

# What is the relationship between the Senior Minister of the Church and the Board of Elders?

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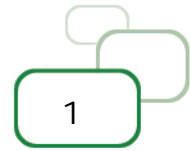


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### Introduction

The Christian Churches/churches of Christ have often had difficulties determining the working relationship between the preaching minister (“evangelist” in some circles) and the board of elders. This study is designed to be a review of the New Testament evidence and teaching about that relationship.

There are approximately 69 times that the term “elders” is used in the New Testament. I recognize that descriptive may be, but is not necessarily, prescriptive.

Of the approx 69 uses of the term “elder” in the NT:

- 2 times it is used in a relational sense
- 7 times it is used of an older person and/or elder in official sense
- 60 times it is used in the official sense in its plural form. (a large number of these refer to the Jewish elders in the Gospels)

### 1. The church is shepherded by a plural group of spiritually mature men called elders:

Acts 11:30-first appearance of NT elders. The church at Antioch sent their special offering to the church in Judea who were suffering from a famine. The gift was turned over to the elders of the churches in Judea. This was a pastoral care/shepherding role. Presumably it was then given to the deacons for distribution (Acts 6)?

Acts 14:23-Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church. (No evidence that elders were EVER elected in the New Testament).

Acts 15:2, 4, 6; 16:4-Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to consult with the apostles & elders [of the Jerusalem church] about the question of circumcision and salvation. The apostles & elders considered the question, took the advice of Peter along with the reports from Paul & Barnabas and sent a letter to all of the churches give them direction on how they were to behave and believe. Note that a group outside the local church (the apostles & elders in Jerusalem) had authority OVER the local board of elders. This is not totally relevant to this current study, except to say that a local board of elders is not the final authority in human terms in Christ’s church.

Acts 20:17-38-Paul calls the elders from the Ephesian church to come to Miletus in order that he may give them direction and encouragement.

1. Paul did not hesitate to teach them what they should do (v. 20, 27)
  2. Elders were to keep watch over the congregation and be shepherds (v. 28)
- Doctrine and Pastoral Care

Acts 21:18-When Paul arrived at Jerusalem he went to James to report “what God had done among the Gentiles through his ministry.” It states that Paul came to

- see James and then adds that all of the elders were also present. But his report was to the person in primary leadership of the Jerusalem church-James.
- Phil 1:1-Elders were included in the named recipients of the letters to the church at Philippi
- I Tim. 3:1-7-Qualifications for elders. They have a responsibility to “take care of God’s church.”
- I Tim 4:14-Timothy’s prophetic gift was given to him by the laying on of the hands of a group of elders. (where? Lystra [Acts 16:1-3]? No evidence of elders yet at Lystra, but neither is there evidence that there were not. [*“The brothers at Lystra...spoke well of him.”*])
- I Tim. 5:17-There are some elders given specific leadership, oversight and teaching responsibilities and they should be compensated for that work.
- I Tim. 5:19: Do not entertain an accusation against an elder unless it is brought by 2-3 witnesses
- Titus 1:5-Titus appointed elders (again note, they were not elected). Appointing them presupposes authority over them.
- Titus 1:5-9-qualifications for elders (1:7- an elder is “entrusted with God’s work”)
- James 5:14-The elders are to be called to pray and anoint the sick with oil. (Part of their pastoral care responsibilities)
- I Peter 5:2-Peter tells the elders to “Be shepherds of God’s flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing” He encourages them not to be greedy, to be eager to serve, to not Lord their position over others and to be examples.
- 2 John 1:1 & 3 John 1:1-John identifies himself as “the elder” (the author of the letter)
- Rev. 4:4, 10; 5:6, 8,11,14; 7:11,13; 11:16; 14:3; 19:4- elders surround the throne of God sometime standing, sometimes sitting on thrones and sometimes falling down in worship
- Rev. 5:5-An elder told John who was worthy to open the scroll and its seven seals. (the Lamb)
- Rev. 7:13 –one of the elders asked John “These in white robes—who are they, and where did they come from?”

Another relevant passage: Hebrews 13:17: *Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.* (The church is not a democracy where the loudest voice or the voice with the most votes wins).

