

The Church of Jesus

Offices, Duties and Organization

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1 Introduction

In Christianity today, there are very different views on how the church should be structured and organized. For example, in some churches elders are regularly elected by all members of the congregation, while in others they are appointed for life without the participation of the members. There is also disagreement about what the duties and responsibilities of elders are and what others may do, for example, whether they are allowed to administer the Lord's Supper. There are churches in which women are not allowed to preach, whereas in others they are installed as pastors. Therefore, I would like to study the relevant scriptures with you in detail.

We begin with a brief explanation of what a church is. Then we look in detail at elders and deacons and compare them with each other. Afterwards, we will investigate how the duties of all believers differ from those of the elders.

In addition to the elders and the deacons, there are other ministries, most notably the one of the apostles and prophets. A separate chapter will be devoted to the role of women in church, due to its controversial nature.

We will also look at some organizational matters, especially church services, church membership, charter and structures, before closing with a word to elders and all believers.

2 What is a church?

The Greek word "ekklēsia" is usually translated as "church." It is composed of two words: "ek" means "out from" and "kalēō" means "to call." A church is a group of people who have been called out of the world to God. Depending on the context, the term "ekklēsia" refers to...

- (i) the entire body of Christ consisting of all believers (Mt 16:18; Eph 1:22-23; Col 1:18+24),
- (ii) the group of all Christians in a city (Acts 8:1; 1Cor 1:2), namely "to God's holy people" (Eph 1,1),
- (iii) a house church (Rom 16:5; 1Cor 16:19; Col 4:15; Phlm 2),
- (iv) an unspecified fellowship of Christians (Acts 15:41; Acts 16:5),
- (v) a church service (1Cor 14:19+28+34-35) or
- (vi) rarely even a non-Christian assembly (Acts 19:32+39+41).

3 Elders

The elders belonged to the leaders of the nation (Num 11:16-17; Jos 23:2; Jdg 2:7; 1Sam 8:4-5; Mt 26:59; Mk 15:1; Acts 5:21). First, we will deal in detail with the elders in church, their duties, how they should be acting and how others should behave towards them. We will answer the questions of how they should be called, what characteristics they should have, how to become an elder and how to recognize them.

3.1 What are their duties and how should they be acting?

Regarding the duties of the elders, we can read the following in the Book of Acts:

¹⁶ For Paul had decided to sail past Ephesus... ¹⁷ Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him. ¹⁸ And when they came to him, he said to them: ... ²⁸ **Pay careful attention** to yourselves and **to all the flock**, in which the

Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to **care** for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. (Acts 20:16-28 ESV; evidence concerning the duties of the elders are highlighted in **dark brown**)¹

Paul sent for the elders (verse 17); here, the Greek² word “presbýteros” stands for the elders. In verse 28, he called them overseers (Greek “epískopos”). Also, in Paul’s letter to Titus, the terms “elders” and “overseers” are used synonymously: “elders” in verse 5 and “overseers” in verse 7 of the first chapter. The two words have exactly the same meaning. The term “elder” comes from Jewish and the official title “overseer” from Greek civil life.

The term “overseer” occurs only a few times in the Bible. In one of these scriptures, Jesus is referred to as shepherd and overseer (1Pet 2:25). One duty of the elders is to **shepherd** (Greek “poimainō”) the congregation; this Greek verb is translated with “to care” in verse 28. To shepherd also means to pay careful attention, to provide, to protect and to lead.

The elders are placed in the church and not over it (Acts 20:28). The Greek preposition “en” translated here as “in” also means “inside” and “within” and describes a state in which something operates from the inside. The same word has been translated as “among” in the following two verses:

¹ So I exhort the elders among you...: ² **shepherd** the flock of God that is among you, **exercising oversight, not under compulsion**, but **willingly**, as God would have you; **not for shameful gain**, but **eagerly**; ³ **not domineering** over those in your charge, **but being examples** to the flock. (1Pet 5:1-3 ESV; **light brown** are notes how elders should be or how they should behave)

We have already explained above what it means to shepherd the flock. In this Bible passage, it is also mentioned that the elders **exercise oversight**, Greek “episkopéō.” This Greek word is the verb to the noun “overseer” (Greek “epískopos”), which has the same meaning as “elder” as we have already explained above. Thus, it generally refers to the function of the elders.

The elders shall **not domineer** (Greek “katakyrieúō”). The same verb is found in the following verse, translated as “to lord it over:”

²⁵ But Jesus called them to him and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. ²⁶ It shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your **servant**, ²⁷ and whoever would be first among you must be your **slave**, ²⁸ even as the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many.” (Mt 20:25-28 ESV; see also Mk 10:42-45; Mk 9:35; Lk 22:25-26)

What it means to lord it over was explained by the centurion of Capernaum:

For I myself am a man under authority, with soldiers under me. I tell this one, “Go,” and he goes; and that one, “Come,” and he comes. I say to my servant, “Do this,” and he does it. (Mt 8:9; see also Lk 7:8)

To domineer or to lord it over means to exercise control. Restricting someone’s decision-making is already a means of control. Instead, we should **serve** others. Naturally, a servant does not have authority over the ones he serves, he also does not tell them what to do. Furthermore, a servant also grants others the freedom not to use his service.

¹ Bible quotations are taken from the New International Version (NIV) translation unless noted otherwise. Others: New International Reader’s Version (NIRV), English Standard Version (ESV), King James Version (KJV).

² All notes on the Greek and Hebrew are taken from the Bible Hub: www.biblehub.com/interlinear

Instead of domineering, elders should lead by example. In Greek, there is the conjunction “allá” before “being examples” (1Pet 5:3); this typically constitutes a strong adversative conjunction that can also be translated with “but instead” or “on the contrary.” Hence, elders shall shepherd by being examples instead of domineering.

Paul wrote:

¹⁷ The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ¹⁸ For Scripture says, ‘Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain,’ and ‘The worker deserves his wages.’ (1Tim 5:17-18; green are indications how all should behave)

The Greek verb “proístēmi,” translated as “to direct,” is composed of “pró” (English “before”) and “hístēmi” (English “to stand”). According to the dictionary, it means “pre-standing,” referring to a pre-set (well-established) character which provides the needed model to direct others, i.e. to positively impact them by example. Thus, Elders should lead by example.

These elders are worthy of double honor (Greek “timé”). This is about honor in the sense of respect and support for the servants of God. More detailed elaborations on this subject can be found in the section discussing the support of God’s servants in my article “What Commandments should Christians keep?”

The Greek verb “kopiáō,” translated with “work,” stands for to labor until worn-out, depleted (exhausted). The Greek “lógos” (English “word”) was translated with “preaching.” So others translate the end of verse 17 with “who labor in the word and doctrine.” (KJV) Thus, in summary this is about teaching.

Paul also wrote:

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to acknowledge those who work hard among you, who care for you in the Lord and who admonish you. (1Thess 5:12)

Above, we already explained the meaning of the Greek verbs “kopiáō,” translated as “work hard,” and “proístēmi” which is translated with “to care” in this verse, but was translated above with “to direct.” Admonish (Greek “nouthetēō”) is derived from “noús” (“mind”) and “títhēmi” (“to place”); literally translated: “to place someone’s mind,” i.e. reasoning with someone by warning (admonishing) them.

Those who admonish, care (or lead) and work hard should be acknowledged (Greek “eídō”). This verb can also mean to see with the physical eyes, as it naturally bridges to the metaphorical sense: perceiving (“mentally seeing”). This is akin to the expressions: “I see what you mean” and “I see what you are saying.” So the point here is to heed the advice of the elders.

Furthermore, Paul wrote that elders should be able to...

...encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it. (Tit 1:9)

The verb “to encourage” (Greek “parakalēō”) is derived from “pará” meaning “from close-beside” and “kalēō” meaning “to call,” properly, “make a call” from being “close-up and personal.” It involves giving personal advice or encouraging someone close. The verb “parakalēō” is a cognate of the noun “paráklētos” which is translated as advocate (NIV), helper (ESV) or comforter (KJV). It occurs five times in the New Testament and always refers to the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:16+26; Jn 15:26; Jn 16:7) or Jesus (1Jn 2:1). Elders should serve their brothers and sisters in a similar way like the Holy Spirit. To refute (Greek “elégxō”) means according to

the Greek dictionary to convince with solid, compelling evidence, especially to expose (prove wrong).

