

CHAPTER 2

“Those who don't study the past will repeat its errors.
Those who do study it will find other ways to err.”

- Charles Wolf, Jr.

“History teaches us that history teaches us nothing at all.”

- Alistair Begg

2. THE ELDER’S HERITAGE

“THE HISTORY OF ELDRSHIP”

It is important to know, in the discussion about spiritual leadership, what are its Biblical-historical roots. God’s design for His leaders did not come out of a vacuum, but was established through a careful development that can be traced over the history of His dealings with man. God, being all-wise and all-sufficient has declared what is best for His people, and having done so intends that His purpose be upheld and His goals reached. Therefore, reinventing leadership among the people of God is to deviate from the original design of God, to ignore the careful strategy of God, and belittle the perfect character of God. The purpose of this study is to trace the historical development of Elders throughout Biblical history in order to properly understand their heritage, and thus lay the foundation upon which the church’s structure of leadership is built.

1. LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES IN THE MODERN CHURCH

Before we examine the Biblical history of spiritual leadership among the people of God, we must underline the need for clarity in this area, because so many different leadership models exist in the church. Today, it is all too common for churches to divide over the kinds of leadership that characterize the Christian churches throughout the world. Some of the most common examples of church leadership that exist in current denominations and churches are as follows:

- A. Bishops – Found largely in Anglican or Episcopalian churches, this model embraces a hierarchical structure of authority of apostle-like leaders who oversee the churches and individual pastors of congregations.¹

Diagram

The model is structured as follows:

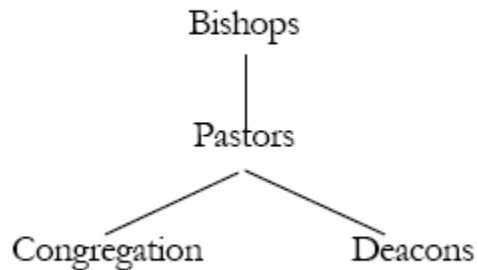


Figure 1 - Bishopric Governance Model

¹ Figure 1 from Russ Kennedy, *Biblical Eldership* (Clearcreek: Clearcreek Chapel, 1999), p. 14.

- B. Presbyterian – Known denominationally by this title, Presbyterian churches have “Elders” who govern multiple churches, with one Head Elder (“the pastor”) appointed to represent the presbytery (who usually transfers churches every few years), while the rest of the Elders are selected by the congregation. The Elders handle the spiritual needs, while deacons are chosen to meet physical needs.²

Diagram

The model is structured as follows:

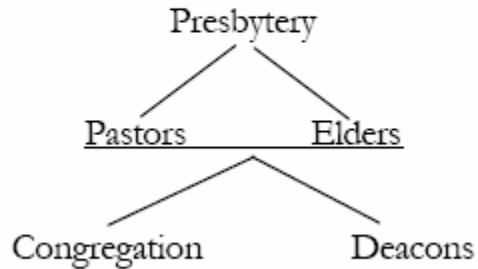


Figure 2 - Presbyter Governance Model

- C. Congregational – Found in many denominational or independent churches, this form of church government mirrors the American Democracy, wherein the authority of the church rests in the members of the church, who delegate responsibility to its elected officers – pastors, deacons, and committee officers. Often the “Senior Pastor” functions as the CEO of the church who hires and fires his “associate staff” at will. “The Pastor” often is held in check by a committee of deacons who are sometimes called “trustees” or “board members.” In this model, the shepherds are led by the sheep and function more as political lobbyists, the congregation being heard typically through town-hall type meetings, usually governed by Robert’s Rules of Order.³

Diagram

The model is structured in one or a hybrid of the following:

