

Biblical Eldership in the Context of Church Planting

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Nearly all modern Evangelical missiologists agree that planting churches is central to fulfilling the Great Commission. That is, the missionary task is not merely about making converts but rather about making disciples—and disciples are not made in isolation, but in community with other believers. Jesus himself stated that he would build his “church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it” (Matt 16:18).¹ The apostle Paul dedicated his efforts to planting and nurturing of churches in Asia Minor and Greece. If the church is central to God’s mission in the world, then it is imperative that churches are planted with biblical leadership. The goal of this article, then, is to discuss how biblical eldership fits into God’s plan for his church. After defining what we mean by “biblical eldership,” we will then consider the importance of biblical eldership in the context of church planting.

What Is Biblical Eldership?

Before we can discuss its validity and necessity in the context of church planting, we must first define what we mean by biblical eldership. In order to accomplish this, we will consider 1) the terminology of leadership, 2) the number of leadership, and 3) the authority of leadership.

The Terminology of Leadership

Church leaders are given various titles in the New Testament. For example, leaders are called 1) elders, 2) overseers or bishops, 3) pastors or shepherds, and 4) deacons.² Who are these leaders and what is the relationship between these terms?

¹ All Scripture quotations are taken from the English Standard Version, unless otherwise noted. The emphasis (italics) of some words in the biblical quotations have been added by the author.

² At times, leaders are mentioned but are given no title (see Gal. 6:6; 1 Thess. 5:12–13; Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

Elders & Overseers

The terms “elder” (*presbuteros*) and “overseer” (*episkopos*) are two different titles that refer to the same office.³ There are a number of factors that support this position. First, the terms “elder” and “overseer” are used interchangeably. There are three texts that clearly demonstrate this usage:

- **Acts 20:17, 28** – Paul “sent to Ephesus and called the *elders* of the church to come to him” and exhorts them, “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.”
- **Titus 1:5, 7** – Paul writes to Titus, “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.” He continues by giving the need qualifications: “For an *overseer*...must be....”
- **1 Peter 5:1–2** – Peter writes, “I exhort the *elders* among you, as a fellow elder...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, serving as *overseers*” (my translation).⁴

Second, elders are never given separate qualifications. If elder and overseer are two separate offices, then it would seem reasonable to expect Paul to give the necessary qualifications for each office. In both 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:7–9 Paul gives the qualifications for anyone who aspires “to the office of *overseer*.” But in both 1 Timothy (5:17–25) and Titus (1:5) *elders* are also mentioned. If the offices are distinct, then what are the qualifications for someone to become an elder? This omission is especially telling because in 1 Timothy 5:22–25, Paul warns Timothy not to appoint someone to the office of elder too hastily since that position is to be filled only by qualified individuals (cf. 1 Tim. 4:14; 2 Tim. 1:6). If

³ See Benjamin L. Merkle, *The Elder and Overseer: One Office in the Early Church*, Studies in Biblical Literature 57 (New York: Peter Lang, 2003); idem, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2008), 54–58, 76–83; idem, *Why Elders? A Biblical and Practical Guide for Church Members* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, forthcoming).

⁴ Although this example is not as definitive since the verb form (“serving as overseers”) is used (and not the noun “overseers”), it still emphasizes that the duty or function of the elders was to oversee the congregation.

elder is a distinct office from overseer, we would expect the qualifications to be clearly stated for such an important position.

Third, elders and overseers have the same function—ruling/leading and teaching. For example, 1 Timothy 3:4–5 states that an *overseer* must “rule/manage” his own house before he is fit to “take care of” the church (cf. Rom. 12:8; 1 Thess. 5:12). Likewise, 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of *elders* who “rule” well, indicating that all elders are involved in ruling or leading the church. In Acts 20:28, Paul charges the Ephesian *elders* to “oversee” and “shepherd” the church of God. Thus, both elders and overseers are given the task of ruling/leading the church. In a similar manner, both are also given the duty of teaching the congregation. In 1 Timothy 3:2, every *overseer* must be “able to teach” in order to be qualified and in Titus 1:9 an *overseer* must “be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict.” Likewise, *elders* who rule well should be considered worthy of double honor, “especially those who labor in preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17). Because elders and overseers are given the same tasks of ruling/leading and teaching, they should be viewed as representing the same office.

