

## The Appointment of Elders (Acts 14:23-28)<sup>a</sup>

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### Context

1. Paul and Barnabas on what will later be known as the “first Missionary Journey”
2. Ministering in a region we know today as modern Turkey
3. Retracing their steps through towns where they first preached the gospel: Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, Antioch in Pisidia (as opposed to Antioch in Syria)
4. Encouraging and strengthening the fledgling churches
5. Return to Antioch in Syria bringing the 1st Missionary Journey to its conclusion

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### Passage (Acts 14:23-28)

**[23]** So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed. **[24]** And after they had passed through Pisidia, they came to Pamphylia. **[25]** Now when they had preached the word in Perga, they went down to Attalia. **[26]** From there they sailed to Antioch, where they had been commended to the grace of God for the work which they had completed. **[27]** Now when they had come and gathered the church together, they reported all that God had done with them, and that He had opened the door of faith to the Gentiles. **[28]** So they stayed there a long time with the disciples.<sup>1</sup>

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### Elders

#### 1. What does the term “Elder” mean, and what is the role of an elder?

- A. Several passages demonstrate the equivalence of three terms: 1) elder; 2) overseer (or bishop); and 3) shepherd (or pastor)
- B. First passage: *From Miletus [Paul] sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church. (Acts 20:17) . . . 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)*

I. Elders = from **πρεσβυτέρος** [*presbyteros*], “of greater age,” “older generation,” “ancestor”

- a. A man of greater age, with greater experience and (hopefully) wisdom
- b. Mellowed on non-essentials, more fully appreciates the subtleties and priorities of essentials
- c. Presbyterian church

II. Overseers: from **ἐπίσκοπος** [*episkopos*]

- a. Preposition: *epi* = over
- b. Noun: *skopos* = look, watch
- c. One who “watches over,” who serves as a guardian
- d. Also translated as “bishop” (Php. [1:1](#); 1Ti. [3:2](#); Tit. [1:7](#))
- e. Episcopal church

III. Shepherd (verb)

- a. Verb: from **ποιμαίνω** [*poimainō*], “to guide, help, rule”
- b. Noun: Ephesians [4:11](#)
  - i. *And He Himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers* (Ephesians [4:11](#))
  - ii. Only occurrence of “pastor” as a noun
  - iii. In the NT, the term most often designates an action (verb) rather than a position (noun)
  - iv. The act of guiding, feeding, keeping, protecting

C. Second passage: *The elders who are among you . . . shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;* (1Pe. [5:1a-2](#))

I. Elder (πρεσβυτέρος [*presbyteros*])

II. Shepherd (ποιμαίνω [*poimainō*])

III. Overseer (ἐπίσκοπος [*episkopos*])

D. Elder == overseer/bishop == shepherd/pastor

I. Any church structure which uses these titles to designate different functions or levels of authority is out-of-step with the NT

II. Common example: elders → pastor → bishop

III. Peter refers to himself as a “fellow elder” (1Pe. 5:1)

## 2. Appointed

A. *when they had appointed* (Acts 14:23)

I. χειροτονήσαντες [*cheirotoneōsantes*] = aorist active participle, from χειροτονέω [*cheirotoneō*]

a. to appoint, choose, elect

b. χεῖρ [*cheir*] = “hand,” root word includes the concept of raising a hand as in a vote

c. Whether a vote occurs depends upon the context<sup>2</sup>

i. Here, Paul and Barnabas appointed, without a vote

ii. Likewise, in Crete, Titus appointed elders without a vote

iii. The closest we see to a congregational vote involving church leadership relates to deacons

- In Acts 6:3, the apostles ask the congregation to recommend men to serve as deacons, whom the apostles then appoint [καίστημι [*kaiistēmi*]] into that position.

- This is, essentially, an advisory vote—as our church constitution recognizes

B. Based on qualities/qualifications

- I. As discerned by Paul and Barnabas
- II. As recognized by other individuals in the community
- III. Newly-established missionary churches
  - a. In this case: *all* are new believers
    - i. *the commended them [the elders] to the Lord in whom they had [only recently] believed* (Acts [14:23](#))
  - b. Inexperienced in this particular situation — you work with what you have
- IV. Biblical qualifications, [primary passages: 1 Timothy [3:1-7](#); Titus 5:1-9; 1 Peter [5:2-3](#)]
- V. In the interest of time, refer to a two-part teaching I did in November/December of 2010 from the Book of Titus titled [The Character of an Elder<sup>c</sup>](#) — available on the church website

### 3. Church government

#### A. Multiple elders in every church

##### I. Paul wrote to Titus

a. *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* (Tit. [1:5](#)).