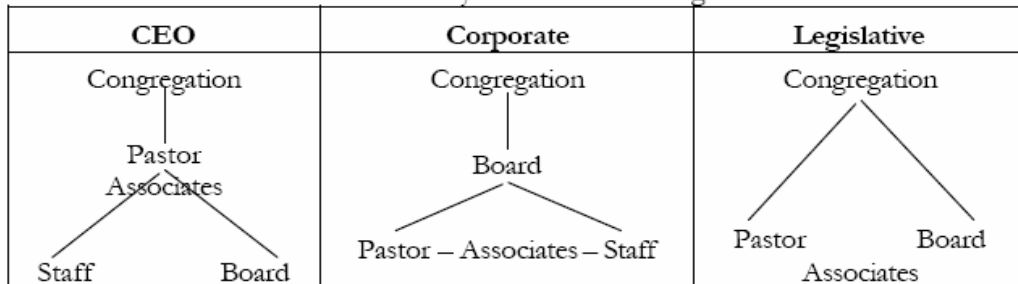


Figure 3 – Congregational Governance Models

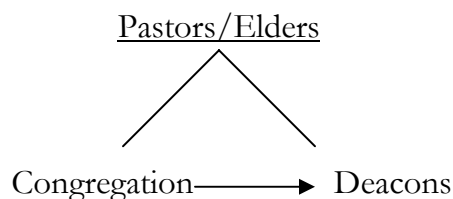
² Figure 2, Ibid, p, 15.

³ Figure 3, Ibid, p, 17.

- D. Eldership – Usually found within independent churches this form of church government places spiritual authority into the hands of men appointed the existing Elders and affirmed by the congregation as to their character. In this case, the Elders lead with one mind, every member of the council being equal in authority and position, though they may be different in influence, age, experience, or giftedness. The Elders in this model carefully consider the well-being of the church and make decisions according to the Word of God and act with sensitivity towards the congregation. In addition, the Elders delegate certain responsibilities to men known as deacons, whose role is to serve the church, caring for its material and physical needs. Some churches that have Elders give the “Senior Pastor” additional authority over the other Elders, who serve as his advisors, creating a hybrid among Eldership models, while others distribute the authority between the Elders and the congregation.

Diagram

The model is structured as follows:



2. LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES IN THE OLD TESTAMENT

- A. Theocracy – The type of rule that God used to lead His people in the Old Testament was a theocracy, which refers to a “government by immediate divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided.”⁴ In other words, God was the Leader who specifically and directly ruled personally or through a person that He uniquely raised up and through whom He would speak. Therefore, as a nation they would remain a religious community. This was unlike the secular nations of the world who were governed by kings or monarchs. Primarily, the people of God were governed by God on two levels, in the home and as a nation.

- 1) Family Leadership – The first and earliest form of leadership in which God governed His people was through the heads of individual families. These families belonged to greater and more extended families called *clans* (cf. **Gen. 46:8-27**), over which certain figures were considered leaders, otherwise known as Patriarchs (Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Joseph,

⁴ Merriam-Webster, I. 1996, c1993. *Merriam-Webster's collegiate dictionary*. (10th ed.). Merriam-Webster: Springfield, Mass., U.S.A.

etc.). Job seems to have been such a Patriarch, whose role, character, and influence appears to be the model when the Old Testament Elders emerged, formally.

➤ **Job 1:3-6**

➤ **Job 29:7-25**

- b. National Leadership – Following the period of the Patriarchs, as God set apart the nation of Israel to be His own distinct people (**Exod. 19:4-6**), He raised up certain men to exercise authority over them. Moses was the first, being the man God used to bring the nation out from the bondage of Egypt. Yet, in this time period, it seems that the role of Old Testament Elder had become more recognized and formalized as the leaders of God’s people.

➤ **Exodus 3:16, 18**

➤ **Exodus 12:21**

At this time, as the role of the Old Testament Elder was solidifying, Moses began to realize the need for greater organization and leadership, due to the overwhelming burden that came with ruling a nation of this size (**Exod. 18:13-27**). Jethro, his father-in-law counseled him to delegate this leadership role to “**able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain...**” (**Exod. 18:21**).⁵ Moses followed his counsel and divided up the nation into groups of thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens. These *men* became the “**heads over the people**” (**Exod. 18:25**) under Moses’ leadership, while he himself taught, prayed, and handled the difficult cases. Moses, speaking about this incident in **Deuteronomy 1:13** said these men were chosen from among the heads of families, i.e., Patriarchs. So, many of these Elders took on more formal civic responsibility as judges, working hand in hand with Moses (**Exod. 12:21; Num. 11:16, 24-25, 30; Deut. 27:1**) and also the priests in matters of worship, teaching, and legal proceedings.