James wrote:

Is anyone among you ill? Let them call the elders of the church to **pray** over them and **anoint them with oil** in the name of the Lord. (Jam 5:14)

So elders are to pray for the sick and anoint them with oil.

At the Council at Jerusalem, the apostles and the elders met to discuss how to deal with the controversial question of whether gentile believers must be circumcised and keep the Law of Moses (Acts 15:6). Thus, the duties of the elders include counseling on fundamental matters of faith and teaching accordingly.

3.2 How should one behave towards elders?

We have already seen that elders are to be **honored** (1Tim 5:17) and **acknowledged** (1Thess 5:12). Paul addressed the following words to all believers:

Be devoted to one another in love. **Honor one another above yourselves.** (Rom 12:10)

Here, the Greek word for “honor” is the same as in the context of elders (“timé”, 1Tim 5:17). We should all honor one another and especially the elders.

The Epistle to the Hebrews says:

Remember your leaders, who **spoke the word of God** to you. **Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.** (Heb 13:7)

In the Epistle to the Hebrews, we do not find the terms “elders” or “overseers,” but exceptionally the word “leaders.” The terms “elders” or “overseers” are not used at all in this epistle, but instead the verb “hégēomai.” We can therefore literally translate: “Remember those who lead you.” The meaning is the same, so the words “elders,” “overseers” and “leaders” are synonyms.

The verse we have just read is encouraging us to be inspired by the positive example of the elders. Paul wrote about this:

Join together in **following my example**, brothers and sisters, and just as you have us as a model, **keep your eyes on those who live as we do.** (Phil 3:17; see also 1Cor 4:16)

Follow my example, as I follow the example of Christ. (1Cor 11:1; see also 1Thess 1:6; 2Thess 3:9)

The elders should set an example for the others in achieving the following:

Follow God’s example... (Eph 5:1)

... Christ ... leaving you an example, that you should **follow in his steps.** (1Pet 2:21)

Let us continue reading in the Epistle to the Hebrews:

Obey your leaders and **submit** to them, for they are keeping **watch** over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you. (Heb 13:17 ESV)

The Greek verb “peithō” translated as “**obey**” is the root of the noun “pístis” which means “faith;” according to the dictionary, this verb means “to persuade, to have confidence.” It was translated in this sense almost throughout the entire New Testament (e.g. Mk 10:24 KJV;

Lk 18:9; Acts 26:26; Acts 28:24; Rom 8:38; Rom 15:14; Phil 1:6+25; 2Tim 1:5+12). Others translate the beginning of this verse much better with “**Have confidence**” (NIV) or “**Trust in your leaders**” (NIRV). So one is to be persuaded to have faith or trust in the elders. One **submits** by trusting them.

That the elders **watch** (Greek “agrypnéō,” meaning “no sleep”) emphasizes their hard work while shepherding, as also expressed in other verses quoted above.

When leaders will have to give an account, they do not give an account of others, but of their own service. This follows from the Greek text. The following translation is more accurate:

... They know they are accountable to God for everything they do... (Heb 13:17 NIRV)

The elders have no responsibility for others, but are responsible for what they do or do not do, in the same sense as God explained it to Ezekiel:

¹⁷ Son of man, I have made you a watchman for the people of Israel; so hear the word I speak and give them warning from me. ¹⁸ When I say to a wicked person, “You will surely die,” and you do not warn them or speak out to dissuade them from their evil ways in order to save their life, that wicked person will die for their sin, and I will hold you accountable for their blood. ¹⁹ But if you do warn the wicked person and they do not turn from their wickedness or from their evil ways, they will die for their sin; but you will have saved yourself. (Ez 3:17-19; see also Ez 3:20-21; Ez 33:2-9)

Thus, no one is accountable for anyone else, nor is one accountable to anyone but God alone (see also Gal 6:4-5; Rom 14:12).

Peter wrote:

In the same way, you who are younger, **submit** yourselves to your elders. All of you, **clothe yourselves with humility towards one another**, because, ‘God opposes the proud but shows favor to the humble.’ (1Pet 5:5)

One should **submit** to the elders (Greek “hypotássō”), that is, one should honor them, respect them, and respect their teaching as well as their counsel. This refers to matters of faith and has nothing to do with personal matters or private decisions. The same Greek verb “hypotássō” is also found in the following verses:

...submit to such people and **to everyone who joins in the work and labors at it.** (1Cor 16:16)

Submit to one another out of reverence for Christ. (Eph 5:21)

Submitting to one another also includes the elders submitting to the others. This mutual subordination is described elsewhere as follows:

...in humility value others above yourselves, (Phil 2:3)

In Greek, we find here again the verb “hégeomai,” which also means “to lead;” in this case, it was translated as “to value.” Therefore, valuing others can also mean allowing yourself to be led by them. The concept of mutual submission is similar to mutual honor. We should submit to one another and we should all honor one another – especially the elders.

Blind obedience to the elders is not required. All teachings may certainly be tested, indeed they should be tested. This is what the Berean Jews did after Paul and Silas taught them:

¹¹ Now the Berean Jews were of more noble character than those in Thessalonica, for they received the message with great eagerness and examined the Scriptures every

day to see if what Paul said was true. ¹² As a result, many of them believed... (Acts 17:11-12)

When you test a teaching, you study it in depth. It does not just go in one ear and out the other. After you have tested something and therefore found it to be correct, you have stronger faith in it than before. And that is why many in Berea believed.

3.3 How should elders be called?

Jesus said to his disciples, the apostles:

⁸ 'But you are **not to be called "Rabbi"**, for you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers. ⁹ And **do not call anyone on earth "father"**, for you have one Father, and he is in heaven. ¹⁰ **Nor are you to be called instructors**, for you have one Instructor, the Messiah.

¹¹ The greatest among you will be your **servant**. ¹² For those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted. (Mt 23:8-12)

"Rabbi" was an honoring title for Jewish teachers of the Scriptures. You should not be called "Rabbi," "instructor" or "teacher," because Jesus is the Teacher. The Greek word here is "didáskalos," which means "teacher" or "instructor." Nor should anyone be called "father," because this title belongs to our heavenly Father. Jesus exhorted not to be addressed with honorary titles and also not to address others with titles that are due to him or our Father in heaven. Therefore, we should not use titles that are due to God.

Jesus mentioned titles of honor that were common at the time. If the following titles had been common in those days, Jesus would probably have mentioned them:

- Apostle (Greek "apóstolos" for "messenger"): Jesus is an apostle (Heb 3:1). He was sent by our Father in heaven (Lk 4:18; Jn 3:17; Jn 5:23+30+36-38; Jn 6:39+44+57; Jn 8:16+18+42; Jn 10:36; Jn 11:41-42; Jn 12:49; Jn 14:24; Jn 17:3+8+18+21+23+25; Jn 20:21; Acts 3:19-20+26; 1Jn 4:9-10+14).
- Prophet (Greek "prophétés"): Jesus is a prophet (Mt 13:57; Mk 6:4; Lk 1:76; Lk 4:24; Lk 7:16; Acts 3:20-23).
- Evangelist (Greek "euaggelizō:" one who proclaims the good news of the Gospel): Jesus is an evangelist (Mt 11:5; Lk 4:18+43; Lk 7:22; Lk 8:1; Lk 20:1; Acts 10:36; Eph 2:17).
- Pastor (Latin for "shepherd," Greek "poimén"): Jesus is our shepherd (Mt 26:31; Mk 14:27; Jn 10:11-16; Heb 13:20; 1Pet 2:25; 1Pet 5:4).
- Teacher (Greek "didáskalos," sometimes translated as "master" or "instructor"): Jesus is our teacher (Mt 8:19; Mt 9:11; Mt 12:38; Mt 17:24; Mt 19:16; Mt 22:16+24+36; Mt 23:8+10; Mt 26:18; Mk 4:38; Mk 5:35; Mk 9:17+38; Mk 10:17+20+35; Mk 12:14+19+32; Mk 13:1; Mk 14:14; Lk 7:40; Lk 8:49; Lk 9:38; Lk 10:25; Lk 11:45; Lk 12:13; Lk 18:18; Lk 19:39; Lk 20:21+28+39; Lk 21:7; Lk 22:11; Jn 1:38; Jn 3:2; Jn 8:4; Jn 11:28; Jn 13:13-14; Jn 20:16).
- Doctor (from Latin for "teacher"): see above.
- Minister (Greek "diákonos" for servant): Jesus was a minister (Mt 20:28; Mk 10:45; Jn 13:5; Rom 15:8; Heb 8:2).
- Reverend: God is reverend (Ps 89:7; Ps 111:9; Eph 5:21; Heb 12:28).

