not* given to wine, *no* striker, *not* greedy of filthy lucre, *not* a brawler, *not* covetous”—without having lived with him for some time? One of the qualifications is that unbelievers give a good report of him (1 Tim. 3:7). How can this be known unless the same unbelievers are known both to the prospective elder and to the assembly?

Thus, the elder is first of all one known to an assembly through protracted fellowship in the assembly before being charged with leadership responsibility.

3.2 They are older males in the assembly.

Recent developments in denominational churches make it necessary to state explicitly that the New Testament knows nothing of woman leadership in the church. No example can be found of an “eldress,” “bishopess,” or “pastoress.” On the contrary, 1 Tim. 2:11-15 forbids women to take authority over men. The reasons given are not cultural factors that might have changed in the last 2000 years, but the very nature of man and woman. Compare also 1 Cor. 11:3; 14:34, 35.

There are further strictures. The elders are not only men. They are the elder men of the assembly, as their name suggests. The literal import of their title is strikingly clear from the structure of 1 Tim. 5, as already outlined. In treating problems in the church by age-group, Paul discusses the elders in the category of elder men as opposed to younger men. Peter makes the same contrast in addressing himself first to the elders, then to the younger (1 Pet. 5:1-7).

3.3 They are gifted and experienced men.

But not every elder man is an elder, any more than in 1 Tim. 5, every elder woman is a widow or every younger man a bond-slave. The requirements of 1 Tim. 3 and Tit. 1 include several details that are quite independent of a man's moral and spiritual character. His aptness to teach (1 Tim. 3:2) will depend on whether or not the Holy Spirit has thus gifted him (Eph. 4:11; Rom. 12:6, 7). He is to be the husband of one wife (1 Tim. 3:2). This requirement excludes not only more wives than one (as in divorce and remarriage), but also fewer wives than one. In other

words, he must be married or widowed. Furthermore, he must have believing children (Tit. 1:6, translated in the Authorized Version, "faithful"). Not only must he be able to lead his children to faith in Christ, he must have children.

Certainly a man is not less spiritual because God has gifted and called him to the celibate life (1 Cor. 7), or because, though married, God has not granted him children (Ps. 127:3). But the oversight of a local assembly is a task that demands two sometimes antithetical abilities--loving compassion mingled with administrative effectiveness. The home is perhaps the closest parallel to the church in demanding a balance in these two areas for successful leadership. Both situations demand love that is felt, yet without compromising discipline. Thus, the eldership is like many positions advertised in the "help wanted" sections of a newspaper. There is a firm specification of "previous experience necessary." A man without that previous experience may be a wonderful person, with great promise. But he is not eligible for the position until he can present the requisite credentials and experience.

3.4 They are recognized by the assembly in which they serve.

Believers in a New Testament assembly were expected "to know them which labor among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; and to esteem them very highly in love for their work's sake" (1 Thess. 5:12, 13). The threefold reference in Heb. 13 to "them that have the rule over you" certainly suggests a well-defined, recognized group with specific leadership responsibilities. And the apostle, in 1 Tim. 3:1, anticipates that the role of overseer in the church is clearly enough defined that a man may aspire to it.

A fairly mature assembly ought to have little difficulty in discerning the necessary gifts and experience among its members, and in submitting itself to the leadership of these who are qualified. The epistles to Timothy and Titus, on the other hand, envision churches still under the care and responsibility of a missionary. Here, as elsewhere, the Lord had gifted certain men to lead the flock. But, unlike other churches, these assemblies had perhaps few men, other than those gifted to lead, with the discernment to recognize the Lord's appointment for leading. It would have been most awkward for the potential elders to set themselves up as elders, and no one else in the assembly was able to recognize their ability. In such cases, the missionary charged with the nurture of the assembly was to mediate by helping identify gifted men and inaugurate them to their responsibilities. Thus the missionary epistles are the portions of the Word of God that contain the most explicit lists of qualifications for church leaders. Titus was commissioned "to ordain elders in every city" (1:5), while Timothy's duties may have included laying hands on a man to ordain him to the office of elder (5:22).