Fourth, the elders and overseers are never listed as separate offices. This usage suggests that the three-tiered ecclesiastical system that later developed in many churches is foreign to the New Testament. Not until the 2nd century—in the epistles of Ignatius—do we see a distinction between the overseer (i.e., the monarchical bishop) and the elders (i.e., presbytery). As such, Ignatius provides us with the first example of a three-tiered system with a bishop, a presbytery, and deacons (*Magn.* 6:1). For Ignatius, the overseer is clearly distinct from the council of elders and is the sole head of the city-church.

Elders & Pastors

Although the title “pastor” is commonly used in our modern church context, it is used only one time in the New Testament as a reference for a church leader. In Ephesians 4:11, we are told, “He [i.e., Jesus] gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers.” The term “pastor” is coupled with the term “teacher,” which together denote one order of

ministry.⁵

What then is the relationship between the office of pastor and that of the elder/overseer? Does the term “pastor” represent a separate and distinct office to that of the “elder” or “overseer”? There are at least two reasons this term represents the same office. First, elders/overseers are given the same tasks as pastors: shepherding (Acts 20:17, 28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:1–3) and teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). Second, as we mentioned earlier, the term “pastor” is only found once in the New Testament as a designation of a church leader. If the office of pastor is separate from the elder/overseer, what are the qualifications needed for those who hold this office? Paul gives us qualifications for the elder/overseer but never for the pastor. Perhaps the reason for this omission is because in giving the qualifications for the elder/overseer, he is giving the qualifications for those who can also be called “pastor.”

Elders and Deacons

The office of deacon is a separate and distinct office to that of the elder/overseer/pastor. The word “deacon” is a translation of the Greek term *diakonos*, which normally means “servant.” Only context can determine if the term is being used generally to mean “servant” or more technically as a designation of a church officer. The Greek term is used twenty-nine times in the New Testament, but only three or four of those occurrences refer to an office-holder (Rom. 16:1[?]; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:8, 12). The origin of the deacon is not known for certain but many scholars believe that the Seven chosen in Acts 6 provides the prototype of the New Testament deacon.

The New Testament does not offer much information concerning the role of deacons. The requirements given in 1 Timothy 3:8–12 focus on the deacon’s character and family life. The most noticeable distinction between elders and deacons is that deacons do not need to be “able to

⁵ The Greek construction favors interpreting this phrase as one office: the pastor/teacher. There is not one office of pastor and a separate office of teacher.

teach” (1 Tim. 3:2). Deacons are called to “hold” to the faith with a clear conscience, but they are not called to “teach” that faith (1 Tim. 3:9). This suggests that the deacons do not have an official teaching role in the church. This does not mean that deacons cannot teach in any capacity, but simply that they are not called to teach or preach as a matter of responsibility related to their office as deacon. It should also be noted that deacons, as their very name indicates, do not rule or lead the congregation but have a service-oriented ministry. Although the Bible does not clearly indicate the function of deacons, based on the pattern established in Acts 6 with the apostles and the Seven, it seems best to view the deacons as servants who do whatever is necessary to allow the elders to accomplish their God-given calling of shepherding and teaching the church. Just as the apostles delegated administrative responsibilities to the Seven, so the elders are to delegate responsibilities to the deacons so that the elders can focus their efforts on the ministry of the Word and prayer (Acts 6:4). As a result, each local church is free to define the tasks of deacons based on their particular needs.

The Number of Leaders

The concept of shared leadership is a common theme in the Bible. In the Old Testament, leadership was shared by the elders of Israel. In the New Testament, Jesus chose twelve apostles to lead the church. In addition, the early church appointed seven men to assist the apostles by caring for the church’s widows (Acts 6:1–6). This pattern of plurality was continued with the establishment of the Christian eldership.