- Priest: Jesus is our priest (Heb 5:6; Heb 7:21+24; cf. Heb 2:17; Heb 3:1; Heb 4:14; Heb 5:10; Heb 6:20; Heb 7:26).
- Bishop (derived from the Greek “epískopos” for “overseer”): Jesus is our overseer (1Pet 2:25).
- Eminence (from Latin for “to stand out,” i.e. “holy,” salutation for cardinals): God is holy (Ex 15:11; 1Sam 2:2; Ps 97:12; Ps 99:5; Isa 6:3; Isa 43:15; Rev 15:4).
- Pope (from the ancient Greek for “father”): God is our father (Mt 6:9; Mt 23:9; Lk 11:2).

All these titles therefore belong to God, which is why we should never use them to call each other. For example, if we perform a pastoral ministry, we should not be addressed as “pastor.” It makes sense to identify who is a pastor, evangelist, prophet, teacher, etc. You can also indicate that you are a pastor, for example. Paul and Peter also mentioned that they were apostles (e.g. Rom 1:1; 1Pet 1:1). This helps others to know who they can turn to for help. Jesus made all believers priests (Rev 1:6; Rev 5:10; 1Pet 2:9).

Jesus also gave the reason for his exhortation not to use honorific titles by saying that we are all brothers (Mt 23:8). And so throughout the New Testament, every apostle and prophet was addressed only as “brother” (Acts 2:37; Acts 9:17; Acts 21:20; Acts 22:13; 2Pet 3:15).

It is important that we do not exalt ourselves (Mt 23:12; Lk 14:11). Jesus also said:

⁴¹ I do not accept glory from human beings... ⁴⁴ How can you believe since you accept glory from one another but do not seek the glory that comes from the only God? (Jn 5:41+44)

The glory (Greek “dóksa”) which Jesus spoke of here is a divine glory due to God (Gal 1:5; Rev 5:13; Rev 7:12). It is written:

I am the Lord; that is my name! I will not yield my glory to another or my praise to idols. (Isa 42:8; see also Isa 48:11)

God does not share his glory with us human beings. Consequently, in particular, we should not use any title that belongs to God.

3.4 What characteristics should elders have?

As we have already noted, an elder should be a good example (Heb 13:7; 1Pet 5:3) and serve others (Mt 20:27; Mk 10:42-45; Mk 9:35; Lk 22:25-26). Paul wrote:

¹ The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. ² Therefore an overseer must **be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,** ³ **not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money.** ⁴ **He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive,** ⁵ for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church? ⁶ He must **not be a recent convert,** or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. ⁷ Moreover, he must **be well thought of by outsiders,** so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil. (1Tim 3:1-7 ESV)

⁶ if anyone is **above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.** ⁷ For an overseer, as God’s steward, **must be above reproach. He must not be arrogant or quick-tempered**

or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain, ⁸ but hospitable, a lover of good, self-controlled, upright, holy, and disciplined. (Tit 1:6-8 ESV)

All this can be summarized in one sentence: An elder must be a good example. Almost casually it was mentioned that he must be able to teach (1Tim 3:2). Every Christian should have or at least strive for each of the above characteristics. Elders must have produced good fruit so that they have a good reputation (cf. Mt 7:15-23).

Paul wrote that an elder should be “the husband of one wife” (1Tim 3:2; Tit 1:6). Does that mean you cannot be an elder if you are not married? Paul also wrote:

⁷ I wish that all of you were as I am. But each of you has your own gift from God; one has this gift, another has that. ⁸ Now to the unmarried and the widows I say: it is good for them to stay unmarried, as I do. ⁹ But if they cannot control themselves, they should marry, for it is better to marry than to burn with passion. (1Cor 7:7-9)

In this passage, Paul emphasized and highlighted it as worthy of imitation that he himself was not married. He as an apostle was of course also an elder and he even encouraged to imitate him (Phil 3:17). It can thus not be correct that an elder must have a wife. Probably, Paul meant that one must not have more than one wife.

Can you only be an elder if your children are also good examples? King David was a man after God’s own heart (1Sam 13:14), but two of his sons, Amnon and Absalom (2Sam 13:1), were really bad examples: Amnon raped his sister Tamar (2Sam 13:14) and Absalom committed treason, appointed himself as king (2Sam 15:10) and committed adultery in public with his father’s wives (2Sam 16:22). Samuel was judge over Israel all the days of his life (1Sam 7:15), but his sons took bribes and perverted justice during his lifetime (1Sam 8:1-3). And the sons of Eli the priest were worthless men, they had no regard for the Lord (1Sam 2:12) and they committed fornication (1Sam 2:22).

Did Paul perhaps mean only young children? That is questionable. After all, one is not likely to bring a charge of debauchery (Tit 1:6) against young children; debauchery (Greek “asōtia”) is to be understood, for example, as drunkenness (Eph 5:18). Additionally, the word “children” (Greek “téknōn”) does not only stand for young children, but, as in English, it is also commonly used for adult offspring (e.g. Mt 21:28; Mt 27:25; Lk 15:31; Jn 8:39; Gal 4:28+31; 1Tim 5:4; 1Pet 3:6).

The characteristics in Paul’s epistles to Timothy and Titus can be a guide, but should not be considered as the one and only binding benchmark. For example, we have already read above that one should imitate the faith of the elders (Heb 13:7); so elders should also have faith worthy of imitation, but Paul did not mention this.

That a recent convert cannot be an elder is self-evident (1Tim 3:6), like many other things. Being an elder is not primarily about age, but about having become a mature exemplary Christian over the course of time.

Paul wrote about elders always in the masculine gender. Can women therefore not be elders? Addressing readers exclusively in the masculine gender is standard practice in the biblical epistles. When sisters were mentioned, usually specific individuals were meant. Sisters are not addressed in any epistle, but brothers only. That is the case if you read the ancient Greek texts. However, meanwhile modern translations interpret the word “brothers” (Greek “adelphos”) as “brothers and sisters” (e.g. Rom 1:13 NIV, NIRV).

Jesus had multiplied five loaves and two fish, and many people were filled; in three gospels it says that around 5000 men ate, without even mentioning women or children (Mk 6:44;

Lk 9:14; Jn 6:10), although they were present (Mt 14:21). On another occasion Jesus and his disciples had only seven loaves and a few fish and about 4000 men ate, with women and children also being fed (Mt 15:38); in Mark's Gospel it is written that approximately 4000 ate, even without mentioning that this refers only to the men (Mk 8:9). And even when reference was later made to these miracles, they were only briefly mentioned as 5000 or 4000 (Mt 16:9-10; Mk 8:19-20).

Explicitly mentioning women was unusual at the time, even if they were included (Rom 8:29; Heb 2:11-12). Therefore, due to the wording in the masculine gender, we cannot conclude that only men can be elders. The question whether women can also be elders will be answered later in section 9.

3.5 How to become an elder?

Paul and Barnabas had been in Antioch (Acts 13:1). They had successfully evangelized in Iconium and Lystra and suddenly departed from there because their lives were threatened (Acts 13:50 to Acts 14:20). Later they returned to these three cities and...

Paul and Barnabas appointed elders for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. (Acts 14:23)

The Greek word “xeirotoneō,” translated here as “to appoint,” literally means to stretch out one's hand expressing agreement. That Paul and Barnabas left suddenly was certainly not the only reason why the elders were appointed later. These churches had not existed for long. The new believers had to act like elders for a certain period of time before they were publicly appointed or honored as such.

Paul wrote to Titus:

The reason I left you in Crete was that you might put in order what was left unfinished and appoint elders in every town, as I directed you. (Tit 1:5)

Paul entrusted Titus to appoint elders, because this had not yet been done. So there must have been churches without elders in these towns. Certainly, also these elders had to prove their maturity over the course of time before they were appointed.