By the way, laying on of hands is a frequent scriptural symbol of identification. In the Old Testament it indicated the identification of a sinner with the sacrifice that was to die as his substitute, Lev. 1:4. In the New Testament, it may signify the endorsement of a church leader by the missionary (1 Tim. 5:22), or the endorsement of a missionary by a sending church (1 Tim. 4:14) or by other missionaries with whom he is to labor (11 Tim. 1:6, and see the Appendix).

4 Titles of the Elders.

The New Testament uses three basic words or word-families to describe church leaders. These words demand our attention for two reasons. First, they are descriptive, in summary form, of the position and work of the leaders. They give a simple but comprehensive outline of what a

church leader does. Second, these words have found their way into common use with meanings often quite different from those that they bear in the New Testament. For instance, these three words in the New Testament are interchangeable and all apply to the same person.

But in many religious organizations today they are applied to different levels or "ranks" of church leaders. If we are to understand the New Testament correctly, we must distinguish its use of these words from the non-biblical uses to which many of us have become accustomed.

4.1 The distinction among the three titles.

4.1.1 Elder.

"Elder" is by far the most common of the three titles. It is used, with clear reference to an office in the local assembly, about twenty times in the New Testament, while the noun and verb for "overseer" together occur thus only about five times, and the words for "pastor" but four times. It is also distinct from the other two word-families in that it describes a characteristic of the leaders rather than their work. While not every older man in the assembly may be qualified to hold the office of an elder, those who do hold the office ought to be older.

The Scriptures place a premium on the experience that comes with age. A man may grow in "knowledge of the Lord Jesus" very rapidly. In a few years of concentrated study one man may master more of the contents of the Word of God than others many times his age. But there is no substitute for the experience of a daily life yielded to the Word to accomplish growth "in grace," and both sorts of growth are needed (2 Pet. 3:18). The mature Christian, spiritually, not only knows the Scriptures, but by reason of use has his senses exercised to discern good and evil (Heb. 5:14). There is no shortcut to such exercise through use.

Perhaps the responsibility placed on older men for leadership is derived from the structure of the original center for spiritual education--the home. In both Old and New Testaments, the parent is in the position of leader and teacher of the children (Deut. 6:7; Prov. 1:10; 2:1; 3:1; 4:1; 5:1; 6:1; 7:1; Eph. 6:4). Those who demonstrate in their homes that they are gifted for spiritual leadership, and whose children show the fruit of such labor (Titus 1:6), are those who ought to have leadership responsibility in the church.

4.1.2 Pastor.

"Pastor" is the same word as "shepherd" and denotes the responsibility of caring for sheep. As a common occupation in Bible lands and times, shepherding offered abundant material to illustrate the care that God takes for his people (Ps. 23). Several times the New Testament pictures the Lord Jesus as shepherd over his flock (Jn. 10:11) Heb. 13:20; 1 Pet. 2:25; 5:4). The elders of the local assembly, as those delegated under Christ to implement his pastoral care, are also called "pastors."

Of the many responsibilities that the shepherd has toward physical sheep, one in particular is emphasized with regard to the pastors of a local assembly. The Authorized Version reflects this by translating the verb as "feed" in 1 Pet. 5:2 and Acts 20:28. Eph. 4:11 identifies five ministries among four types of gifted men given by God to his church. Some men are apostles; some, prophets; some, evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers (literally, pastor-teachers). The elder was required to be "apt to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2), able to deal both offensively and defensively with

doctrinal problems in the assembly (Tit. 1:9). As a pastor, an elder is preeminently one who feeds the church with the Word of God.

Heb. 13 in its three exhortations to Christians concerning "them that have the rule over you" (vv. 7, 17, 24), seems to have in mind the three titles of the church leaders. The title of "elder," as denoting one who is simply an older, more experienced member of the assembly, is reflected in Heb. 13:24. There, the rulers are greeted along with the rest of the saints, as an integral part of the church family. We will later trace the work of the bishop as outlined in v. 17. The pastor seems most clearly in view in v. 7. "Remember them which have the rule over you. who have spoken unto you the word of God; whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." As a pastor, the church leader is one who speaks to the people the Word of God, and who clearly demonstrates what he teaches through his manner of life ("conversation"). Those who are not pastors may teach in the assembly. Paul and Timothy, for example, are never called pastors. Yet their teaching ministry is apparent in every part of the writings associated with them. But while a non-pastor may teach, there is no such thing as a non-teacher being a pastor. Some of the elders may "labor" (work especially hard) in the Word and doctrine (1 Tim. 5:17). But all are to be apt to teach (1 Tim. 3:2).