- **Acts 11:30** – The church in Antioch sent Barnabas and Paul to the “*elders*” in Jerusalem with money to aid in the famine relief.
- **Acts 15:4, 22, 23** – The “*elders*” are referenced along with the apostles in the context of the Jerusalem council.
- **Acts 14:23** – Paul and Barnabas planted churches in the cities of Antioch, Iconium, Lystra, and Derbe and “appointed *elders* for them in every church.”

- **Acts 20:17** – At the end of his third missionary journey, Paul summoned “the *elders* of the church to come to him.”
- **1 Tim 5:17** – Paul writes to Timothy, “Let the *elders* who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”
- **Phil 1:1** – When Paul writes to the church at Philippi, he specifically greets the “*overseers* and deacons.”
- **Titus 1:5** – Paul directed Titus to “appoint *elders* in every town.”
- **James 5:14** – James, the Lord’s brother, raises the question, “Is anyone among you sick?” His answer is, “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.”
- **1 Peter 5:1** – The apostle Peter exhorts the “*elders*” among the believers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.⁶

There are also other terms used to describe the plurality of leaders in the church. In his first letter to the church at Thessalonica, Paul exhorts the believers “to respect *those* who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you” (1 Thess. 5:12). Although the term “elders” is not used, it is clear that those whom Paul is referring to were the spiritual leaders of the congregation, performing elder-like functions. The author of Hebrews also indicates that the church to which he writes was lead by a plurality of shepherds. In Hebrews 13:7, the author states, “Remember your *leaders*, those who spoke to you the Word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.” He then urges the congregation by writing, “Obey your *leaders* and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those

⁶ There are a few exceptions, however. In 1 Tim. 5:19, Paul states, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” In this verse the singular form is used, not because the church in Ephesus had only one elder, but because the context refers to accusations brought up against an individual elder. Verse 17 clearly mentions that there was a plurality of elders in the Ephesian church (also see Acts 20:17). The other two occurrences of the singular form occur in the later two epistles of John where John describes himself as “the elder” (2 John 1; 3 John 1). In this case, the singular must be used because the title is used as a personal designation (cf. 1 Peter 5:1 where Peter calls himself a “fellow elder”).

who will have to give an account” (Heb. 13:17). In the closing of his letter, he adds, “Greet *all* your *leaders* and all the saints” (Heb. 13:24). In each case, the author refers to a plurality of leaders (also see 1 Cor 16:15–16).

The New Testament evidence indicates that it was the norm for every church to be led by a plurality of elders. There is no example in the New Testament of one elder or pastor leading a congregation as the sole or primary leader. There were a plurality of elders at the churches in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30), Antioch of Pisidia, Lystra, Iconium, and Derbe (Acts 14:23), Ephesus (Acts 20:17; 1 Tim. 5:17), Philippi (Phil. 1:1), the cities of Crete (Titus 1:5), the churches in the dispersion to which James wrote (James 1:1), the Roman provinces of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter 1:1), and possibly the church(es) to which Hebrews was written (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24).

The Authority of Leaders

The New Testament does not tell us precisely how much authority the elders of the local congregation should have. We have to take relevant texts from the New Testament and attempt to synthesize the principles that are taught in each text. As a result, we must be cautious of conclusions that are too rigid or dogmatic. The principles we gather from Scripture should be kept, but the outworking of these principles can be appropriated in different ways.

In the first place, we must note that the Bible is clear that elders have authority.

- **1 Thess. 5:12** – “We ask you, brothers, *to respect* those who labor among you and *are over you* in the Lord and *admonish you*.”
- **1 Tim. 5:17** – “Let the elders who *rule* well be considered worthy of *double honor*, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”
- **Heb. 13:17** – “*Obey* your leaders and *submit* to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account” (cf. 1 Cor. 16:15–16; 1 Peter 5:5).