When Israel finally came into the promised land of Canaan, being citizens instead of nomads, they spread and settled in. This created the need for the leadership structure to altar slightly. Those who were formally Elders/judges were given governmental oversight in the towns

⁵ This is the 1 Timothy 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9, and 1 Peter 5:1-4 of the Old Testament qualifications for Elders.

where they settled, to govern and judge at the city gates – the place where most civic business was transacted (cf. **Deut. 21-22; Ruth 4:1-11**).

During the period of the judges, this structure of leadership broke down because **“every man did what was right in his own eyes”** (**Judg. 17:6; 21:25**), chasing after the gods of their pagan neighbors. God sent waves of judgment in the form of opposing nations, and yet He periodically provided special Judges from among the present ruling class – the Elders/judges, to lead them out of judgment (cf. **Judg. 2:16** - these were a unique few who were military leaders that lasted as long as the military campaigns in order to restore the theocracy – **Judg. 8:22-23**).⁶

B. Monarchy – The era of the Elders/judges would not last indefinitely in the nation of Israel, not because God changed, but because **“all the Elders of Israel”** wanted to be like the world around them and change their form of government to one more pragmatic and appealing.

1) **1 Samuel 8:1-8, “¹And it came about when Samuel was old that he appointed his sons judges over Israel. ²Now the name of his firstborn was Joel, and the name of his second, Abijah; *they* were judging in Beersheba. ³His sons, however, did not walk in his ways, but turned aside after dishonest gain and took bribes and perverted justice. ⁴Then all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel at Ramah; ⁵and they said to him, “Behold, you have grown old, and your sons do not walk in your ways. Now appoint a king for us to judge us like all the nations.” ⁶But the thing was displeasing in the sight of Samuel when they said, “Give us a king to judge us.” And Samuel prayed to the LORD. ⁷The LORD said to Samuel, “Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them. ⁸“Like all the deeds which they have done since the day that I brought them up from Egypt even to this day—in that they have forsaken Me and served other gods—so they are doing to you also.”**

- a. What were **“all the Elders of Israel”** reacting to when they appealed for a king in v. 5?
- b. What was their rationale for wanting a new king based on the current form of government?
- c. What was wrong with this thinking and how is it used today?

⁶ See the very helpful article in Packer, Tenny, and White, *The Bible Almanac* (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 1980), p. 319-329.

- d. What did they want this king to do, according to v. 5?
 - e. Whose role was this?
 - f. What is God’s commentary on the Elders of Israel in v. 7-8?
 - g. What did this reveal about their hearts’ real reason for desiring a king like the pagans?
- 2) A Change for the Elders – From this point, now that Israel functioned under a monarchy, the Elders appeared to remain as local officials who managed their own tribes and affairs at the local level, but at the national level, the organization of the military became the priority. This decentralized the Elders’ responsibility and dispersed it to higher levels of leadership. Furthermore, it gave additional responsibility to the Elder to provide for and support the militia (**1 Chron. 27:1-22**). *In other words, the shift of power from a theocracy to a monarchy condensed the role of the Elders from its original intent and installed many tiers of leadership over them.* The nation who once functioned with tribal independence had become an empire. And it appears that the Elders became advisors (**1 Kin. 12:6-14**) and masters of ceremony (**2 Sam. 5:1-4**) to the King, though their authority was not binding. Sadly, “**all the Elders of Israel**” became corrupt (**Isa. 3:1-2, 14; 9:15; 2 Sam. 17:1-4**) and vacillated in their loyalties to Israel’s kings until they were utterly rejected by King Rehoboam (Solomon’s son) who divided the kingdom and eventually led the nation into its dark days of apostasy and exile (**Lam. 1:19; 2:10; 4:16; 5:12-14**). In captivity, the Elders remained corrupt (**Ezek. 8:1-12; 14:1-8; 20:1-4**) as their generation died in captivity.
- 3) The Return to Eldership – After being allowed to return from the Babylonian Captivity, the nation of Israel was without a king, and so it returned to its original structure of leadership, with God’s hand on the Elders. God had raised up new men who had learned obedience from God’s chastening (**Ezra 5:5-13**). God also raised up other choice servants who joined the Elders in the work of rebuilding the Temple that had been destroyed in the Babylonian Siege (**Ezra 4:2; 6:6-15**). This list of men included such names as Ezra the Scribe who preached the Law of God the prophets Zechariah and Haggai (**Ezra 5:1-2**) who gave new revelation to motivate the work, Zerubbabel the builder, and the Levitical priests who reinstated the sacrificial system for Israel’s worship.

3. LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

The period between the Old and New Testaments contains about 400 years of silence from God. There was no new revelation, no angelic visitation, and hardly any miraculous activity. The period was full of history though, which must be understood in light of the leadership structures that were in place when the New Testament opens. Certain leadership structures appear in the New Testament that were not present in the Old. Israel was under a different leadership than ever before, having foreign government structures that cooperated with Israel's religious infrastructures. The incarnation and the death of Christ brought about a significant change to the leadership structure among the people of God, in which the Elders of Israel would see their leadership transfer to the Elders of the church.

A. Israel

- 1) Roman Occupation – Between the time when Israel was governed by kings (monarchy) and the open of the New Testament, God's people had been subject to foreign invaders: Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece, and then Rome. Rome was the dominant world superpower when at the time of Christ, and Israel was one of its subjects. Rome occupied and ruled the people of God in their land, and the Jews resented it.
- 2) Religious Leadership – When the New Testament begins, it is clear that a spiritual leadership structure had emerged, with some element that had never before been part of Israel's heritage, but now governed her people. Sadly, this leadership was all but completely corrupt, in Jesus' day. The following is a list of the different leaders, their history, and function.
 - a. Scribes – Starting with the tradition set by Ezra after the days of captivity, these men were the ThD's of the ancient world, the supposed "expert" interpreters of the Law of God. They were the lawyers of the day, who were copied on the Old Testament and all the extrabiblical literature containing tradition passed down (*the Mishna and Talmud*). They had a noble beginning, tracing their heritage from the guardians of the truth, who resolved to never let the truth be so grossly misapplied as it was before the exile. In some cases, they were used to enforce civil laws in Israel.
 - b. Pharisees – Emerging during the Intertestamental period (between the Old Testament and New Testament), this group came from the mighty men of Israel who aggressively sought to observe the Law of God in their native land. They were committed to religious, political freedom, and hostile to Rome. Most of them came from middle-class families of tradesmen and craftsmen and carried a tremendous amount of influence over the people who trusted them implicitly, taking their counsel over the priests. Being well-trusted, they were given high

ranking positions within the commonwealth of Israel. This explains why Jesus attacked their credibility with the people because they had betrayed this trust, and also why the Pharisees had constant dread and concern when Jesus began to attract followers. They were men who were religiously conservative to the point of being rigid in their legalistic traditions, which they elevated above Scripture, and as Jesus identified, inwardly corrupt and hell-bound (cf. **Matthew 5:20; 23:1-36**).

