

Eldership and Women in the Bible

Ken Radant, December 13, 2019

I. Eldership: some conceptual framework

Some key terms: leadership, authority, teaching, pastor, overseer, people, deacon, elder

- Leaders: set direction, example
- Authority: makes decisions
- Teaching: shapes thought, behavior
- Pastor: local church public leader (*poimen*)
- Overseer: local or multi-church leader (*episkopos*)
- People: members
- Deacon: “servant” or “minister” (*diakonos*)
- Elder: (*presbyteros*)

The terms raise questions:

- Relationship of leadership & authority
- Does teaching carry authority? Why, what kind?
- Who has leadership and authority? Why, how, what kind, how much, over whom?

This matters. Shapes your view of church structure, eldership.

For example...

Who leads?	How do they lead?	Who has authority?	How do they get it?	Beyond the local church ...?	Sound familiar?
Local, broader overseers (“bishops”)	Making decisions	Overseers / bishops	Appointed by earlier overseers	Hierarchy of leaders	Roman Catholic Church, Anglicans
Pastors , local church leaders (“ministers”)	Teaching and example	The people (by vote)	The Spirit	Cooperation , no authority (autonomy)	Baptists, Mennonites
“ Pastors ” and “ elders ”	Teaching , delegated authority	The people , delegated to leaders (within policy)	Vote by people	District, national leaders appointed by district, national gatherings	Many Protestant groups

II. Eldership: some historical context

For most of history, churches have been organized in 1 of 3 ways:

- Hierarchical leadership (“Episcopal”)
- Distributed consensus (“Congregational”)
- Delegated authority (“Presbyterian”)

Where does the C&MA fit?

Primarily presbyterian. Blended family. Members from different traditions. Flexible constitution. Diversity among churches. <https://pacificdistrict.ca/cma-manual/>

So what? Your decision will be shaped by principles, pragmatics, and preferences.
Get the principles straight, be flexible on the rest!

III. **A look at church organization in the NT**

A. **Some general observations:**

- All 3 classic approaches claim the NT supports their church organization.
Hierarchical: Mat 16; Acts 6, 14; Timothy & Titus; 1 Tim 5:17
Congregational: Luke 22; John 13; Mat 18, 1 Cor 1; Acts 1
Presbyterian: Acts 13, 15; Acts 1, 6
- The NT describes different approaches.
- NT church organization adapted to different situations

B. **A look at key terms in the NT**

“Pastor”

- *Poimen* – shepherd. Literal and metaphorical. Of Jesus (Jn 10:2,11,12,14,16; Rev 7:17). Special focus on one who cares for, leads church (John 21:16; 1 Pet 5:2; Acts 20:28)
- Focus on function, not office.

“Overseer”

- *Episkopos* – one who oversees. “Bishop” came later. Normally for local leader (Acts 20:28; Phil 1:1; 1 Tim; Titus).
- Clear leadership role, but focus on function, no distinction from other roles.

“Deacon”

- *Diakonos* – servant. Sometimes a title for a role (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3; 1 Tim 4:6), but often just of service anyone could provide. (Mat 20:26, 23:11, Mk 9:35, 10:43.) Jesus as example (Rom 15:8; Mat 20:28; Mk 10:45). All should serve with their gifts (1 Pet 4:10-11).
- Used for people who served generally (women, Mat 27:55, Mk 15:41, Lk 8:3; Onesiphorus, 2 Tim 1:16-18; Onesimus, Philem 13). Also some people called “diakonos” where a formal role may be in view: Paul and Apollos (1 Cor 3:5); Tychicus (Eph 6:21, Col 1:23-25); Epaphras (Col 1:7); Phoebe (Rom 16:1). A role in Acts 6, more formal over time.

“Elder”

- *Presbyteros* – someone older, more mature. Sometimes literally (John 8:9, 1 Tim 5:1ff). Of community leaders (OT, Rev 4, 5, 7, 11), of Jewish leaders in Jerusalem (gospels, Acts).
- In the church: early leaders alongside apostles (Acts 11, 15, 16, 21); Peter and John (1 Pet 5:1, 2 John 1:1, 3 John 1:1). Appointed to leadership in new churches (Acts 14:23, Tit 1:5).
- Clearly a title for leaders, reflecting wider social patterns. Details limited, not differentiated from other titles.