The very functions or duties of the elders communicate that their office carries with it a

certain amount of authority. As teachers, they are charged with the task of authoritatively proclaiming God's Word (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:9). As shepherds, the elders are given the task of leading God's people (Acts 20:28; Eph. 4:11; 1 Peter 5:2). As representatives, they speak and act on behalf of the entire congregation. When Barnabas and Paul brought famine relief money on behalf of the church in Antioch, it was received by the elders of the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30). Later in Acts, Paul called for the elders of the Ephesian church to come so that he might encourage them (Acts 20:17).

The authority of the eldership comes from God and not the congregation. Although the congregation affirms their calling and authority, it is an authority with a divine origin. Paul tells the Ephesian elders that the Holy Spirit made them overseers (Acts 20:28). They were called and given authority by God and not by man. In the letter to the Ephesians, Paul states that Christ has given gifts to the church, including pastor-teachers (Eph. 4:11). Therefore, the authority of an elder does not come from the congregation, but from Christ himself.

It must be pointed out, however, that the elders' authority is not absolute. They derive their authority from the Word of God, and when they stray from that Word, they abandon their God-given authority (Acts 17:11; Gal. 1:8). The authority that the elders possess is not so much found in their office, but in the duties they perform (and the Christ-like character they display). That is, the elders are not to be obeyed simply because they are elders. Rather, they are to be obeyed because they have the responsibility of shepherding and teaching the congregation (1 Thess. 5:13). They shepherd because the Word calls upon elders to shepherd. They teach because the Word calls upon elders to teach. But when their shepherding and teaching stray from Scripture, their authority as shepherds and teachers is no longer binding on the congregation.

The authority of elders is balanced by the authority of the congregation as a whole. It is important to remember, however, that Jesus Christ and his Word have ultimate authority in the church. Everything should be done under his authority because he is "the head of the body, the church" (Col. 1:18). But, acknowledging Jesus' lordship, the authority of the elders is balanced by the authority given to the congregation as a whole. There is strong evidence that the New

Testament favors a self-governing model of the church. In the early church, many important decisions—such as selecting leaders (Acts 1:23; 6:2–3), sending missionaries (Acts 13:3; 14:27), determining theological positions (Acts 15:22), deciding church discipline (Matt. 18:17), and performing excommunication (1 Cor. 5:2)—were the responsibilities of the local congregation. Additional support is found in the fact that Paul’s letters to churches were addressed to entire congregations and not just to office-holders of the church. Finally, the priesthood of all believers and the teaching of Jesus also lend evidence in favor of an autonomous church model (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6; 5:10; 20:6).

Thus, key decisions in the church should not be given only to the elders but should be brought before the entire congregation. Because the church is a body (and not merely a head or feet), all in the church are important and should be allowed to be a part of major decisions. It must be remembered, however, that elders are the leaders in the church and should therefore be given freedom to lead. Every decision should not be brought before the church. Important decisions, such as the addition of a new elder or deacon, the budget, and changes to official church documents, are a congregational matter. Most other areas of concern, however, should be left to the leadership of the elders.

The New Testament presents a consistent, though perhaps not completely uniform, pattern of church leadership. Sometimes these leaders were called “elders,” “overseers” or “pastors” (all three of these terms refer to the same office and were used interchangeably in the New Testament). The overwhelming evidence in the New Testament is that every congregation was led by a group of elders and not merely by a single pastor. While elders do have authority to lead the church,—and should be given such authority by the congregation—their authority must be balanced by the congregation as a whole.

How Does Biblical Eldership Relate to Church Planting?

There are several ways in which biblical eldership is relevant to church planting. In the

rest of this article we will highlight five of the most crucial.

1. Every Church Should Have Multiple Leaders.

As was demonstrated above, it was the pattern of the New Testament churches to be led by a plurality of leaders. These leaders were sometimes called “elders,” “overseers,” or “pastors.” The key element here is not precisely what the leaders were called, but that there was always a plurality. On his first missionary journey, Paul planted multiple churches in Asia Minor as he went through the various cities. As he doubled-back on his return trip, we read that he “appointed elders for them in every church” (Acts 14:23). Thus, as soon as leadership was established in these churches, it was established on principle that each church should be governed by more than one leader. Based on this pattern, it is my contention that it is beneficial for church planters not to find one, strong, visionary leader and give that person all of the leadership responsibility. Instead, from the very beginning if possible, pass the leadership to a number of qualified disciples who can lead together.