##### II. On the way back to Jerusalem on his third missionary journey, Paul stopped at the port of Miletus, near Ephesus.

a. *From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church* (Acts [20:17](#)).

##### III. James gave this advice to the sick

a. *Is anyone among you sick? 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* (Jas. [5:14](#)).

## IV. Peter, writing to believers in Asia, instructs younger believers to

a. submit yourselves to [your] elders. . . . (1Pe. 5:5b)

V. As we'll see, it is important to have multiple elders

a. The widespread, popular, and *seemingly* practical approach of having a single elder/pastor at the helm of each church leads to unforeseen complexities and dangers

## B. Who is over the elders?

## I. Who do the elders report to?

II. The patriarchs? The major archbishops? The primates? Perhaps the metropolitans? The archbishops? The ordinaries? Or is it the cardinals, the blue jays, the priests or the pope?<sup>3</sup>

## III. Commended to the Lord

a. “Commended” is **παράτιθεμαι** [*paratithemai*], “to commit, entrust to”

i. Basic meaning, “to set/place before”

ii. Entrust, place before — they stand before and report directly to Jesus

iii. Others must trust that Jesus keeps them

iv. Since there are risks involved, therefore *faith* is required

IV. The simplicity of NT Church government: believers → deacons → elders → Jesus<sup>5</sup>

## C. Spiritual authority in the church

I. Not the secular business model (CEO, president, vice president, board)

II. Elders/pastors are not in the role of employees which the congregation or a separate governing board hires/fires at will

## III. Not a democracy

a. The elders provide the spiritual authority of the church — not the

## congregation

- b. For their spiritual authority to be effective, it must not be possible for a separate "business board" or congregation to overrule or fire them.
  - i. This would result in "priority inversion" — where those who are supposed to be under the authority of the elders actually have authority over the elders!
  - ii. This is the common, even if unbiblical: "elder as a puppet" scenario
  - iii. The elder or elders appear to be leaders, but their strings are manipulated by some other controlling interest—other than Jesus
  - iv. Example: the son or daughter of a powerful member of the business board is living in sin. When confronted by the elder, a board member intervenes to overrule or subvert the elder's authority. In severe cases, several board members may collaborate to terminate the elder.
- c. Running the church as a democracy inexorably leads to another common practice not found in the New Testament: establishing formal, local church membership.
  - i. In order for the congregation to have ultimate authority, there must be authoritative voting.
  - ii. It then becomes important to determine who can vote and who can't vote.
  - iii. The solution: local church membership
    - Some core group of people—usually those who established the church—are deemed to be founding members
    - Thereafter, based on man-made evaluation of applicants, the established members vote one who should be allowed to become an official member . . . or not
    - Formal church membership then is then used to regulate various activities
      - Who can vote
      - Who can serve communion
      - Who can receive communion (!)
      - Who can teach
  - iv. The problem:

- Evaluation and motivation can be flawed: unbelievers may become church members
- People who are true believers, but who do not find church membership in the NT, are prohibited from serving and using their gifts
- The sheep have authority over the shepherds
- Ultimately: unbelievers may wind up in control of the church
- Those who are less biblically-minded and biblically qualified to lead wind up in control

v. The danger: as goes the culture, so goes the church

#### IV. Eldership required for a fellowship of believers to be a legitimate NT church

a. As with these fledgling fellowships, the church is not a building

b. Early on, churches met in homes

c. BUT: a meeting of believers in a home is not necessarily a NT church!

i. May be worship, may be bible study, may be fellowship

ii. Without established elders—recognized spiritual authorities—it cannot function as a NT church

iii. Some home fellowships in our day are popular precisely due to the lack of spiritual authority

- People who will not subject themselves to the NT eldership model
- Don't like “organized religion” so they prefer “disorganized religion”
- Many dangers in such a fellowship - lacking the safety of established spiritual authority: guidance, correction, discipline

#### D. What about the abuse of spiritual authority — who controls the elders?

I. The problem of sin - pervasive, affecting both sheep and shepherds

II. It is impossible, short of Jesus being present, to avoid all possibility of abuse of authority: all schemes of church government have the potential for being abused

### III. Potential problems with democratic model

- a. Who can vote?
- b. Unbelievers wind up as members
  - i. Church membership mis-aligned with membership in the body of Christ
- c. Authority inversion - shepherds ultimately subject to the sheep who hire/fire pastors at will
- d. Itching ears hire teachers that tickle them
- e. Cultural influences erode biblical fidelity