Interchangeable terms: Acts 20:16ff; 1 Pet 5:1ff

Summarizing re the NT terms:

- Can be titles for recognized roles; more often describe general functions.
- Can overlap, be used interchangeably.
- None are unique to the church
- All are to be practiced in a Christlike way

C. Key NT passages about church leaders

1 Tim 3:1-13

- “Overseer”
- “If a man aspires” (NAS, KJV) – actually “if someone ...”
- “Husband of one wife ...”
- “Able to teach”
- “Not a recent convert”
- “Deacons
- “The women (wives?) likewise”

Focus on character, behavior. Same qualities for each group—general Christian character. Lived out in ordinary life.

Social roles for men/women, husbands/wives assumed.

Concerned about God’s approval, perception of others.

1 Tim 4-5

- Timothy an “Overseer”
- Elders’ appointment
- The list of widows?
- “Wife of one husband”
- Elders who direct well
- Those whose work is preaching and teaching

Terminology is flexible, “elder” and “deacon” are titles. Diversity of roles. Focus on character, reputation.

Men and women involved, common expectations.

Family functions assumed.

Titus 1

- Elders are “overseers”
- “Such a one...” not “If any man...”
- “Husband of one wife”
- “Blameless” (2x), well-managed family
- Knows, promotes good teaching

1 Peter 5

- Apostle as “fellow-elder”
- Elders are “shepherds,” “overseers”
- Not young
- Attitude and example

IV. Summary so far

Church structure: diversity. Generally reflects wider culture. NT sees church as a “household,” not an institution. We must reflect Jesus

Leaders: are important. Have various titles, and various functions (especially teaching, discipling, example, service, and training other leaders). Little detailed direction; emphasis on character, reputation.

Elders: a common term for leaders. Not differentiated from pastor, overseer, deacon/servant. Implies maturity. Not all have identical roles. There are multiple elders who lead together.

Bottom line? There are some clear NT principles (mostly about character and mission). There is room for flexibility, diversity in the details. This tends to reflect what works (pragmatism) and to respect preferences (what is personally and culturally familiar and comfortable).

V. Does the OT add insights?

A complicated question. OT theology is clear on many things, but the relationship of Israel and the Church has been a great debate from the outset, across history. (Circumcision, food laws, sabbath, “priests,” infant baptism, state churches.....)

OT organization is diverse: patriarchs, Moses/Joshua; Judges: Kings; Exile. National organization changed. Local organization was family/tribal based. Used what was familiar, with exceptions.

VI. If we looked at all the accounts of women in the Bible, what would we find?

Most of the time, they fit the normal social expectations of their setting

- Wives and mothers in families (Prov 31)
- Vulnerable - In the wild west (Judges 21, Jer 50:37); in poverty (Ruth); in the home (Esther 1:20, Num 5, Deut 22)
- Sometimes powerful: as royalty (Jezebel, 1 Kings 16, 2 Kings 9; Esther; Herodias and daughter, Mk 6); in Urban affluence (Acts 13, 16, 17)

In a male-dominated culture where women are often overlooked, many stand out.

Examples of faith and/wisdom: Rahab, Samson’s mother, Ruth, Hannah, Abigail, Shunammite; Wise women of Tekoa, Abel Beth-Maacah; Mary, Anna, woman with incense, woman healed by touching Jesus, poor widow, Syrophoenician, Mary & Martha, Lois & Eunice ... and more!

Specific examples of women exercising leadership: Miriam (Num 12); Deborah (Judges 4-5); Huldah the prophetess (2 Kings 22); Dorcas/Tabitha (Acts 9:36-41); Lydia? (Acts 16:14-15); Philip’s 4 daughters (Acts 21:8-11); Priscilla – with Aquilla (Acts 18:2-3, 18-28; cf 1 Cor 16:19, 2 Tim 4:19).

See also Paul’s co-workers mentioned in Romans ch 16: **Phoebe** – servant/deacon at Cenchreae, benefactor/patroness (16:1-2); Priscilla (with Aquila) – co-worker (16:3); Mary – worked hard for them (16:6); **Junia** – has shared prison, “outstanding among the apostles” (16:7); Tryphena and Tryphosa – worked hard in the Lord (16:12); Persis – has worked very hard in the Lord (16:12); Rufus’ mother (16:13); Julia and Nereus’ sister (16:15) – in total 10 of the 29 people mentioned!

VII. Conclusions (for now...)

- Church structure has always been diverse.
- The Bible doesn’t dictate details. Doesn’t command egalitarianism, doesn’t forbid women elders.
- The NT focuses on purpose, character.
- There are principles that move us toward equality.
- Biblical ministry is context-sensitive, works with people where they are.

Which leads us to the “key passages,” next time