It is a great responsibility to feed the flock of God, especially when one realizes that the duty is delegated by the Lord Jesus, the chief shepherd. Thus the Scriptures give special warning to those who would be "masters" (literally, "teachers") (James 3:1).

4.1.3 Bishop, Overseer.

"Bishop" and "overseer" are two words used in the English New Testament to translate a single Greek term. Like "pastor," this term describes the work of church leaders, and is applied first of all to the Lord Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 2:5).

The particular responsibility of the church leaders, viewed as overseers or bishops, is clear from Heb. 13:17. "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."

According to this verse, the overseer is one who "watches." In English, there is some ambiguity in the word "watches." It may be used of the "watchman," who stays awake on the city wall to guard against enemy attack. Or it may be used of the TV viewer, who falls asleep in front of the late-night movie. But the Greek term is unambiguous. It means the wakeful, attentive sort of watching. The overseer is in the position of a watchman, guarding the flock from threatening dangers. The same idea, though not the same word, is in Acts 20:28, where Paul is introducing to the Ephesian elders his warning of the external (Acts 20:29) and internal (Acts 20:30) threats that will challenge the church.

But there is still more to this duty of "watching." The word is used only three other times in the New Testament. Every other time, it is coupled with prayer (Mark 13:33; Luke 21:36; Eph. 6:18). "Watch and pray," our Lord had commanded his disciples. "Watch and pray," the disciples had passed the command down. In the context of such teaching, surely the ones who watched over the flock did it with dependent prayer.

The object of the overseer's watching is the believer's soul (Heb. 13:17). Today we speak glibly of the "soul" as the spiritual and eternal part of man, that which lives on beyond the grave. But in the Bible, the lines are not so sharply drawn. The whole person can be termed a "soul"

(Acts 7:14; 1 Pet. 3:20). Or “soul” can refer to a man's physical life, without reference to spiritual salvation or damnation (Acts 15:26). It may refer to the inner self, which experiences the whole gamut of sensations to which man is subject: satisfaction (Luke 12:19), sorrow (Matt. 26:38), pleasure (Heb. 10:38), pain (Luke 2:35), even being well-fed (Matt. 6:25). The overseer, in watching for the soul of the believer, guards far more than his spiritual well-being. He is responsible for every aspect of the believer's welfare. Thus, church leaders supervised numerous instances of physical ministry among believers in the early church. In Acts 6:1-4, the leaders of the church discerned the need and delegated responsibility to the deacons. In Acts 11:27-30, a gift was addressed to the elders of the needy church for distribution.

This wide-ranging responsibility, which is laid upon the elders in their capacity as overseers, is simply the performance of a duty delegated to them by the Lord Jesus, the bishop of our souls (1 Pet. 2:25). He is pledged to the welfare of his redeemed ones, both spiritually (John 14:2, 3, etc.) and physically (Matt. 6:33). And his present prayerful watch over them (Heb. 7:25) found illustration more than once in his earthly life (Luke 22:32; John 17). Because the overseer performs a delegated responsibility, as the representative of the Lord Jesus, he must expect to render an account of his performance (Heb. 13:17).

4.2 The identity of the Three Titles.

In the New Testament, the same people who are elders are pastors and overseers as well. Of many passages that might be cited, two are particularly clear.

Acts 20:18-35 is addressed explicitly to the elders of the church at Ephesus (v.17). Paul's exhortation to this group of men is, “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” (v.28). All of the elders, without distinction, are here called “overseers.” Thus there is no distinction between the “elder” and the “bishop” or “overseer.” Furthermore, the charge, “Feed the church of God,” may be literally translated, “Shepherd the church of God” or “Pastor the church of God.” That is, the ones who pastor the flock are none other than the group already identified as the elders, who are identical with the bishops or overseers. There is no hint, in this final exhortation by the apostle to the church leaders of Ephesus, of any hierarchy or organizational distinction among those leaders into elders, pastors, and bishops.

Peter's injunction in 1 Pet. 5:1-7 is very similar to Paul's in Acts 20. In fact, considering Peter's close acquaintance with Paul's writings (2 Pet. 3:15, 16), and other parallels with Paul's teachings to be found in 1 and 2 Peter, it would not be surprising if these verses in 1 Pet. were actually a synopsis of Paul's message to the Ephesian leaders.