### IV. Potential problems with biblical model

- a. Elders cannot be fired
  - i. Elders may go apostate
    - Mitigated by plural eldership
    - Solution: lovingly correct, ultimately vote with your feet
  - ii. Elders may abuse finances
    - Mitigated by plural eldership
    - Open books, ultimately vote with your feet
  - iii. Elders unaccountable to the congregation
    - Multiple elders
    - If collusion: lovingly correct, ultimately vote with your feet

### V. The key: only one model of church government is biblical — plural eldership

- a. Analogous to leadership in the home
  - i. Woman → Husband → Jesus
  - ii. Can the husband mess things up?
  - iii. Can the role model structure established by God within the household be abused? Can the husband mess things up? Yes!
  - iv. Should the home be run as a strict democracy instead? No!
- b. Like leadership in the home, leadership in the church must conform to biblical leadership principles



- i. As the husband, as leader of the household, must give himself for his wife whom he leads, so elders "give themselves" in service for the church
- ii. Peter describes the approach
  - *Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1Pe. 5:2-3)*
  - Not for dishonest gain
  - Nor as being lords
  - Examples to the flock
  - Those "entrusted to you" — they are owned by Jesus
    - Paul told the elders in the church at Ephesus to *Be on guard for yourselves and for 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 20:28).*
- c. What does God want?

- i. In both home and church, our primary question should be
  - Has God set forth how He wants this done?
  - Which approach reflects the will of God?
  - Which approach will God honor?
  - Our best protection is found in walking in the authority roles established by God rather than following our own ideas
  - Will things be perfect? No!
  - Will we overcome all sin? No!
  - Even so, we will be honoring God in our approach
  - God knows best: what problems remain will be less than alternative approaches to governing the church

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## **Familiar Topics at Mabana Chapel - from hard-won experience**

### **1. This is a topic which our fellowship has considered at some length**

- A. How should membership function in view of NT truths?
- B. How should voting and decision making function in view of NT truths?

2. An excellent series of sermons in 2006 by Pastor Greg on **The Nature of the Church<sup>d</sup>** covering topics such as: 1) membership; 2) leadership; and 3) measuring commitment.
3. Refer to the **church constitution<sup>e</sup>** for our views—or happy to discuss in person.

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**Endnotes:**

1. [Acts 14:23-28](#), NKJV
  2. “the presbyters in Lycaonia and Pisidia were not chosen by the congregations, . . . This does not involve a choice by the group; here the word means appoint, install, w. the apostles as subj.” [Ref-0334](#), 881
  3. [https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hierarchy\\_of\\_the\\_Catholic\\_Church](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Hierarchy_of_the_Catholic_Church)
  4. [Ref-1217](#), Christopher Cone, pp. 86, 92
  5. “The Biblical model is simple indeed. It would appear that mandating a singular or monocratic leadership, or creating a complete distinction between a pastor and an elder or between an overseer and a pastor, represents a shift away from the natural interpretation of Scripture and the simplicity that results, and a shift toward anthropocentric and artificial forms of leadership.”<sup>4</sup>
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**Sources:**

- Acts 14:23-28** Unless indicated otherwise, all Scripture references are from the *New King James Version*, copyright © 1982 by Thomas Nelson, Inc. Used by permission. All rights reserved.
- Ref-0334** See . Arndt, W., Gingrich, F. W., Danker, F. W., & Bauer, W. (1996, c1979). *A Greek-English lexicon of the New Testament and other early Christian literature : A translation and adaption of the fourth revised and augmented edition of Walter Bauer's Griechisch-deutsches Wörterbuch zu den Schrift en des Neuen Testaments und der ubrigen urchristlichen Literatur*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
- Ref-1217** Christopher Cone, ed., *Practical Aspects of Pastoral Authority*, 1st ed. (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009). ISBN:978-0-9814791-5-6<sup>9</sup>.
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**Links Mentioned Above**

- a - See [http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts\\_by\\_Tony\\_Garland/49\\_Acts\\_14\\_23-28/index.htm](http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/Acts_by_Tony_Garland/49_Acts_14_23-28/index.htm).
- b - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/tg.htm>.
- c - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/teaching/32.htm>.
- d - See <http://www.mabanachapel.org/teaching/topics/index.html>.

e - See <http://www.mabanachapel.org/20160117-MabanaConstitution.pdf>.

f - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org>.

g - See <http://www.spiritandtruth.org/id/isbn.htm?978-0-9814791-5-6>.