

"From the cowardice that shrinks from new truth, from the laziness that is content with half truths, from the arrogance that thinks it knows all truth, O, God of Truth, deliver us."



## A Controversial Newsletter "The Printed Voice of Summit Theological Seminary"

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### Elder Confusion --By Terry Carter

Recently I had two very different theories about the eldership come across my desk.

The first was that elders have no authority in the Church at all. In fact, the author implied that elders in the early Church were merely an extension of the traditions carried on in the synagogues and therefore without any Divine sanctions whatsoever. I say he implied this because it is not clear to me what his main point is precisely.

He seemed to be of the opinion that each congregation was governed simply by Scripture and the consensus of its members. He recognized that there were elders, deacons, evangelists, and apostles in the early church.

However, he argued that these were never positions of rank or authority, only service and responsibility. Of course this assumes that service and responsibility necessarily excludes rank and authority, which is manifestly absurd. Equally ludicrous is the assumption that authority is mutually exclusive to shepherding.

The second theory was at least clearer in its claims. It called itself the "Multi-location, Metropolitan Church Model". The author claimed that in the early Church multiple congregations in the same city were all overseen by one group of elders.

We could certainly look at the claims each of these authors made one by one and refute them. However, I don't believe that is necessary. A few simple observations ought to dismantle both positions sufficiently.

**First**, it should be pointed out that if there is any truth to either one of these positions, the other is necessarily false. That is, both cannot be right. Both could be wrong though.

**Second**, both authors made incredible leaps of logic and huge assumptions. They constantly used phrases like "the implication is", "it could have been", "it would also seem logical to us", "we can assume from this", "historically it has been inferred that", etc.

One piece explicitly listed four assumptions in the only paragraph that actually attempted to defend its proposition. Such language ought to make it clear to the reader that the author has an agenda with little or no Scriptural support.

**Third**, it should be noted that both authors spent most of their time talking about things that have little or nothing to do with their main point. Most of the defenses of both positions were nothing but elaborate smoke screens shedding no light, but rather confusing the issue at hand. Like any good magician, diversion, smoke and mirrors, and sleight of hand are critical to their success. While you are busy looking where they are pointing, you are missing the real trick.

**Fourth**, both Scripture and early Church history paint very different pictures than either of those authors. Both make it clear that in the early Church, each congregation was led by a group of overseers or bishops, also called elders, presbyters, pastors, or shepherds. It was Jesus Himself who gave elders (pastors) to the Church. Further, the fact that their authority was limited to their local congregation has been well documented by church historians of every denominational stripe.

An understanding of the various terms that are used for the office of "elder" in Scripture and early Church history will be helpful in the following discussion.

In the Scripture, there are three Greek words that refer to the office of "Elder". They are translated by six English words. Each describes an aspect of this office as follows:

1. "*Poimen*" – translated "shepherd" or "pastor", which describes the work.
2. "*Episkopos*" – translated "bishop" or "overseer", which describes the authority.
3. "*Presbuteros*" – translated "elder" or "presbyter", which describes the age and experience.

Consider the following Scriptures:

"11 And **He Himself gave some [to] [be]** apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some **pastors and teachers**, 12 for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ."  
**Ephesians 4:11-12**

“So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” **Acts 14:12**

“For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and **appoint elders in every city as I commanded you--**” **Titus 1:5**

“17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and **called for the elders of the church...** 28 “Therefore **take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God** which He purchased with His own blood” **Acts 20:17, 28**

“Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, **with the bishops and deacons:**” **Philippians 1:1**

“**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.” **Hebrews 13:17**

“1 The **elders who are among you** I exhort, I **who am a fellow elder** and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: 2 **Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers,** not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; 3 nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock; 4 and when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that does not fade away.” **I Peter 5:1-4**

These passages clearly show:

1. It was Christ who gave elders (pastors) to the Church.
2. A plurality of elders appointed in each congregation.
3. They were overseers who were to edify the body and shepherd the Church.
4. There are those who rule over us, watch out for our souls, and will be held responsible for how they did so. We must obey and be submissive to them.
5. The elders were not to abuse their authority as overseers, but use it properly for the benefit of both themselves and the flock they were overseeing.
6. Note carefully that although Jesus is Himself a shepherd, this does not imply that He has no authority in the Church. He is the Chief Shepherd.