The group addressed is, like the group from Ephesus, termed “elders” (1 Pet. 5:1). They are commanded, without distinction, to “feed the flock of God which is among you” (v. 2). As in Acts 20, the word for “feed” here is literally “shepherd” or “pastor.” This same group, again without distinction, is commanded further to take the “oversight” of the church (v. 2). “Oversight” is simply the work of the overseer, or bishop. Thus Peter does not divide the responsibilities of church leadership among elders, pastors, and bishops. Rather, he exhorts one group of men to perform all three duties.

Table 1: Passages showing the Relation among the Three Titles

Passage	Elder	Overseer	Pastor
Acts 20	elders (v.17)	overseers (v.28)	feed (v.28)
1 Pet. 5	elders (v.1)	oversight (v.2)	feed (v.2)
1 Tim. 5:17	elders	rule	word, doctrine
1 Thess.5:12	labor among	over you	admonish you
Tit. 1	elders (v.5)	bishop (v.7)	doctrine, exhort, convince (v.9)
Heb. 13	greet (v.24)	obey (v.17)	remember (v.7)

Table 1 lists six passages, including the two discussed here, that combine all three ministries in a single class of person. The key words that highlight each of the ministries in each passage are listed beneath the usual title for that particular ministry.

5 The Reward of the Elders.

5.1 The general principle.

Human beings have a penchant for professionalism. Even in New Testament times the carpenter, the dyer of purple, and the doctor each earned his living through highly specialized activity. In turn, he depended on other specialists for needs that were not within his sphere of expertise. The high standards and diligent activity expected of the elders in a local church would tend, in such a society, to constitute them a professional, specialized class. It is quite understandable that people should feel obligated to pay their pastors, just as they do their doctors and their plumbers. It is quite understandable, but it is also quite unbiblical.

5.1.1 Acts 20.

When Paul addressed the Ephesian elders, he spoke to them explicitly on the subject of their reward. From God, and through his Word, they could expect two rewards for their labor (v.32). They would be built up spiritually by the intensive study of the Scriptures that their teaching duties would require of them. And their heavenly reward would be greater because of their faithful service on earth. But they must not expect these spiritual rewards to be supplemented with financial returns. Paul, their example, had asked no pay from those under his ministry (v.33). Quite the contrary, he worked for his own support—and not only for his own, but for the support of some of his fellow laborers who were not able to make ends meet (v.34). His exhortation to the Ephesians was unmistakable (v.35). “So laboring, you ought to support the weak, and to remember the words of the Lord Jesus, how he said, ‘It is more blessed to give than to receive.’ “

We ought not miss the little word, “So.” It means, “In this same way.” Paul's instruction to the Ephesians is that they ought to labor in the same way that he did—not only spiritually, but physically. Far from receiving from the flock, they ought to be in a position to give to others, thus setting an example in the important matter of caring for the needs of one another. (Recall our discussion of the extent of the responsibility implied in watching for the souls of the saints in Heb. 13:17.) Like Paul, the Ephesian pastors were not to be paid for their ministry.

5.1.2 1 Pet. 5.

Peter stated explicitly that the elders should not serve “for filthy lucre.” We have already noted close parallels between 1 Pet. 5 and Acts 20. This phrase no doubt reflects Paul's command to pastors there not to take a salary.

The Greek word translated by “for filthy lucre” is rendered differently in various lexicons. Lexicons that treat only the New Testament and related literature invariably render it, “being desirous of dishonest gain.” So understood, the word forbids only unscrupulous gain, not income in general. But the word occurs only three times in the New Testament, and always of church leaders (here and Tit. 1:7 of elders; in 1 Tim. 3:8, of deacons). When one turns to a lexicon that treats all ancient Greek sources, including the New Testament, one finds a different emphasis in the definition: “sordidly greedy of (any) gain.” Both types of lexicons recognize that the word describes a desire for gain. But they differ on the matter of precisely what is wrong with such a desire. The purely New Testament lexicons condemn the particular kind of gain that is desired—“filthy lucre.” The lexicons that rest upon a broader base of data denounce the very desire itself.