It is also biblical not to make distinctions between the various leaders. For example, some churches make a distinction between “pastors” and “elders” (oftentimes the pastors are paid, full-time staff while elders are un-paid, volunteer leaders). While this may be a convenient modern distinction, such distinction is not found in the New Testament. If the term “pastor” refers to the same office as the “elder,” then making a distinction between an “elder” and a “pastor” (or “senior pastor”) is unwarranted. That is, it is unhelpful and misleading to speak of someone being a “pastor” *and* an “elder” (since every pastor is an elder and every elder is a pastor). Nowhere in the Bible are elders who work “full-time” for the church given a different title than those elders who also held a “secular” job. Such a distinction creates an unhealthy dichotomy between the full-time and part-time elders.

Finally, I think it is important, though not essential, to use biblical titles for church leaders. Of course, the title one has is not as important as the role or duties which that person performs. Paul emphasizes the importance of a leader’s function more than the particular title

that is given. Furthermore, it is also counterproductive for biblical titles to be used without that person performing the appropriate role. But simply because titles are not essential to the Christian ministry does not mean they have no importance or relevance. Although there is some flexibility as to what terms should be used (e.g., elder, overseer, or pastor), there are a number of reasons why it is beneficial to employ biblical terminology.

First, it bases our authority on the Bible and not the wisdom of man. By using titles that are not found in Scripture, or using biblical titles incorrectly, the congregation may begin to doubt the basis of authority for the church leaders. But when it is shown that elders or overseers are responsible for shepherding and teaching the church based on the model of the New Testament churches, it gives authority and credibility to their office. By using the terminology along with the appropriate roles, the leaders communicate to the congregation that the Bible is the final authority for all faith and practice. Second, it allows the congregation to know what to expect from the leadership. If other terms are used, the congregation has to guess what the responsibilities of the leaders are. If the biblical terms and functions are used, however, then one can know immediately that elders/overseers/pastors are in charge of preaching/teaching and leading the church and that the deacons are responsible for the service-oriented tasks of the church. Third, it holds leaders to the biblical qualifications. If the ruling and teaching leaders of the church are simply called “council members” or are given some other title not found in Scripture, then it is difficult to hold such leaders to the biblical qualifications. If the qualifications are going to be consistently applied to the leaders of the church, it is best for those leaders to bear the same title as is given at the beginning of the qualifications. If the appropriate titles are not used, it confuses the congregation and provides a way of escape for unqualified office-holders. By using the biblical titles, future leaders will know precisely what is expected of them based on the qualifications given in Scripture.

2. Every Church Should Have Accountable Leaders.

If having a plurality of elders that share equal authority is God’s design, there will be

many benefits by following the biblical pattern. Although having a plurality of elders does not guarantee the church leadership will not encounter problems or conflict, it does at least provide several safeguards against some problems and difficulties that a single-pastor church often faces—especially in the area of biblical accountability.

Biblical accountability is needed for at least two reasons. First, it helps protect a pastor from error. Pastors often possess a lot of authority in their churches—too much authority with too little accountability. Such authority can cause one to believe that he is more important than others and thus become proud. Others may act in ways that are insensitive or unscriptural but be blinded to their faults. Each person has certain blind spots and faults or deficiencies which can distort one's judgment. If a pastor has little or no accountability, these tendencies can go unchecked. When a church has only one pastor, or a senior pastor with unmatched power, there is usually no accountability structure built-in to the system. A plural eldership model helps to provide the needed accountability that is lacking in most churches. It provides the needed ingredient so that one person does not dominate the church. There must be others who are equal in status and authority who can face a fellow elder and confront him if he is being unreasonable or is living in sin—just as Peter was confronted by Paul (a fellow apostle) when Peter refused to eat with Gentiles (Gal. 2:11–14). A pastor needs the constant reminder that he is not above the law but is subject to the other elders. Every pastor is prone to sin and must constantly be monitoring his spiritual walk. Paul warns the Ephesian elders, “Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock” (Acts 20:28). Later he exhorts Timothy, “Keep a close watch on yourself and on the teaching” (1 Tim. 4:16). But a pastor not only needs to keep watch over his own life, he also needs the help of others.