No assumptions are necessary, just a straightforward reading of Scripture.

Consider church historians:

**Walton Robert C. Chronological and Background Charts of Church History, Zondervan, Grand Rapids, MI 1986:**

“*1<sup>st</sup> century - Elder-bishops and deacons in each church were under the supervision of the apostles.*”

“*Early 2<sup>nd</sup> century – Elders and bishops were differentiated; each congregation was governed by bishop, elders, and deacons.*”

“*Late 2<sup>nd</sup> century – Diocesan bishops – a bishop now oversaw a group of congregations in a geographical area; they were thought to be successors of the apostles.*”

**Walker Williston, A History of the Christian Church, Charles Scribner’s Sons, New York, 1959:**

“*It is evident, however, that till some time after the year 100, Rome, Greece, and Macedonia had **at the head of each congregation** [emphasis mine] a group of collegiate bishops, or presbyter-bishops, with a number of deacons as their helpers.*” (Page 41)

“*It is evident, however, that the monarchical bishopric [one bishop over the other elders] must have come into being between the time when Paul summoned the presbyter-bishops to Miletus and that at which Ignatius wrote.*” [Second century] (Page 42)

“*The monarchical bishopric is not yet diocesan, [exercising authority over multiple congregations] **it is the headship of the local church,** [emphasis mine] or at most the congregations of a single city; but Ignatius does not treat it as a new institution.*” (Page 42)

**Schaff Philip, History of the Christian Church, Hendrickson Publishers, Peabody MA, 1858:**

“*The terms Presbyter (or Elder) and Bishop (or Overseer, Superintendent) denote in the New Testament one and the same office...*” (Volume 1 pages 491-492)

“*The interchange of terms [bishops and presbyters] continued in use up to the close of the first century, as is evident from the Epistle of Clement of Rome (about 95), and the Didache, and still lingered towards the close of the second.*” (Volume 1 page 493)

“*With the beginning of the second century, from Ignatius onward, the two terms [bishops and presbyters] are distinguished and designate two offices; the bishop being regarded **first as the head of a congregation surrounded by a council of presbyters, and afterwards as the head of a diocese** [emphasis mine] and successor of the apostles.*” (Volume 1 page 494)

“*They [bishops or presbyters] **always appear** [emphasis mine] as a plurality or as a college **in one and the same***”

**congregation**, [emphasis mine] even in smaller cities, as Philippi.” (Volume 1 page 493)

“The presbyters always formed a college or corporation, a presbytery; as at Jerusalem, at Ephesus, at Philippi, and at the ordination of Timothy. They no doubt maintained a relation of fraternal equality...But so long as the general government of the church was in the hands of the apostles and their delegates, the bishops were limited in their jurisdiction either **to one congregation** [emphasis mine] or to a small circle of congregations.” (Volume 1 page 496)

“During the lifetime of the apostles, those eye- and ear-witnesses of the divine-human life of Jesus, and the inspired organs of the Holy Spirit, there was no room for proper bishops; and those who were so called, must have held only a subordinate place.” (Volume 2 pages 133-134)

“It is a matter of fact that the Episcopal form of government was universally established in the Eastern and Western church as early as the middle of the second century...But it is equally undeniable, that the episcopate reached its complete form only step by step.” (Volume 2 page 144)

“The episcopate first appears, as distinct from the presbyterate, but **as a congregational office only** [emphasis mine] (in distinction from the diocesan idea), and as yet a young institution, greatly needing commendation, in the famous seven (or three) Epistles of Ignatius of Antioch...” (Volume 2 pages 144-145)