It is understandable that lexicographers who are first of all churchmen and accustomed to the common custom of a professional clergy, should handle this word in its clerical New Testament associations to permit a salaried elder. But this very tendency suggests that the sense of the word given by secular lexicons may be the more objective one. Peter is not saying that church leaders must eschew dishonest gain, though that is certainly true. He is saying that financial return should have no place in their conception of ministry.

5.1.3 2 Thess. 3.

The New Testament directly forbids pastors to be paid by the local church. Once this is understood, another passage, not referring to church leaders' directly, is seen to apply to them as well as to the people at large. 2 Thessalonians treats three related problems in the church at Thessalonica. Paul concludes his discussion of each problem with a prayer (1:11, 12; 2:16, 17; 3:16-18). Thus the traditional chapters correspond to the thought divisions of the epistle.

The first problem is the severe persecution that the believers are suffering for their testimony (1:4). This in turn has led to the propagation of the false teaching, for which Paul's authority has deceitfully been claimed (2:2), that the believers have already entered the tribulation. Under the sway of this false teaching, a third problem had arisen. “There are some which walk among you disorderly, working not at all, but are busybodies” (3:11).

From the use of the cognate noun in 1 Tim. 5:13, it is apparent that a “busybody” is one who meddles in the affairs of others. We do not know just what this meddling consisted of. It may have included very spiritual-sounding activity in which the “busybodies” redoubled their efforts in view of the shortness of the time. Whatever it was, it distracted them from their responsibility of supporting their families, and led them to cast themselves on the assembly for support.

Paul's response was unmistakable. He had showed them, by his own example, that making a living was not incompatible with a biblical ministry, any more than “full time service” was inconsistent with holding a “secular” job. “Neither did we eat any man's bread for nought; but wrought with labor and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you” (3:8). Paul's “labor and travail” here were not the burden of gospel ministry, as tiresome as that can be. Paul would not have had to remind them of that. The danger was, that in remembering him as an ideal of Christian ministry, they would forget his custom (very unexpected from their

point of view) of working for his keep while ministering. The notion is precisely parallel to Acts 20:34, cf. Acts 18:3. He worked physically to feed himself and his helpers, even as he labored spiritually to provide for the spiritual needs of others. And the Spirit of God has recorded this pattern as normative. “If any would not work, neither should he eat” (2 Thess. 3:10).

It is significant that Paul did not make a special exception for the elders of the assembly. In the light of Acts 20 and 1 Pet. 5, we can understand that no such exception was possible. All in the assembly, leaders and congregation alike, were to work “with quietness ... and eat their own bread” (2 Thess. 3:12).

5.2 Are there exceptions?

5.2.1 1 Cor. 9.

1 Cor. 9 contains one of most direct discussions of the question of paid Christian workers to be found in the New Testament. Paul defends his right as an apostle to be supported by those among whom he travels (vv. 1-6) with four arguments. He argues from human experience (v. 7), the Old Testament agricultural law (vv. 8-10, Dt. 25:4), the practice of other workers (vv. 11-12), and Old Testament levitical custom (v.13). But Paul explicitly gives up this right in order to minister more effectively (vv. 15-23), recognizing that the real reward, and one that material pay might hinder him from receiving, is a spiritual inheritance yet to come (vv. 24-27).

Are the arguments of this chapter applicable to the elder in the local church? Three observations need to be made clear.

First, the chapter has in view, not a resident elder, but an itinerant teacher. Paul nowhere calls himself or is called an elder. His ministry was that of the traveling missionary, whose right to support is explained further in 3 John 5-8. It is from such a standpoint that he speaks. Verse 5 clearly indicates the peripatetic nature of the ministry in question. There could be no question of the elder's right to have a wife and, if a salary were in view, to support her on it. Indeed, if a man had no wife, or if he had one but did not care for her, he would be disqualified from being an elder! But a different sort of question might arise if a traveling brother, visiting various churches and receiving hospitality from them, should desire to take his wife with him and expect her to be entertained as well.

Second, it is hospitality, support in kind, that is in view in the chapter. There is no mention of a salary, but only of eating and drinking (v. 4). Even the gift sent to Paul from Philippi is described as “the things (plural) which were sent from you” (Phil. 4:18). If that gift involved money, it included as well other “things,” gifts in kind.