Have their duties or responsibilities changed after their appointment? Certainly not, because they still served their brothers and sisters. The appointment of elders is primarily an announcement to the others, namely that they are exemplary and trustworthy.

Let us see how Paul was called and began his ministry. Jesus appeared to Paul (Acts 9:1-7). After he could see again, he was baptized, filled with the Holy Spirit, and immediately began to preach the gospel (Acts 9:20). Paul had a divine revelation (Gal 1:12; see also Eph 3:3; 1Cor 11:23). He himself wrote about this:

¹⁵ But when God, who set me apart from my mother's womb and called me by his grace, was pleased ¹⁶ to reveal his Son in me so that I might preach him among the Gentiles, my immediate response was not to consult any human being. ¹⁷ I did not go up to Jerusalem to see those who were apostles before I was, but I went into Arabia. Later I returned to Damascus. ¹⁸ Then after three years, I went up to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Cephas and stayed with him fifteen days. ¹⁹ I saw none of the other apostles – only James, the Lord's brother. (Gal 1:15-19)

Paul began his evangelistic ministry without being appointed or confirmed by apostles or elders. He had not even consulted with them. He wrote about himself:

Paul, an apostle – sent not from men nor by a man, but by Jesus Christ and God the Father, who raised him from the dead (Gal 1:1)

⁴... Jesus Christ our Lord. ⁵ Through him we received grace and apostleship... (Rom 1:4-5)

He understood that he had been called by Jesus to be an apostle. To the Corinthians he wrote:

Even though I may not be an apostle to others, surely I am to you... (1Cor 9:2)

So apparently some doubted that Paul was an apostle, which may be an indication of not having been appointed as such by the other apostles.

Also, about the elders in Ephesus, there is nothing in the Bible about them being appointed by others, but that...

...the Holy Spirit has made... [them] overseers... (Acts 20:28)

John the Baptist was also called directly by God (Lk 3:2; cf. Jn 1:6), as were Moses and Aaron (Ex 3:1-10; 1Sam 12:6), Jeremiah (Jer 1:4-5) and Ezekiel (Ez 2:3 until Ez 3:11).

It is good to be confirmed by elders or other brothers and sisters, but it is not absolutely necessary. One becomes an elder by serving as an elder in an exemplary way.

3.6 How to recognize elders?

How one acts, how one is, and what one does are indications of whether one is an elder. Note that there are also false brethren and false elders, that is, people who pretend to be brethren, elders, apostles, prophets or teachers when they are not (Mt 24:5+11+24; Mk 13:6+22; 2Cor 11:13+26; 2Pet 2:1; 1Jn 4:1; Rev 2:2; see also Rom 16:17-18; 1Tim 1:3).

Jesus warned:

¹⁵ Watch out for false prophets. They come to you in sheep's clothing, but inwardly they are ferocious wolves. ¹⁶ By their fruit you will recognize them. Do people pick grapes from thorn-bushes, or figs from thistles? ¹⁷ Likewise, every good tree bears good fruit, but a bad tree bears bad fruit. ¹⁸ A good tree cannot bear bad fruit, and a bad tree cannot bear good fruit. ¹⁹ Every tree that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. ²⁰ Thus, by their fruit you will recognize them. ²¹ Not everyone who says to me, "Lord, Lord," will enter the kingdom of heaven, but only the one who does the will of my Father who is in heaven. ²² Many will say to me on that day, "Lord, Lord, did we not prophesy in your name and in your name drive out demons and in your name perform many miracles?" ²³ Then I will tell them plainly, "I never knew you. Away from me, you evildoers!" (Mt 7:15-23)

And in the epistles we read:

¹ Dear friends, do not believe every spirit, but test the spirits to see whether they are from God, because many false prophets have gone out into the world. ² This is how you can recognize the Spirit of God: every spirit that acknowledges that Jesus Christ has come in the flesh is from God, ³ but every spirit that does not acknowledge Jesus is not from God. This is the spirit of the antichrist, which you have heard is coming and even now is already in the world. (1Jn 4:1-3)

And that because of false brethren unawares brought in, who came in privily to spy out our liberty which we have in Christ Jesus, that they might bring us into bondage. (Gal 2:4 KJV)

And in their greed they will exploit you with false words... (2Pet 2:3 ESV)

We are all urged to pay attention, not only the elders, because these words are for all brothers and sisters. So we should look at the fruits of the people (Mt 7:15-23) and their confession (1Jn 4:1-3). True elders also do not bring anyone into bondage (Gal 2:4). They do not put others down or belittle them, but deliberately foster their spiritual growth. They also do not exploit anyone (2Pet 2:3), neither financially nor in terms of their labor.

4 Deacons

This section is about the duties of deacons, how they should be and how to become a deacon.

4.1 What are their duties?

We read about the first appointment of deacons in the Book of Acts:

¹ In those days when the number of disciples was increasing, the Hellenistic Jews among them complained against the Hebraic Jews because their widows were being overlooked in the daily **distribution of food**. ² So the Twelve gathered all the disciples together and said, 'It would not be right for us to neglect the ministry of the word of God in order **to wait on tables**. ³ Brothers and sisters, choose seven men from among you who are known to **be full of the Spirit and wisdom**. We will turn this responsibility over to them ⁴ and will give our attention to prayer and the ministry of the word.' ⁵ This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit; also Philip, Procorus, Nicanor, Timon, Parmenas, and Nicolas from Antioch, a convert to Judaism. ⁶ They presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6; duties of the deacons are also highlighted in **dark brown** and **light brown** are again indications of how they should behave or how they should be)

The duties of deacons are **hands-on activities**. The Greek word "diákonos" literally means someone who thoroughly raises up dust by moving in a hurry. Therefore, a deacon serves eagerly and diligently. The word "diákonos" is often translated as "servant," for example:

... Jesus called the Twelve and said, 'Anyone who wants to be first must be the very last, and the servant of all.' (Mk 9:35; see also Mt 20:26; Mt 23:11; Mk 10:43)

Paul referred to himself several times as a servant (Greek "diákonos:" 1Cor 3:5; Eph 3:7; Col 1:25). Everyone should be a servant. Just as everyone should aspire to have the characteristics of elders, everyone should also have an attitude of being a servant, and this explicitly includes elders.

4.2 What characteristics should deacons have?

Similar to what Paul wrote about the desired characteristics of elders, he wrote the following about deacons:

⁸ Deacons likewise must be **dignified, not double-tongued, not addicted to much wine, not greedy for dishonest gain**. ⁹ They must hold the mystery of the faith with a **clear conscience**. ¹⁰ And let them also be tested first; then let them serve as deacons if they prove themselves **blameless**. ¹¹ **Their wives likewise must be dignified, not slanderers, but sober-minded, faithful in all things**. ¹² Let deacons each be the **husband of one wife, managing their children and their own households well**. (1Tim 3:8-12 ESV)

To summarize briefly, a deacon should be a good example. This list is similar to the list already discussed above regarding elders and my comments on it are equally relevant here.

4.3 How to become a deacon?

In the first report on deacons, we read earlier that they were chosen by the “whole group.” Then the apostles prayed and laid their hands on them. (Acts 6:1-6)

Paul instructed that deacons should be tested first (1Tim 3:10). This makes sense, because the duties of deacons are of practical service and not everyone possesses the required capabilities.

Thus, when one is appointed as a deacon, he assumes the corresponding service.

5 Comparison of elders and deacons

Elders and deacons have some similarities, but also very significant differences. Both elders and deacons have a special place in the body of Christ, in which they are observed by many. They should have a blameless reputation and be a good example.

When an elder is appointed or confirmed, his ministry is recognized by others in public. This does not change any duties or service. Therefore, there is no need to appoint them on probation, because they have already developed into that calling beforehand. As an elder, one is primarily a role model. Thus, elders do not serve for a restricted period of service; as an elder, you lead and serve as long as you live.

It is different with deacons. With their appointment, they take over a certain practical service. Thus, one holds the office of a deacon as long as one performs this service.

Deacons are chosen by others to serve them practically. On the contrary, elders are not chosen by others, but are honored by their appointment. Whether one is an elder or not does not depend on whether one has been formally appointed by others.