- 2. Christ is the Chief Elder:** It is recognized that the Lord Jesus Christ is THE CHIEF ELDER above and among all other Elders (I Peter 2:25; 5:4. ) He is THE Chief Shepherd, and THE Overseer/Bishop of our souls. It is the same term that is used for human elders. It is in the context of Christ’s suffering and now the readers, like

sheep who have gone astray, have returned to Christ. He is THE sacrificial Lamb in the midst of the 24 elders (Rev. 4-5). He is THE Apostle, Prophet, Evangelist, Pastor and Teacher. He is the fullness of the Godhead bodily. All the Divine nature, character, glory, attributes, grace and gifts are in Him in perfection (Col. 1:19; 2:9; John 3:33-34) He is the Head of the Church, which is His Body.

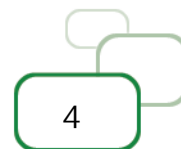
**3. In any group of elders, God generally places the mantle of leadership upon some one Elder.** That does not exalt this Elder above the other Elders, but sets him in responsibility as “First among equals.”

*New Testament Examples*

- a. Peter & the apostles (Acts 1:15; 2:14, 38; 3:4-25; 4:8-12; 5:1-11)
- b. James and the elders (Acts 12:17; 15:1,2,6,13-22; 21:18 especially with Gal. 2:12)
- c. Paul & the elders at Ephesus (Acts 19:10-11; 18:11; 20:17-24)
- d. Timothy & the elders (I Tim. 3; Pastoral Epistles). Timothy is spoken of as the first Bishop of the Church of Ephesus. There were Elders already at Ephesus. Timothy is left by Paul as “first among equals.” He is not a novice, but a young man of about 40 years of age in this work.
- e. Titus & the elders (Titus 1.5-he was to appoint them, which again presupposes authority over them.)
- f. Epaphroditus with the Bishops & Deacons (Phil 1:1; 2:25; 4:18)
- g. Nympha(s) and the Church in her/his house (Col. 4:15)
- h. Aquilla & Priscilla –had a house-church in Rome (Rom. 16:3-5)
- i. Christ, the Chief Elder/Lamb is in the midst of the 24 elders around the throne, as “first among equals,” ONLY as to the OFFICE of eldership (Rev. 4:5)

**The Biblical principle is for one leader (however selected) to raise up/appoint men who match his vision and style:**

- Moses chose the leaders after being chastised by Jethro for trying to do it all himself. But Moses was still in charge.
- David-picked his “mighty men” and set them as leaders of 50, 100, etc.
- Jesus picked his twelve.
- Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in each church—the congregation did not elect them. They worked under the authority of Paul & Barnabas.
- The Ephesian elders worked under the authority of Paul.
- Paul set Timothy in place to raise up godly leaders who were then able to teach and lead others (2 Tim 2.2). He obviously would not raise up leaders who did not have a similar vision to his.
- Titus was directed to select elders to lead under his authority
- Eph 4:11-16- Christ gave the church apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors & teachers to lead & equip the church. God has given the church a five-fold leadership ministry. (Apostles, Prophets, Evangelists, Pastors & Teachers) In



short, you will not grow to your full potential without a pastor, which according to this text is a gift of Christ to the church.

I draw the following conclusions:

1. Elders are essential to the smooth functioning of a congregation. Their work in maintaining correct doctrine and shepherding the congregation is vital and God ordained.
2. God raises up one elder to be the one responsible for leading the rest of the elders in vision and direction. He is foolish if he does not take their wisdom and counsel into account, but he is the one ultimately responsible. Vision and direction will not arise from a group (particularly a group whose makeup changes somewhat every year and totally every few years, as it does in most Christian Churches). Now, in an unhealthy situation, it might arise from one particular dominant or vocal voice in the eldership, but a group will not provide vision and direction. That is what you ask the senior minister to provide. In New Testament times that was one person (sometimes arising from within, sometimes coming from outside) who provided that leadership.
3. Election of an eldership board is a non-biblical addition. In the biblical system, the elders were appointed, particularly by the one person given leadership authority in the church—in our case, the senior minister.

### **Comments:**

- *I have often used the analogy of “first among equals.” The Senior Minister is equal to the rest of the elders in role and function, but has leadership responsibilities for leading and directing the elders in the way he believes God would have the church to go.*
- *I have always seen it like a marriage. In a healthy marriage the issues of authority and submission to one another don’t have to be emphasized, they are simply understood and lived out. It is only when things get tense or lines are crossed that we recognize the need to be specific about one another’s specific areas of authority and responsibility. The same seems to be true in an eldership as well.*