Second, biblical accountability is needed to help foster maturity and godliness among the elders (Heb. 3:12–13). As the elders serve and lead together, they will often be challenged by the godly examples they see in each other so that they hold firm their confession “firm to the end” (Heb. 10:14). They will “stir up one another to love and good works” (Heb. 10:24). The more mature elders can help train the younger ones in how to be an effective shepherd.

3. Every Church Should Have Paid or Unpaid Leaders.

The idea that only full-time, paid pastors can lead the church is not found in the Scriptures. In fact, such a view can lead to an unhealthy church. Having both paid/staff and unpaid/non-staff elders allows for a church to have more leaders than a comparable church with only paid elders/pastors. According to the Bible, there is no requirement that a leader must be paid to be an elder or pastor. And yet, it is the responsibility of the church to pay an elder for his work if he needs to be financially supported. Paul argued that both he (1 Cor. 9:8–10) and elders (1 Tim. 5:18) had the right to be paid for their work. In both of these passages Paul quotes Deuteronomy 25:4 which states, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain.” The principle that Paul is drawing out of this passage is that the one doing the work should be rewarded for his labor. Just as it was wrong to muzzle an ox while he is threshing (i.e., working), so also it is wrong not to support financially those who work in order to advance to the kingdom of God. In 1 Timothy 5:18 Paul also quotes a saying of Jesus to support this idea: “The laborer deserves his wages” (Matt. 10:10; Luke 10:7). Elders who spend their days shepherding and teaching the church ought to be not only respected for their duties, but should also be financially compensated (also see Gal. 6:6).

This does not mean, however, that all (or any) of the elders must be paid for their work or that only those who work full-time for the church can rightfully be called “elders” or “pastors.” Paul, as an apostle and missionary, certainly had the right to be supported by the churches he established and in which he labored. And yet, for sake of the gospel, he chose not to claim his rights. Just like Paul, there are many elders who are self-supported in the sense that they draw a salary from outside the church. They spend much of their free-time in helping to shepherd the congregation but are not paid for their labors. Some churches have difficulty financially supporting one or more elders. By having elders who do not receive monetary compensation for their work, the church is able to include more elders without the extra burden of supporting them financially. This situation allows the elders to shepherd the congregation more effectively and allows for more rapid church planting to occur.

4. Every Church Should Have Qualified Leaders.

Church planters must be careful not to give leadership to those who are not biblically qualified. When reading the qualifications for an elder or overseer (see 1 Tim. 3:1–7; Titus 1:5–9; 1 Peter 5:1–4), one is immediately struck by the relative simplicity of the qualifications. In fact, the qualifications needed for an elder are the basic characteristics that are expected of all Christians. There is no mention of being full-time or paid. There is no formal training required. The focus of the qualifications is on who a person is more than what a person does.

The only qualification given that directly relates to an elder's duties in the church is that he must be "able to teach" (1 Tim. 3:2; cf. Titus 1:9). Elders must be able to communicate God's Word in a way that is accurate and understandable. An elder must not only be "able to teach," but he must also teach sound doctrine and correct those who are in error (Titus 1:9). He cannot merely have a cursory knowledge of the Bible, but must be immersed in the teachings of Scripture so that he can both exhort in sound doctrine and rebuke those who reject sound doctrine. Someone should not be made an elder who is not both gifted in teaching and knowledgeable of essential Christian doctrine. Someone should not be given leadership merely because they are able to share the gospel and have completed a short, church planting course.