6 Duties of all believers

In this section, we will study scriptures that talk about what all Christians should do, whether they are elders or not. Afterwards, we will compare the duties of elders with those of all believers. We will thus exclusively focus on those matters that are essential for this comparison.

In the following subsections, we will look at the duties of which we read above that they should be performed by elders (such as teaching, admonishing, encouraging, refuting and praying for the sick). Then we will look at acts that are typically performed by elders, such as administering the Lord's Supper, baptizing and doing miracles.

6.1 Caring

In the epistles we can read:

... All of them will **take care of one another**. (1Cor 12:25 NIRV)

None of you should look out just for your own good. **Each of you should also look out for the good of others**. (Phil 2:4 NIRV)

And let us consider how to **stir up one another to love and good works**, (Heb 10:24 ESV)

Therefore **encourage one another and build each other up**, just as in fact you are doing. (1Thess 5:11)

Brothers and sisters, if someone is caught in a sin, you who live by the Spirit should **restore** that person gently. But watch yourselves, or you also may be tempted. (Gal 6:1)

If you see any brother or sister commit a sin that does not lead to death, you should **pray** and God will give them life... (1Jn 5:16)

God wants us to take care of each other and be supportive. We should look after others, encourage another, build each other up and pray for one another. All this is part of shepherding what also elders should do.

Already in the old Mosaic covenant there was the following commandment:

...love your neighbor as yourself... (Lev 19:18)

Loving your neighbor is not a new commandment from Jesus. God has always wanted people to help each other and support the poor (Deut 15:7-11).

6.2 Teaching

In the epistles it is written:

Let the message of Christ dwell among you richly as you **teach** and **admonish** one another with all wisdom through psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit, **singing to God** with gratitude in your hearts. (Col 3:16)

In fact, though by this time you ought to **be teachers**, you need someone to teach you the elementary truths of God's word all over again. You need milk, not solid food! (Heb 5:12)

Older women... are to **teach** what is good, (Tit 2:3 ESV)

And the Lord's servant must **not be quarrelsome** but must be **kind** to everyone, **able to teach, not resentful**. (2Tim 2:24)

So teaching is not something which should be done by the elders only, instead, all believers should teach more and more as time goes on.

Long before, Moses said in the authority of God:

⁶ And these words that I command you today shall be on your heart. ⁷ You shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, and when you walk by the way, and when you lie down, and when you rise. (Deut 6:6-7 ESV; see also Deut 11:19)

So one should talk about God's words, that is, teach about them, and also when walking "by the way," that is, in public.

6.3 Admonishing, instructing, warning ("nouthetéō")

In the previous section on teaching, we have already read that believers should also admonish one another (Col 3:16; Greek "nouthetéō"), which is also one of the duties of the elders (1Thess 5:12).

Paul wrote to the entire church:

I myself am convinced, my brothers and sisters, that you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with knowledge and competent to **instruct** one another. (Rom 15:14)

And we urge you, brothers and sisters, **warn** those who are idle and disruptive, **encourage** the disheartened, **help** the weak, **be patient** with everyone. (1Thess 5:14)

¹⁴ If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter...¹⁵... **warn** him as a brother. (2Thess 3:14-15 ESV)

In these verses, the Greek verb “nouthetéō” was used again. This time, it is not translated with “to admonish,” but with “to instruct” or “to warn.” Admonishing, instructing and warning are therefore also duties for all believers.

In the days of Moses, God was already commanding the people of Israel:

... Rebuke your neighbor frankly so that you will not share in their guilt... (Lev 19:17)

To admonish or rebuke one's neighbors is therefore nothing new either.

6.4 Encouraging, comforting (“parakaléo”)

The epistles also state:

Therefore **encourage** one another with these words. (1Thess 4:18)

Therefore **encourage** one another and **build each other up**, just as in fact you are doing. (1Thess 5:11)

But **encourage** one another daily, as long as it is called ‘Today’, so that none of you may be hardened by sin's deceitfulness. (Heb 3:13)

²⁴ And let us consider how to **stir up** one another to love and good works, ²⁵ not neglecting to **meet** together, as is the habit of some, but **encouraging** one another, and all the more as you see the Day drawing near. (Heb 10:24-25 ESV)

He comforts us in all our troubles. Now we can **comfort** others when they are in trouble. We ourselves receive comfort from God. (2Cor 1:4 NIRV)

Now instead, you ought to forgive and **comfort** him, so that he will not be overwhelmed by excessive sorrow. (2Cor 2:7)

To encourage and to comfort (Greek “parakaléo”) are also duties of the elders (Tit 1:9).

6.5 Correcting, refuting opponents

Paul wrote:

²⁴ And the Lord's servant must **not be quarrelsome** but **kind** to everyone, **able to teach, patiently enduring evil**, ²⁵ **correcting his opponents** with gentleness... (2Tim 2:24-25 ESV)

The apostles sometimes humbly referred to themselves as servants of the Lord Jesus (Greek “doúlos;” Rom 1:1; 2Cor 4:5; Gal 1:10; Phil 1:1; Tit 1:1; Jam 1:1; 2Pet 1:1; Jude 1:1), and in other passages they used the same word for other believers (1Cor 7:22; Eph 6:6; 1Pet 2:16; Rev 1:1; Rev 22:6).

All believers are servants of God and should correct their opponents. This is very similar to what elders should do, which is “to refute those who oppose” (Tit 1:9).

6.6 Praying for the sick

James encouraged:

Therefore **confess your sins to each other** and **pray for each other so that you may be healed**. The prayer of a righteous person is powerful and effective. (Jam 5:16)

Praying for the sick is thus not just the duty of the elders (Jam 5:14). Jesus said that the believers...

...will **lay their hands on the sick**, and they will recover. (Mk 16:18 ESV)

6.7 Administering the Lord's Supper

The Lord's Supper has its origin in the Passover meal, which was celebrated in the family, that is, without a priest. It can be celebrated by all believers without the presence of elders. For more details, see my article on the Lord's Supper.

6.8 Baptizing

In the Book of Acts there are reports of several baptisms, including the following:

- Ananias was a disciple (Acts 9:10) and he baptized Saul (Acts 9:18), who is also known to us as Paul (Acts 13:9).
- Peter ordered that the new believers were baptized (Acts 10:48) by Jewish believers who had come with him (Acts 10:45). And these were brothers from Joppa (Acts 10:23).
- Because of Paul's evangelism, Crispus and many other Corinthians believed and were baptized (Acts 18:8). In his First Epistle to the Corinthians, Paul stated that he did not baptize any Corinthians except Crispus and Gaius and the household of Stephanas (1Cor 1:14-16). Therefore, many other believers in Corinth were most probably not baptized by elders, as the following observation also shows:
- It was consistently the case that believers were baptized immediately after their conversion, not only in the above examples, but in principle (Acts 2:41; Acts 8:12; Acts 8:35-38; Acts 16:14-15; Acts 16:33; Acts 19:5; Acts 22:16). As we have seen above, there were also churches in which no elders were appointed. So we can conclude that the new converts were baptized by others.

Likewise, Jesus did not baptize himself, but his disciples (Jn 4:2). – So you do not have to be an elder to baptize.

On a side note, I suggest to baptize the new converts according to the biblical model immediately after their conversion. The person who led the new convert to Christ can also baptize. If there is no suitable lake nearby, someone can be baptized in a swimming pool or bathtub, for example. There is no biblical example to keep someone waiting for weeks or to prepare someone in several meetings before the baptism.

6.9 Doing miracles

Jesus said:

Very truly I tell you, whoever believes in me will **do the works I have been doing, and they will do even greater things** than these, because I am going to the Father. (Jn 14:12)

¹⁷ And these signs will accompany those who believe: in my name they will **drive out demons; they will speak in new tongues; ¹⁸ they will pick up snakes with their hands; and when they drink deadly poison, it will not hurt them at all; they will place their hands on people who are ill, and they will get well.** (Mk 16:17-18)

Stephen was a deacon (Acts 6:5) and he “performed great wonders and signs” (Acts 6:8). So miracles are not reserved for the elders, but it is sufficient to believe.