Third, although the itinerant has a right to receive the essentials of life from those whom he is presently serving, the example of Paul is to surrender that right. Even from the Philippians, there is no evidence that he accepted gifts until after he had left them. It is contrary to Paul's intent in 1 Cor. 9 to argue from it that certain classes of teachers ought to be paid. The more direct suggestion is that they refuse payment! At least three reasons may be suggested for Paul's refusal. They should claim the careful attention of one who today seeks support through the ministry of the Word of God.

1. In the immediate context, Paul explains that he wants to make the gospel of Christ without charge (v.18). Lest there be any danger of misunderstanding, or reduction in the effectiveness of his ministry, Paul refused payment from those among whom he worked.

2. Paul's ministry as an itinerant was primarily establishing local assemblies, not training other itinerants. Although he was entitled to support, he wanted to set an example for local elders of the self-supported teacher (Acts 20:33-35; 2 Thess. 3:6-10).
3. Throughout his ministry Paul was involved in receiving contributions for the needy saints in Jerusalem. Perhaps he was especially cautious about finances lest he be accused by some of misappropriating monies committed to his custody for the use of others.

5.2.2 1 Tim. 5:17, 18.

1 Tim. 5:17, 18 is often cited as authority for a paid clergy. "Honor," it is suggested, refers to financial remuneration. 5:3, which speaks (apparently) of enrolling needy widows in a support fund, is frequently quoted as justification. And 5:18 is felt to make the reference to material reward unambiguous.

We ought to be cautious, though, because of the contradiction that such an understanding would cause with Acts 20. One of the churches with which Timothy had missionary dealings was Ephesus (1 Tim. 1:3). Would the apostle instruct the elders themselves to support themselves, yet outline a different policy to Timothy who worked among those same elders?

A close examination of 5:17, 18 shows that they do not refer unambiguously to a salaried clergy. 5:18 would be the strongest argument for material payment of an elder. The first Scripture quotation, from Deut. 25:4, is quoted by Paul in 1 Cor. 9:9, 10 to prove that the itinerant teacher has a right to food and lodging from those to whom he ministers. And the second, from Luke 10:7, is quoted from the Lord Jesus' instructions to the seventy itinerant teachers whom he sent out. There, too, it has clear reference to material provision. "In the same house remain, eating and drinking such things as they give, for the laborer is worthy of his hire." Yet when these verses refer to material payment, they only refer to provision of food and drink, provision in kind. Neither passage gives any notion of a salary. And both 1 Cor. 9 (as noted above) and Luke 10 have to do, not with resident elders, but with itinerants, whose financial needs were especially acute because of their travels. A resident church leader, obeying Paul's instructions in Acts 20, would have his own income. Applied to such a one, these scriptures are better understood as referring to intangible rewards.

Such rewards are no doubt in view in 5:17, which prescribes that elders who execute their responsibility well are to receive "double honor." It is true that the church's ministry to the widows, outlined in 5:3-16, included the possibility of financial assistance (v.16). It is not at all clear that this is expressed by the word, "honor," in 5:3. "Honor" (5:3) and "double honor" (5:17) are the first two terms in a series of three, which culminates in "all honor" (6:1). "All honor," the greatest of the three, is what the slave owes to his unsaved master. Surely this refers, not to a financial stipend paid by the slave to his master at intervals, but to an intangible attitude of respect and reverence. And this meaning, unambiguous with "all honor," is quite suitable with the lesser members of the series, "double honor" and "honor."

Is it, then, out of order for members of an assembly to express their esteem for their leaders in material ways? Gal. 6:6 instructs, "Let him that is taught in the Word communicate unto [share with] him that teaches in all good things." Some of the "good things" might conceivably be material. But surely all of them are not. And Acts 20 and 2 Thess. 3:7-12 make it clear that a regular salary, freeing an elder from the responsibility of earning his own living, is out of the question.

6 How Should Elders Rule?

Hebrews 13:7, 17, and 24 speak of elders “ruling” and of people “obeying” them. These verses have been used to justify an authoritative top-down style of pastoral care. In fact, if we pay careful attention to these words in their context, and consider other instructions to elders, we’ll come to a very different conclusion

6.1 Rule and Obey

1 Peter 5:3 would seem to forbid an overbearing attitude on the part of elders: “Neither as being lords over God’s heritage, but being ensamples to the flock.” The writer’s selection of terms in Heb 13 is consistent with Peter’s exhortation.