Another qualification is that an elder "must not be a recent convert" (1 Tim. 3:6). Paul gives the reason for this qualification: "or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil" (1 Tim. 3:6). The difficulty is that Paul does not specify what constitutes a "recent convert." Was he referring to six months, one year, or ten years? Perhaps the answer to this question depends on the congregation or historical circumstances involved. For example, the church at Ephesus was a somewhat well-established church when Paul wrote 1 Timothy. By that time, the church was in existence for about fifteen years and already had established leaders. In this circumstance, Paul could write that elders should not be recent

converts because in that church there would have been others who were more mature in their faith and could handle the respect and responsibilities given to such office-holders. Paul's letter to Titus, however, does not contain the restriction concerning new converts. Did Paul simply forget to add this qualification or was it purposefully ignored? It is plausible to think that Paul ignored the restriction concerning new converts because the situation in Crete was different than that in Ephesus. The church in Crete was much younger, making nearly all the potential candidates for eldership "recent converts." In this case, if new believers were not appointed as elders, there would be no elders. Consequently, this qualification is not absolute but depends somewhat on the situational context of the congregation involved.

5. Every Church Should Have Reproducing Leaders.

According to Paul leaders are given to the church "to equip the saints for the work of the ministry" (Eph. 4:12). The role of the elder as teacher is important not just for the health of the church in the present, but also for the growth of the church in the future. As a result, it is not enough for the elders to simply be teachers, they must also be purposefully equipping the next generation of elders to minister alongside of them or to plant new churches.

Again, Paul's words to Timothy are instructive. He tells Timothy, "What you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also" (2 Tim. 2:2). As Paul's faithful co-worker, Timothy was entrusted with the task of passing on the pure gospel as preached by Paul. He had been equipped by Paul and was now to become an equipper. Thus, he was to entrust what he had learned to "faithful men," which is probably another way of describing the elders of the church. But this task of equipping does not stop with the elders. They are also to become equippers "who will be able to teach others also." It is the task of the elders to identify others who will be faithful to carry on the gospel message.

Conclusion

Church planting is important because the church is central to God's plan for expanding

his kingdom (Matt. 16:18). But this means that planting churches should be done in such a way that is faithful to the methods revealed in Scripture. In this article we have argued that, based on the New Testament evidence, every church should have (1) multiple leaders, (2) accountable leaders, (3) paid or unpaid leaders, (4) qualified leaders, and (5) reproducing leaders. If this is the case, then these conclusions should impact our church planting methodology. For example, let us consider the idea of churches reproducing rapidly. How quickly should churches multiply? The answer to this question is often, “Faster than you think possible.”⁷ But if multiple leaders (at least two) are going to be adequately trained and qualified (according to the biblical standard), it may require us to intentionally slow down. Jesus himself spent three years with his disciples and Paul waited approximately ten years after his conversion before he even attempted to plant his first church. Moreover, it is inaccurate to claim that Paul’s method was to plant a church (with the correct DNA, of course) and then “leave the church in the hands of the Holy Spirit.” Paul was often forced to leave the churches he planted because of persecution. When persecution subsided, Paul often made extended visits to his churches. He stayed a year and a half in Corinth (Acts 18:11) and approximately three years in Ephesus (Acts 19:8–10). Furthermore, when Paul was unable to visit his churches, he wrote letters and/or sent his co-workers as a means of follow-up.⁸ Another often missed fact is that most of Paul’s initial converts were Jews or Gentile proselytes. This means that these converts not only shared the same worldview as Paul, but they were familiar with and lived according to the teachings of Scripture (that is, the Old Testament). In a place where the people do not have such a foundation, it will often take more time to raise up qualified leaders. It is still possible to have “success” without embracing these principles. But such success is usually short-lived, bearing little long-term fruit. Races are never won with short, quick sprints. Instead, it requires consistent and persistent endurance until the end.

⁷ David Garrison, *Church Planting Movements: How God Is Redeeming a Lost World* (Midlothian, VA: WIGTake Resources, 2004), 21.

⁸ See Benjamin L. Merkle, “The Need for Theological Education in Missions: Lessons Learned from the Church’s Greatest Missionary” *The Southern Baptist Journal of Theology* 9.4 (2005): 50–61.