“The peculiarity in this Ignatian view is that the bishop appears in it as the head and centre of a single congregation, [emphasis his] and not as equally the representative of the whole church...The ignatian episcopacy, in short, is congregational, not diocesan; a new and growing institution, not a settled policy of apostolic origin.” (Volume 2 page 148)

“At the same time the wavering terminology of Irenaeus in the interchangeable use of the words “bishop” and “presbyter” reminds us of Clement of Rome, and shows that the distinction of the two orders was not yet fully fixed.” (Volume 2 page 149)

### **McClintock and Strong Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological, and Ecclesiastical Literature, Volume I, Bishop**

“That during Paul’s lifetime no difference between elders and bishops yet existed in the consciousness of the Church is manifest from the entire absence of distinctive names (Acts XX, 17-28; I Pet. V, 1,2). The mention of bishops and deacons in Phil. i, 1 and I Tim. iii, without any notice of elders, proves that at that time no difference of **order** [emphasis theirs] subsisted between bishops and elders.” (Page 819)

“In the last epistle written by him, [Paul] (2 Tim. iv, 9) he calls Timothy suddenly to Rome in words which prove that the latter was not, at least as yet, a bishop either of Ephesus or of any other Church. That Timothy was an evangelist [emphasis theirs] is distinctly stated (2 Tim. iv, 5)...” (Page 819)

From these statements of Church historians, the following things are clear:

1. The authority of the eldership was never in question in the early Church. When questions did arise, they were about the limits of that authority and its distribution within the group of elders.
2. Each congregation was overseen by a plurality of elders or presbyters, also called bishops or overseers or shepherds or pastors.
3. No elder, or group of elders, had authority outside of their local congregation in the apostolic Church. This departure from Scripture did not come until the late second century.
4. While the historians can’t rule out an eldership over a small circle of congregations in a single city, they certainly have no proof of such a thing. Even if they had such proof, it would only indicate a departure from the Scriptural pattern shown above. The historians do not even discuss the possibility of an eldership having authority outside their congregation before the second century. Even then it is only a possibility (not an established reality) and very limited in scope.
5. The historians are interested in tracing the development of the Papacy and a hierarchy within the Church. They agree that there are two departures that came together to produce this.

The first is elevation of one elder above the rest reserving for him the title of bishop. This is first seen in the time of Ignatius in the early second century, but it is clearly not a universal practice until at least the middle or late second century. Even then their authority was limited to a single congregation.

The second is the diocesan concept of extending this authority from the local congregation to a geographical region. This did not come into being at all till the late second century. It was the marriage of these two departures from Scripture that led to a hierarchy and the Papacy itself.

Again, no assumptions are necessary, just a straightforward reading of history.

Jesus did not leave us without leadership in the Church. He gave us the gift of pastors (elders). They are to oversee each local congregation. While they have no authority to make laws, they are to enforce the laws that

Jesus, the only Lawgiver, has already given. There are no indications in either Scripture or early Church history that the eldership was without authority in the local congregation. Neither does either give us any example of an eldership with authority over more than one congregation. Only those with agendas making unwarranted assumptions and taking huge leaps of logic come to other conclusions.

Remember, Jesus gave pastors (elders) to the Church so that we would be edified and not be infants tossed to and fro by every wind of doctrine.

“11 And **He Himself gave some [to] [be]** apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some **pastors and teachers**, 12 **for the equipping of the saints for the work of ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ**, 13 till we all come to the unity of the faith and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a perfect man, to the measure of the stature of the fullness of Christ; 14 **that we should no longer be children, tossed to and fro and carried about with every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, in the cunning craftiness of deceitful plotting**, 15 but, speaking the truth in love, may grow up in all things into Him who is the head--Christ--”,  
**Ephesians 4:11-15**

If we simply follow the Biblical pattern for leadership, we will not be so easily led away by those with an agenda.