“Rule” is the verb ἡγεομαι (Strong’s G2233), from which we get English words like “hegemony.” The first, simplest, and perhaps sufficient observation is that this is the word used by our Lord to describe prominent people among the believers, in Luke 22:24-27, where he contrasts it with two other verbs, κυριεω (Strong’s G2961) and εξουσιαζω (G1850).

Luke 22:24-27 And there was also a strife among them, which of them should be accounted the greatest. 25 And he said unto them, “The kings of the Gentiles **exercise lordship** κυριεω over them; and they that **exercise authority** εξουσιαζω upon them are called benefactors. 26 But ye shall not be so: but he that is greatest among you, let him be as the younger; and he that **is chief** ἡγεομαι, as he that doth serve. 27 For whether is greater, he that sitteth at meat, or he that serveth? is not he that sitteth at meat? but I am among you as he that serveth.”

Peter appears to be recalling this teaching in his epistle. His verb translated “being lords” is κατακυριεω (Strong G2634), derived from κυριεω. (Matthew’s account of this episode uses the very same word that Peter does.) The Lord recognizes that there will be those who are prominent among the believers. Their attitude is to be one of humility and service, not the kind of domineering authority associated with the heathen.

This contrast is confirmed by the LXX. The LXX (the Greek translation of the OT that was common in the first century) is very important as a guide to the meaning of NT vocabulary. Just as the meaning we associate with words like “righteousness” and “redemption” is largely drawn from our English Bible, Greek-speaking Jews of the first century drew their vocabulary from the LXX. So where a given Greek word consistently translates a specific Hebrew word in the LXX, we can often learn something by considering that Hebrew term.

In the case of ἡγεομαι “rule,” there is a clear alignment with the Hebrew word נָגִיד *nagid* (Strong’s H5057), commonly translated “captain” in the AV, which the Lord commonly uses to describe the the kings of Israel (cf. 2 Sam 7:8). נָגִיד *nagid* is a noun; ἡγεομαι is a verb, but often used as a participle in a nominal sense.) The OT narrator also calls them “king” מֶלֶךְ *melek*, from a root used throughout the Semitic world. I haven’t checked in detail, but my impression is that the Lord does not usually use this term in direct speech to the kings. This contrast between what the world calls Israel’s kings and what the Lord calls them reflects his condemnation of the Gentile kingship in 1 Sam 12. The people wanted a king, but the Lord intended that they have a נָגִיד *nagid*. The contrast between the intended function of Gentile kings and Israel’s rulers is parallel to the Lord’s contrast in Luke 22.

Heb 13:17 tells believers to “obey” the elders. Again, there is a contrast with other words the author could have used. The usual term for “obey” in Greek is *υπακουω* (Strong G5219), which is what the winds and the sea do to our Lord in Matt 8:27. This term is not used in Heb 13:17. Instead, the author uses a passive form of the verb *πειθω* (Strong G3982). The active form of this verb means “to persuade, convince, win over.” So the exhortation in Hebrew is not to servile obedience to an authoritative human, but to sympathetic attention to the teaching offered by the elders.

The selection of *πειθω* to describe the response to those whose function is described by *ηγεομαι* may go back to the Hebrew. The term *נָגִיד* *nagid* comes from a verb that means “to propose, announce, inform” (Strong H5046). The emphasis on the ruler as one who teaches, and to whom the appropriate response is based on that teaching, fits very nicely with Hebrews 13:17.

6.2 Servants and Examples

Let’s return to 1 Pet 5:3. Peter exhorts the elders to be “examples to the flock,” and contrasts this position with “being lords over God’s heritage.” The verb “to be lord over” is *κατακυριεω* (Strong G2634). This verb appears only three other times in the New Testament. Once, in Acts 19:16, it describes a man possessed by a demon, who leaped on those who challenged him and “overcame them” by physical force. The other two occurrences, in Matt 20:25 and Mark 10:42, record the same teaching that Luke records in the passage we considered above. Let’s read Matthew’s account, starting with verse 25.

25 But Jesus called them unto him, and said, “Ye know that the princes of the Gentiles exercise dominion *κατακυριεω* over them, and they that are great exercise authority *κατεξοθσιαζω* upon them. 26 But it shall not be so among you: but whosoever will be great among you, let him be your minister; 27 And whosoever will be chief among you, let him be your servant: 28 Even as the Son of man came not to be ministered unto, but to minister, and to give his life a ransom for many.”