7 Comparison of elders and other believers

In the following table we have listed the references to the scriptures related to the duties of the elders. And in the case of duties that are also to be carried out by the other believers, we have added the corresponding references.

Duties	Elders	All Believers
Shepherding	Acts 20:28 Heb 13:17 1Pet 5:2	Caring: 1Cor 12:25 Gal 6:1 Phil 2:4 1Thess 5:11 Heb 10:24 1Jn 5:16
Leading, directing	1Thess 5:12 1Tim 5:17	
Teaching	1Tim 5:17 Heb 13:7	Col 3:16 Heb 5:12 Tit 2:3 2Tim 2:24
Admonishing, instructing, warning (Greek „nouthetéo“)	1Thess 5:12	Rom 15:14 Col 3:16 1Thess 5:14 2Thess 3:15
Encouraging, comforting (Greek „parakaléo“)	Tit 1:9	2Cor 1:4 2Cor 2:7 1Thess 4:18 1Thess 5:11 Heb 3:13 Heb 10:25
Correcting, refuting opponents	Tit 1:9	2Tim 2:25
Praying for the sick	Jam 5:14	Mk 16:18 Jam 5:16
Anointing the sick with oil	Jam 5:14	

There is no verse that encourages all believers to anoint one another with oil. However, Jesus made all believers priests (Rev 1:6; Rev 5:10; 1Pet 2:9). Therefore, there are no acts which are reserved for the elders.

It is remarkable that the Bible explicitly states that almost all duties of the elders should also be carried out by the other believers. This even includes some of the duties of the shepherds, because mutual care should also be done by all believers, that is, the area of shepherding that is not related to leadership.

The duties of elders and others only differ in the fact that elders additionally assume a leading role.

8 Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers

Paul wrote:

¹⁹ ... you are... ²⁰ built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. (Eph 2:19-20)

The Greek word for “apostle” is “apóstolos.” It is derived from the verb “apostéllō” which in turn is derived from “apó” (English “away from”) and “stéllō” (English “to send”). According to the dictionary, an apostle is someone sent (commissioned), focusing back on the authority (commissioning) of the sender. Apostles are messengers or ambassadors who are acting in an exceptional way in the authority of Jesus (Acts 4:33; Acts 5:12). Their ministry is characterized by signs, wonders, miracles and mighty works (2Cor 12:12). The twelve disciples of Jesus were apostles (Mt 10:2; Lk 6:13) and others were also called as such (Acts 14:14; Rom 16:7). Paul also called himself an apostle (e.g. Rom 1:1).

The word “prophet” (Greek “prophētēs”) is derived from the Greek “pró” (English “beforehand”) and “phēmi” (English “to shine”). Prophets receive divine revelations to an outstanding degree (Eph 3:5; Rev 10:7). Through their prophetic speaking they strengthen, encourage and comfort others (1Cor 14:3; Acts 15:32). In addition, they prophesy about the future (Acts 11:28; Acts 21:11).

In the verses just quoted, no other ministries were mentioned than apostles and prophets, and these were even referred to as the foundation on which we are built. Of course, the apostles were also elders. John also referred to himself as an elder in his epistles (2Jn 1:1; 3Jn 1:1). Since, besides the apostles, only the prophets were mentioned as the foundation, it can be assumed that all prophets are also elders. We are talking about the ministry of prophet, that is, about people whom God has called in a special way for this ministry. Not everyone who prophesies has the ministry of a prophet.

Two chapters later, we read in the Epistle to the Ephesians:

And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, (Eph 4:11 ESV)

The word “evangelist” (Greek “euaggelistēs”) is derived from the Greek “eú” (English “good, well”) and “angellō” (English “announce, herald”); an evangelist is someone with a calling from God to announce or to proclaim the good news of the Gospel. Shepherds care for others, pay careful attention, provide, protect and lead. And a teacher instructs, educates and imparts knowledge.

In this verse, evangelists, shepherds and teachers were mentioned in addition. Is it possible for someone to be a teacher, but not an elder? I assume that one must have proven oneself as an elder, that is, served as a role model, before being called by God to such a ministry. Therefore, I assume that all evangelists, shepherds and teachers are also elders.

Paul wrote:

And God has placed in the church first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healing, of helping, of guidance, and of different kinds of tongues. (1Cor 12:28)

Only three ministries are explicitly mentioned in this text, namely the apostles, prophets and teachers; the rest of the list does not deal with ministries, but with gifts. Guidance, which is the only duty which distinguishes the elders from the others, is just one of many.

These three verses are about ministries that God has given, and it is remarkable that the apostles and prophets are always mentioned first, and the elders are not mentioned at all. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers are elders with a very special calling.

As we have already seen, the elders should shepherd and teach. However, this does not mean that every elder is a shepherd or a teacher. Just as there are people who prophesy without having the ministry of a prophet, there are also elders who are neither shepherds nor teachers.

9 The role of women in the church

Paul wrote to the Corinthians:

³⁴ Women should remain silent in the churches. They are not allowed to speak, but must be in submission, as the law says. ³⁵ If they want to enquire about something, they should ask their own husbands at home; for it is disgraceful for a woman to speak in the church. (1Cor 14:34-35)

These words may seem very harsh to us nowadays. The epistles of the New Testament were not addressed to us, but in this case particularly written for the Corinthians, with extensive knowledge of the special situation at that time. They also contain answers to questions that are unknown to us. The writers assumed that the readers were aware of this background; for otherwise they would certainly have explained certain aspects in more detail. This in fact caused problems even in the early days of the church, and so already Peter wrote:

¹⁵ And account that the longsuffering of our Lord is salvation; even as our beloved brother Paul also according to the wisdom given unto him hath written unto you; ¹⁶ As also in all his epistles, speaking in them of these things; in which are some things hard to be understood, which they that are unlearned and unstable wrest, as they do also the other scriptures, unto their own destruction. (2Pet 3:15-16 KJV)

Among the Corinthians, it may have been the case that women did not understand many things due to less education or having previously been prevented from attending meetings. Perhaps Paul wanted to avoid disturbing the meetings with simple questions from individuals that could easily be answered individually at home. Before we conclude, let us turn to another passage of Paul's letter to Timothy:

I do not permit a woman to teach or to assume authority over a man; she must be quiet. (1Tim 2:12)

Let us also read what Paul wrote to Titus:

³ Likewise, teach the older women to be reverent in the way they live, not to be slanderers or addicted to much wine, but to teach what is good. ⁴ Then they can urge the younger women to love their husbands and children, (Tit 2:3-4)

So Paul certainly did not want women never to teach. In the Book of Acts, we can read that this did happen:

... Priscilla and Aquila heard him, they invited him to their home and explained to him the way of God more adequately. (Acts 18:26)

Priscilla was a woman who explained the way of God; this means she taught and she was even mentioned first, before her husband Aquila (Acts 18:2). May it have been Paul's concern that women should not teach in the meetings?

An essential purpose of the epistle to Timothy was to give him guidance in dealing with false doctrines that had emerged (see 1Tim 1:3-7; 1Tim 4:1-8; 1Tim 6:3-5; 1Tim 6:20-21). Perhaps, primarily women had fallen for such false doctrines and with this restriction he intended to prevent these from spreading.

Hence, can we conclude that women should not teach in church services today? Let us consider some more notes to the Corinthians:

⁴ Every man praying or prophesying, having his head covered, dishonoureth his head.

⁵ But every woman that prayeth or prophesieth with her head uncovered dishonoureth her head: for that is even all one as if she were shaven. ⁶ For if the woman be not covered, let her also be shorn... (1Cor 11:4-6 KJV)

So is a man sinning if he walks praying through the snow with a cap on his head? And do we cut off our women's hair if they pray without a head covering? Paul wrote to Timothy:

I also want the women to dress modestly, with decency and propriety, adorning themselves, not with elaborate hairstyles or gold or pearls or expensive clothes, (1Tim 2:9)

If we were implementing these instructions, then any gold and pearl jewelry would also be forbidden. Paul also wrote:

No widow may be put on the list of widows unless she is over sixty, has been faithful to her husband, (1Tim 5:9)

This meant that the church should only provide for widows who are at least 60 years old, because younger widows should marry instead (1Tim 5:14). Is this how it should be practiced nowadays?