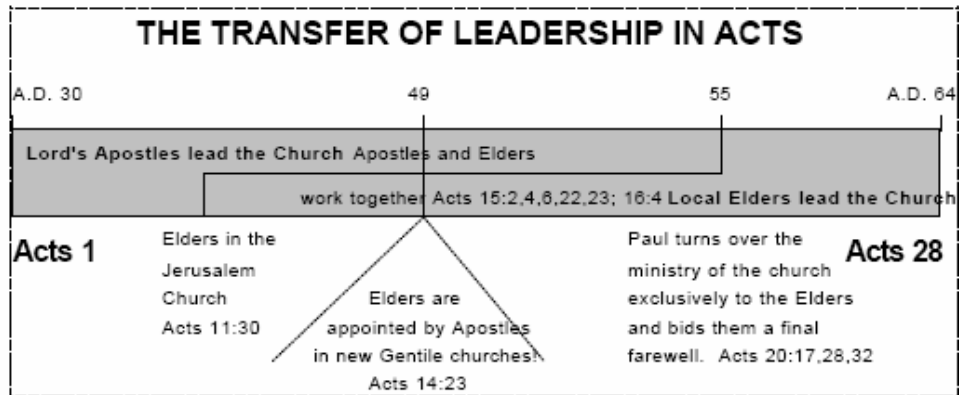
- c. Sadducees – Being religious liberals and political conservatives, the Sadducees adhered only to the first five books of the Bible, the Pentateuch, or the Law of Moses, because that connected them to their right to govern the temple in Jerusalem. Otherwise, they rejected the tradition of the Rabbis and the extrabiblical literature, as well as the rest of the Old Testament Scripture. They did not believe in the resurrection from the dead or the existence of angels and demons. Their bitterness towards the Pharisees over past history created a sharp division that was brought to light every time the Pharisees came to the temple.
- d. Priests – Starting in the days of Moses, the religious branch of Israel’s governance originally came from the tribe of Levi. Their responsibility was to oversee the dimensions of Israel’s worship and sacrificial system as the head of Israel’s spiritual life. The high priest was selected to serve in the most significant role of the sacrificial system – the Day of Atonement, wherein once a year he was allowed into the Holy of Holies to make atonement for his sins and the sins of the nation (**Lev. 16:1-25**). The other priests served in such capacities as administrating national feasts, consulting in medical issues (**Lev. 13:15**), settling judicial disputes (**Deut. 17:8-9**), and blast the trumpets the signaled national war (**Num. 10:1-10**).
- e. Sanhedrin – Comprising the chief internal Jewish political assembly, this governing body was made up of men called “Elders” (**Mark 15:1**) the head Elder being appointed by Rome. These Elders made up the highest tribunal (court) in Israel, and was presided over by the high priest. At one time, the Sanhedrin could execute a criminal with capitol punishment, with the confirmation of a Roman procurator, like Pilate (who had Jesus executed). So in essence, the Elders maintained their original ruling element as in the days of Moses, but were now in league with the chief priests, scribes, and Pharisees. The Elders of Jesus’ day were corrupt, plotting the murder of the Son of God and adding extrabiblical revelation to the Scriptures as having the same authority (**Matthew 15:1-2; 16:21; 26:3-4, 47; 27:1-4; Mark 7:1-7**).

B. The Church

- 1) Israel’s Rejection – Receiving the Messiah meant something different to the Jews than it meant to God. The Jews, being corrupt, refused to embrace Jesus Christ and crucified Him as a common criminal who blasphemed, because He claimed to be God (**John 10:33**). Realizing that His rejection was imminent, He declared to the Jews in **Matthew 21:43** that He was turning away from the Jews as a missionary force to the Gentiles. God temporarily set aside the use of Israel as a nation and placed His mission to proclaim salvation to the world into the hands of a new entity called the church.

- 2) The Apostles – Starting with Jesus in His earthly ministry, these men were entrusted with the spread of the message of the kingdom until Jesus comes again (**Matthew 28:18-20; Acts 1:8-11**), having miraculous gifts (**Acts 5:12; 2 Corinthians 12:12**) that substantiated their message. Their primary responsibility was to ground and establish the church along with specially gifted prophets (**Ephesians 2:20; Romans 1:11**). The apostles were given special revelation, much of which was inspired, being canonized in Scripture. Apostles were scarce, given the increasing number of churches that needed spiritual leadership. The work of the apostles and their apostolic delegates (Titus, Timothy, etc.) was to appoint Elders in the churches in which they ministered (**1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5**).

- 3) The Transition to Eldership – As the apostolic era came to an end with the death of the apostles, it became clear that the leadership mantle was passed to the Elders of these established churches (**Acts 14:23**). This transition can be discerned with a cursory reading of the book of Acts, wherein the apostles provided primary spiritual leadership until the church was established. Then the direction and oversight responsibility of the church fell to the Elders, whose office remains to this day. Consider the following chart, which represents this transfer in the book of Acts.⁷



⁷ Taken from Russ Kennedy, *Biblical Eldership* (Clearcreek: Clearcreek Chapel, 1999), p. 15.

We should note that the Apostles only put one structure in place that would remain – Elders. These Elders would have no additional hierarchy over them to which they would be accountable (such as a denomination), though there would be a very strong cooperation among the churches and their individual Elder councils. In addition, while the surviving apostles themselves still ministered with their apostolic gifts and with Scriptural revelation, they did so as Elders.