The two words for which I have given the Greek are strengthened forms of the words we considered in Luke 22. Here *κατακυριεω* is translated “exercise dominion,” and describes how Gentile princes rule their people. The Lord forbids believers to treat one another in this way. His wish is that those who are prominent among the believers should be characterized, not by their dominating behavior, but by an attitude of serving.

Peter’s repetition of *κατακυριεω* suggests that he is recalling the Lord’s teaching. Elders should remember what the Lord taught his disciples. Their place is not to exercise dominion. It is to serve (Matt 20) and be examples (1 Pet 5). The authority of the elder is exercised as a servant, as an example. The elder’s knowledge of Scripture should enable him to set forth arguments that will persuade the people, so that their obedience ultimately is not to the elder, but to the Word of God that he moderates.

7 So What?

Our Savior exhorts us not only to hear the Word of God but to do it (Luke 8:21). How will the principles discussed in this paper be reflected in the administration of a local assembly?

An assembly may begin to meet under the leadership of a missionary who is not himself qualified as an elder. His objective is *not* to build up the membership and the weekly offering to the point where the church is able to call and hire a full-time “pastor.” It *is* to build up the men in

the assembly spiritually, and then seek the Spirit's guidance to appoint from among those men the leaders of the assembly.

Thus, while a missionary may come from outside an assembly to help with particular difficulties, over a limited period of time, it is a violation of the New Testament pattern to call a “pastor” or pastoral staff from outside an assembly. Only men well known to the assembly, and well known to meet the biblical requirements for leadership, may be appointed.

A local pastor is not to be supported by the assembly financially. Rather, an elder should be an example to the flock in “working with his hands ... that he may have to give to him that needeth” (Eph. 4:28). His function in the church is to serve and be an example. His authority is exercised by his persuasive teaching of the Scriptures, not through top-down command and control.

Patterns of education that cater to individuals who expect to make a profession of the ministry are inimical to the New Testament pattern of church leadership. Institutions for biblical education should be structured to encourage students to remain in their home assemblies and continue their usual employment. They should concentrate on part-time curricula. And they should go to the student, rather than requiring the student to move his home and family to them. In a local church that follows the pattern of the NT, it is the elders (“pastors and teachers”) who perfect the saints so that the saints can do the work of the ministry and build up the body of Christ (Eph 4:11-12).

Only two offices are known in the local churches of the New Testament, the deacon and the elder-overseer-pastor. There is no biblical warrant for one pastor presiding over a “lay” board of elders, unless that one pastor be “our Lord Jesus, that great shepherd of the sheep” (Heb. 13:20).

8 APPENDIX Was Paul an elder?

We have frequently suggested that Paul did not hold the office of pastor-elder-overseer. There are two details in the New Testament that might suggest that he did, and that should be reviewed.

First, he is called “Paul the aged” in Philemon 9. The word is not, however, the comparative *presbyteros*, which is always used for the officers of the church, but the absolute *presbytes*. Likewise, his work as an ambassador is described with a verb cognate to *presbyteros*, *presbeyw*. But the context makes the sense of the verb clear in its only New Testament occurrences, 2 Cor. 5:20 and Eph. 6:20. In neither case does it have the sense, “execute the office of an elder.”

Second, a comparison of 1 Tim. 4:14 with 2 Tim. 1:6 might suggest that Paul was a member of the presbytery of the church at Lystra-Iconium, which sent Timothy out. Timothy's ordination is not explicitly described in Acts. But the symbolism of the laying on of hands is basically clear. It was a statement of identification. Acts 16:2, 3 does report that Timothy was “well reported of by the brethren that were at Lystra and Iconium. Him would Paul have to go forth with him.” Note that Timothy's approval is twofold. He is commended to the work by the church, and received into the work by the apostle. It is likely that this was expressed by a twofold imposition of hands: once by the elders of the church(es), to express their endorsement of Timothy and his gifts, and once by Paul, to show his approval. Thus it is not at all necessary that the verses in 1 Tim. 4 and 2 Tim. 1 be understood to teach that Paul was a member of the presbytery at Lystra-Iconium.