In other epistles, there are the following directives:

Greet one another with a holy kiss... (Rom 16:16; also in 1Cor 16:20; 2Cor 13:12; 1Thess 5:26; 1Pet 5:14)

Greet one another with a kiss of love... (1Pet 5:14)

Are we sinning if we do not practice all these things? If we think that some of these instructions do not need to be followed nowadays, why should we keep the others? On the other hand, if we believe that we must follow one of these instructions, should we consequently not keep all the other ones as well?

Let us also consider what is written in the Old Testament:

So God created mankind in his own image, in the image of God he created them; male and female he created them. (Gen 1:27)

Man and woman are both similar to God. They are not the same, of course; they reflect different aspects of God. God has assigned different roles and responsibilities to men and women. During the time of the Mosaic covenant, all men were obliged to travel to the temple in Jerusalem three times a year on the occasion of the highest feasts (Ex 23:17; Ex 34:23; Deut 16:16); women were not obliged to do so according to the Mosaic Law, but sometimes traveled along nonetheless (Lk 2:41). Moses consecrated Aaron and his sons as priests (Ex 29:1-34; Lev 8); and all subsequent priests were sons of Aaron (Num 3:10; Num 18:7; 1Chr 23:13; 2Chr 26:18).

Jesus made all believers priests (Rev 1:6; Rev 5:10; 1Pet 2:9), and not only men, but the whole church (Greek "ekklēsia;" Rev 1:4), and that includes women. Paul wrote:

There is neither Jew nor Gentile, neither slave nor free, nor is there male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus. (Gal 3:28)

For God does not show favoritism. (Rom 2:11)

So God does neither favor men nor women; women and men are worth the same.

Deborah was a prophetess and judged the people of Israel (Judges 4:4); she was the leader of the nation (Judges 5:7), similar to Moses before. In the Old Testament, some other prophetesses were mentioned, namely Miriam (Ex 15:20), Huldah (2Kgs 22:14; 2Chr 34:22) and Noadiah (Neh 6:14). Furthermore, Isaiah wrote of a prophetess without mentioning her name (Isa 8:3). In the New Testament we read about the prophetess Anna (Lk 2:36). Paul greeted the outstanding apostle Junia (Rom 16:7 NIRV) and Junia was probably a woman, but this is controversial.

In some cases, God appointed women to prominent positions; with Deborah, he even chose a woman to be the leader of the entire nation of Israel (Judges 4:4). Note that it is also written:

I the Lord do not change... (Mal 3:6)

Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever. (Heb 13:8)

Every good and perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of the heavenly lights, who does not change like shifting shadows. (Jam 1:17)

God does not change. Therefore, it cannot be assumed that God would not call women to leadership positions nowadays. So it is evident that women can also be elders.

As we noted above, elders should be teaching. Thus, we have to conclude that Paul's ban on women teaching (1Tim 2:12) must not be taken out of its historical context and cannot be universally valid. The same applies to his instruction that women should remain silent in the church (1Cor 14:34).

10 Organizational notes

This last section before the closing deals with church services, membership and charter, NGO, finances and the structure of the church.

10.1 Church services

A church service is usually referred to in the Bible as a meeting, an assembly, an assembling, a coming together or a gathering (1Cor 11:17-18+20+33-34; 1Cor 14:23+26; Heb 10:25; Jam 2:2), rarely also as a church (Greek "ekklēsia": 1Cor 14:28+34-35). It is not reported in the Bible that any church had a special room for their meetings. People gathered in their houses (Acts 5:42; Acts 20:8+20), in the temple (Acts 2:46; Acts 5:42) or near the temple in Solomon's Colonnade (Acts 5:12). In addition, the apostles evangelized in the synagogues (Acts 13:5+14+42; Acts 14:1; Acts 17:1-2+10+17; Acts 18:4+19+26; Acts 19:8) and other places, for example, by the river in Philippi (Acts 16:13) and in the marketplace in Athens (Acts 17:17).

On the one hand, there were meetings focusing on the teaching of an apostle, for example, when someone fell sound asleep and toppled out the window while Paul was speaking (Acts 20:9). On the other hand, there were meetings where everyone was expected to contribute:

... When you come together, each of you has a hymn, or a word of instruction, a revelation, a tongue or an interpretation. Everything must be done so that the church may be built up. (1Cor 14:26)

After this verse, Paul gave the Corinthians some further instructions for their meetings (1Cor 14:27-40).

Now what is a Church service? Jesus said:

For where two or three are gathered in my name, there am I among them. (Mt 18:20 ESV)

When we meet with someone else to pray, praise God or share about matters of faith, that is already a church service. It does not matter where it takes place. The presence of an elder is not required. The first 3000 Christians met daily in their homes, without apostles and elders. At that time, there could not have been enough anyway to attend every single meeting (Acts 2:46). Please remember that there were also churches without any elders at all.

It is remarkable that Paul addressed all instructions regarding the meetings to the whole congregation, he did not even mention elders at all. In particular, Paul did not give them any responsibility related to the arrangement of a church service. Prophecies were to be judged by the entire congregation (1Cor 14:29). He also addressed to the whole church his exhortation "Let all things be done decently and in order." (1Cor 14:40 KJV).

10.2 Church membership

It is written about the first Christians:

⁴⁴ And all that believed were together, and had all things common; ⁴⁵ And sold their possessions and goods, and parted them to all men, as every man had need. ⁴⁶ And they, continuing daily with one accord in the temple, and breaking bread from house to house, did eat their meat with gladness and singleness of heart, ⁴⁷ Praising God, and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to the church daily such as should be saved. (Acts 2:44-47 KJV)

The believers did not only meet for church services, but they lived closely together and supported each other. All believers are part of the church of Jesus, that is the body of Christ, the "ekklēsia," because God is the one who adds to the church as soon as one is saved (verse 47). Christians should have fellowship with other believers and should also participate in church services (Heb 10:25).

If you participate in a church service, then by doing so you are part of this meeting, you thus belong to that part of the church of Jesus that meets at that place at that time. Let us assume that you participate in a service of church X; then you are part of this meeting, you then belong to this church gathering and it does not matter whether church X is considering you as its member or not, i.e. whether you belong to its organization in a special way or not. You belong to a (church) meeting by being there.

Many churches offer the option of becoming a member. When one applies for membership, that person must usually confirm the faith in Jesus and sometimes commitments are required like supporting the church; and then it is decided whether one will be accepted as a member or not. There is no biblical example for this kind of process or church membership. What is the point of determining and documenting whether or not someone is a member of church X?

Paul appealed:

¹⁰ Now I beseech you, brethren, by the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that ye all speak the same thing, and that there be no divisions among you; but that ye be perfectly joined together in the same mind and in the same judgment. ¹¹ For it hath been declared unto me of you, my brethren, by them which are of the house of Chloe, that there are contentions among you. ¹² Now this I say, that every one of you saith, I am of Paul; and I of Apollos; and I of Cephas; and I of Christ. ¹³ Is Christ divided? ... (1Cor 1:10-13 KJV)

Why should someone say: "I am Catholic." or "I am Protestant." or "I am Pentecostal." or "I am Baptist." or "I am a member of church X." or ...? Is Christ divided?

In the same letter, Paul explains further:

¹ And I, brethren, could not speak unto you as unto spiritual, but as unto carnal, even as unto babes in Christ. ² I have fed you with milk, and not with meat: for hitherto ye were not able to bear it, neither yet now are ye able. ³ For ye are yet carnal: for whereas there is among you envying, and strife, and divisions, are ye not carnal, and walk as men? ⁴ For while one saith, I am of Paul; and another, I am of Apollos; are ye not carnal? (1Cor 3:1-4 KJV)

The current division of the body of Christ into different denominations and church organizations is therefore a characteristic of carnal Christians (verse 4), of Christians who are "babes in Christ" (verse 1).

Jesus asked our heavenly Father:

²⁰ 'My prayer is not for them alone. I pray also for those who will believe in me through their message, ²¹ that all of them may be one, Father, just as you are in me and I am in you. May they also be in us so that the world may believe that you have sent me. ²² I have given them the glory that you gave me, that they may be one as we are one – ²³ I in them and you in me – so that they may be brought to complete unity. Then the world will know that you sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me. (Jn 17:20-23)

Jesus obviously cares very much that all of us are one, and not just all within a denomination or all of a particular church, but truly all believers are to be one in complete unity!