➤ **1 Peter 5:1-2**

➤ **2 John 1**

➤ **3 John 1**

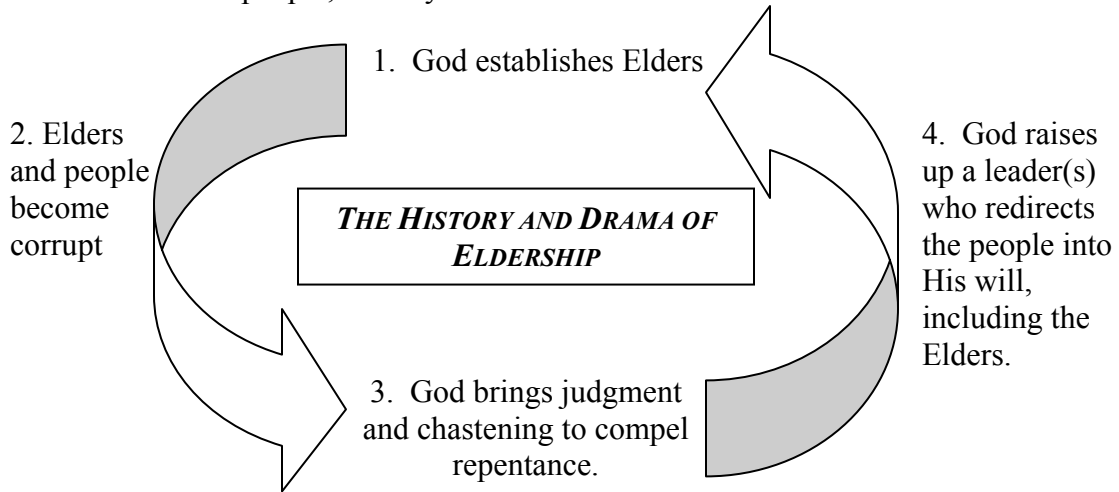
4) Elders in the Church – Continuing the role and function of leading God’s people (**Hebrews 13:17**), feeding them God’s truth (**1 Thessalonians 5:12**), protecting God’s flock from spiritual wolves (**Acts 20:28-31**), praying for God’s people in times of need (**James 5:14**), and resolving civil disputes among believers (**1 Corinthians 6:1-6**), the Elders are the given authority by God to govern the church. Consider the following helpful breakdown of the leadership structure of every church mentioned in the New Testament:⁸

- a. Elders in All the Churches that Paul Founded (**Acts 14:23**).
- b. Elders in the Church at Jerusalem (**Acts 15:2**).
- c. Elders in Ephesus (**Acts 20:17**).
- d. Elders in All the Churches of Crete (**Titus 1:5**).
- e. Elders in All the Churches of the Dispersion of the Roman Empire (**James 1:1; 5:14**).
- f. Elders in All the Churches in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (**1 Peter 1:1; 5:1**).

⁸ John Piper, *Biblical Eldership* (Minneapolis: Desiring God Ministries, 1999), p. 15-16.

CONCLUSION

Tracing the development of Elders throughout the redemptive history yields several fascinating conclusions and lessons. From the beginning, God established Elders to guide, influence, and govern His people with their God-given authority. They were to be men of stellar character, competent knowledge, and intense commitment to God’s glory and His people’s best interest. A cyclical pattern seems to have characterized the rise and fall of God’s people, directly tied into the role of the Elders:



Lessons from *The Elder’s Heritage*:

1. Eldership was God’s design from the beginning.
2. Sin in the leadership inevitably results in sin in the people.
3. Excuses like, “It doesn’t work!” do not justify abandoning God’s design for pragmatics.
4. The world has nothing to offer the church in its values regarding leadership.
5. Adding tradition, even religious tradition to God’s design for leadership among His people undermines the Word of God, even though it might appear “wise” to man.
6. No leader is impervious to the temptations of compromise and corruption.
7. Our leadership structure as a church has a prestigious and rich heritage, for which we should be grateful in our responsibility to maintain.
- 8.
- 9.
- 10.