How can dividing ourselves into denominations or other church organizations help us with "complete unity" as Jesus asked (Jn 17:23)? Obviously, it is practically impossible, for example, for all Christians of New York City, that is, the New York City church of Jesus, to meet in one gathering. This is not necessary at all. Also in New Testament times, Christians met in small groups in their homes (Acts 2:46).

All Christians should have fellowship and serve one another, and in particular, elders should serve other believers, all believers. If one is an elder, then one is an elder within the church of Jesus, that is, within the body of Jesus, that is, within all of Christianity. Elders should be willing to serve not only "their" congregation or "their" denomination. Naturally, one serves those more with whom one has a closer relationship. This happens by seeing each other more often, for example in church meetings. So it is quite normal that there are elders who primarily serve a certain group and that they may be perceived as elders by them only. Nevertheless, they are elders in the body of Jesus and as such, should be ready to serve all Christians.

Why should believers be recorded in membership lists and divided into denominations or otherwise? Memberships can also be very hindering if they restrict or bind Christians. Let us read from a Gospel:

³⁵ The next day John was there again with two of his disciples. ³⁶ When he saw Jesus passing by, he said, 'Look, the Lamb of God!' ³⁷ When the two disciples heard him say this, they followed Jesus. (Jn 1:35-37)

From one moment to the next the two disciples changed from disciples of John to disciples of Jesus. We should not bind anyone by membership, commitments or anything else. Everyone should feel completely free to follow Jesus, without any need to declare leaving or anything else to anyone. Each one is responsible to God only and not to an elder. This also answers the question of how loyal we need to be to elders: Just as little as the two disciples were loyal to John.

Does that mean that you can just drop everything and run away at any time? Yes, if God directs you in this way. But remember that we should all serve one another. We should not just quit out of selfishness. After all, Jesus said:

So whatever you wish that others would do to you, do also to them, for this is the Law and the Prophets. (Mt 7:12 ESV)

10.3 Church charter

I know of some churches that have a charter which outlines, for example, what they believe, what their goals are, who is an elder and how to become an elder or a member of the church.

It is definitely beneficial to think about what you believe and what your goals are. Having this documented can also be helpful in teaching, for example when dealing with interested people or new believers.

It can also be helpful to write down which duties the elders have; I have also done that in this article. However, such a document is not a charter, but related to teaching only.

Why should one try to regulate spiritual matters in an authoritative charter? Is the Bible not sufficient? In the Bible, there is no mention of any church having a charter or special church rules. We live in the New Covenant today and God writes his instructions in our hearts (Heb 8:10; Heb 10:16; Jer 31:33). Paul wrote:

He has made us competent as ministers of a new covenant – not of the letter but of the Spirit; for the letter kills, but the Spirit gives life. (2Cor 3:6)

God has set us free from the obligation to keep the Mosaic Law. Why should we now impose a charter on ourselves? Doing so would contradict the principles of the New Covenant. For a deeper insight into this matter, you may wish to turn to my article "What Commandments should Christians keep?"

10.4 NGO

Many churches have established a nongovernmental organization (NGO) or another legal entity in order to undertake business affairs such as renting facilities. A charter of an NGO is a legal document and, as such, very different from a spiritual church charter which we discussed in the previous section.

For such legal entities, there is also no biblical example, but they can certainly be helpful to the body of Jesus.

10.5 Finances

In some churches it is taught that you should support the church with your tithes, even though tithing is part of the Mosaic Law. We do not have to tithe, but we should honor God with our possessions and the firstfruits of our income. We should also support the poor and God's servants. For more details, see the section on financial obligations in my article "What Commandments should Christians keep?"

10.6 Church structure

The body of Jesus today, that is, His church, is structured to a large extent as illustrated in the following diagram. The elders are shown in brown and the other believers in black:



It is normal that there are elders of different maturity, that is, that some elders are "elder" or more senior than others, and that one elder is a role model to another elder. For example, Paul was an example to Timothy and an elder for him, whereas Timothy in turn was an elder for others. This is why the elders are shown in different shades of brown in the diagram.

Many churches have a hierarchical structure. The elders supervise others and are sometimes even authorized to give them orders. Moreover, they sometimes have the possibility to take disciplinary action against the elders who report to them. This is a form of control and ruling that Jesus explicitly does not want (see above).

Elders shall direct others, but they shall not be above them. They were placed in the congregation and not above it. And this is what the following diagram should illustrate:



Jesus, as explained above, does not want anyone to exercise authority over anyone else (Mt 20:25). Every congregation must consequently be completely independent, no matter how small it is; this includes small groups within a larger congregation, such as house groups and similar. There must not be any overarching structure where someone would have the authority to interfere with or restrict their matters. For example, if a congregation has to inquire elsewhere about whom to hire as pastor or whether a certain guest speaker may be invited, then such control is already a form of ruling.

Being independent and autonomous does not mean being on your own. God is pleased when we have fellowship and serve one another and also when one church serves another church. Paul traveled to Jerusalem to get acquainted with Peter (Gal 1:18); according to the dictionary, getting acquainted (Greek "historéō") means to learn by inquiring (doing a personal examination) and to gain knowledge by "visiting" which conducts "a full interview." The churches in Galatia and in Corinth supported the church in Jerusalem (1Cor 16:1-3; see also 2Cor 8:1-15; Acts 11:29-30; Rom 15:26). The emphasis is again on helping and serving, without control.

10.6.1 Do elders hold an office?

At the beginning of the Book of Acts, it says that someone else was called to replace Judas, the disciple of Jesus who betrayed him. There we read about Judas:

He was one of our number and shared in our ministry. (Acts 1:17)

And a few verses later it says:

... Let another take his office. (Acts 1:20 ESV)

The Greek word for “office” here is “episkopé.” It is related to the word for overseer and describes what an overseer does. So it is better translated as follows:

... May another take his place of leadership. (Acts 1:20)

The same word “episkopé” is used in the epistle to Timothy, where it talks about what elders should be like (1Tim 3:1).

In Acts, Psalm 109 was quoted, where the Hebrew word “pequddah” is found for the oversight (Ps 109:8). And this is also in line with the fact that Judas received a “ministry” as we read shortly before (Acts 1:17).

Those who hold an office have some degree of executive authority, command and control. They are integrated into an official organization and hierarchy, and they perform official acts that others are not allowed to perform. As we have seen above, these things do not apply to elders according to the biblical model. For this reason, the use of the term “office” would be misleading and we should better speak of the ministry of an elder.

11 Closing words

First, a closing word to the elders, subsequently to all believers.

11.1 Closing word to elders

As an elder, serve and shepherd all believers by being a good example to them. You are not to be called pastor, priest, apostle or the like. Do not domineer and do not exercise authority over anyone. You are not responsible to anyone else, but only to God for how you serve others.

I would like to compare your service with the service of a chambermaid in a hotel: Unless there is a “Do not disturb!” sign on the door, a chambermaid is expected to knock on the door and ask if she may clean. But if no service is desired from her, then, depending on the situation, she may briefly inform about the possibilities of getting the room cleaned later; but then she leaves. She is not responsible for cleaning the room if it is not wanted. She also does not hold a grudge against anyone when leaving the hotel.

If someone thinks differently than you and does not want to listen to your advice, then you can pray for him as God lays it on your heart. You are not responsible for what others do or what they believe, but only for serving them as a role model, if they are willing. Paul wrote:

... Maybe you think differently about something. But God will make it clear to you.
(Phil 3:15 NIRV)

You can trust God to guide and direct all believers.

11.2 Closing word to all believers

Have fellowship with other Christians. Pay attention to what the elders say, test it and be inspired by it. But also note that there are false elders. You are not accountable to any elder, but only to God. You are also under no obligation of false loyalty to any elder or congregation. Let God guide you in everything you do. Whether male or female, follow your calling and do not let (male) elders keep you down.

You are a priest and we are all brothers. Do not call anyone pastor, priest, apostle, bishop, etc. There is no action that is reserved for the elders. So you may also baptize, administer the Lord's Supper and everything else that elders are allowed to do.

I would like to close with the following scripture:

³ Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, ⁴ not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. (Phil 2:3-4)

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