

**Systematic Theology**  
**Church Government: Monarchy, Anarchy, or Democracy?**  
**Selected Scriptures**  
**October 29, 2006 PM**  
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Well, we began this year looking on Sunday nights at the study of the church. We actually began by looking at the doctrine of salvation and finishing that up. But we began afresh and anew all that God has to say about His church. And it's my hope and desire that we will finish that before this year is done, sometime before Christmas. We'll see if that happens or not. And then we'll begin our last section of theology, that is, what the Bible teaches about the last things, a look at prophecy, beginning, Lord willing, in January. I also hope to on Sunday mornings starting in January, if all goes as planned and I finish James 5 before Christmas, which again, I hope to do. Then I will start in January a study of worship because I think that is the last great topic that we should study regarding the doctrine of the church, and that is, we are by definition, a worshipping body of people. And what does that mean? And what does that look like? So that's my hope, sort of mapping out for you the rest of the year. We'll, Lord willing, finish James 5 in the morning, we'll finish our study of the church on Sunday night and then beginning with the New Year, we'll do eschatology on Sunday night, the doctrine of last things, and beginning Sunday morning with a short series on worship.

But tonight, we come again to our study of the church. More than a year ago, we had the opportunity as a church to watch a brief film entitled, *Unlocking the Mystery of Life*. It described the journey of several scientists away from evolution toward intelligent design. The video wasn't arguing for biblical creation, in fact, most of the men aren't even Christians. The focus of the video, which will never be a best-seller, was the bacteria flagellum. The flagellum is that tiny hair that protrudes from a single cell bacterium and is what enables the bacteria to move. Under powerful microscopes we were able to see that the flagellum is actually a tiny motor, complete with a hair as a rotor. Really fascinating, because in reality every human cell is composed of a number of tiny motors including even a sophisticated assembly line within each individual cell. As I thought about that, not only was I in awe of God's great creative ability, but I was also

struck with the fact that even down to the smallest living things, our God is a God of meticulous structure and order.

Now when you take that reality and you bring it into the life of the church, it's amazing how immediately those who would agree with what I've just said about the human body, and the cells, and the bacteria flagellum, will suddenly back away and come to a different conclusion. Many churches and their leaders think the issue of how the church is organized, its structure, is unimportant. If God cared so much to give so much structure and order to the tiniest cell, how in the world could He have left the church of Jesus Christ, His chief base of operations in the world, without a structure and an order? But this is what some say.

For example, Donald Miller, in his book, *The Nature and Mission of the Church* says, "No particular structure of church life is divinely ordained." He goes on to say, "Any form, which the Holy Spirit can inhabit and to which He may impart the life of Christ, must be accepted as valid for the church. As all forms of life adapt themselves to their environment, so does the life of Christ by His Spirit in the church." In other words, structure doesn't really matter. The order and structure of the church is something that's left up to us. But in fact, this issue is absolutely crucial because organizational structure determines how people think and act. More and more that's seen in the business world. Businesses understand that even the structure of an office communicates to people and they act upon that structure and live out the implications of that structure in how they do their work. And if structure is important to secular organizations and even to nations, then certainly the structure of the church should be very important to us.

Alexander Strauch, in his excellent book, *Biblical Eldership*, says this,

Some of the worst havoc wrought to the Christian faith has been a direct result of unscriptural forms of church structure. Only a few centuries after the apostles' death, for example, Christ's churches began to assimilate both Roman and Jewish concepts of status, power, and priesthood. Under Christ's name, an elaborately structured institution emerged that corrupted the simple family structure of the apostolic churches, robbed God's people of their lofty position and ministry in Christ, and exchanged Christ's supremacy over His people for the supremacy of the institutional church.

What should matter most to us is this: what does the scripture say about the government, the structure of the church? Bob Saucy, in his little book on the church says, “The church must have some form, in fact, it always does. There’s no such thing as a church without form. The question remains,” he says, “as to which form is prescribed in the scripture.” Now my task tonight, and next week, is two-fold. I want to present the evidence from scripture to you, and I want to persuade you that God requires every church to follow that pattern. So that’s my two-fold mission, show you the evidence from scripture for a biblical structure, and then persuade you that God doesn’t just leave it up to us then to decide whether or not we’ll take it, but requires every church to follow that pattern.

I want to begin tonight by looking at a little bit of history, the historical forms of church government. The charts I’m going to show you are found in Wayne Grudem’s *Systematic Theology*. I think they’re very helpful if you want to look them up on your own. But there are several forms, common forms of church government or structure that have been around and are around today.

First of all, let’s look at the Episcopalian model. The Episcopalian model by definition is rule by bishops. This form of church government maintains that there are three legitimate church offices: bishops, presbyters, they also call them rectors, and deacons. The bishops, alone, the Episcopalians would say, have authority to appoint other bishops, presbyters, and deacons. Now, as far as how far back this goes, they differ. Some Episcopalians trace the authority of the bishop back to the apostles, they call it apostolic succession, much as the Roman Catholic Church does, relating to the pope. Others trace the bishops’ authority simply to church history and still others claim that there’s absolutely no historic succession, it’s just a good form of government and this is the way it ought to be done.

Now, you can see here that at the very top is an archbishop, and then you have various bishops overseeing rectors, or presbyters, and then they oversee individual congregations. That’s the Episcopalian model, its structure. Now who exactly embraces this form? There’re several denominations, first of all the Orthodox, the Anglican in England, and some here in the states, and other English-speaking parts of the world, primarily, Roman Catholicism, and the Methodists, follow an Episcopalian model, some of the Methodist denominations. Now, the

defense of this model, there's several arguments that they use. The first is that church history argues for it. For example, Lightfoot, in an excerpt called *The Christian Ministry* says, "History seems to show decisively that before the middle of the second century, each church or organized Christian community had its three orders of ministers," those three orders that we talked about. So they would say church history is on their side.

Secondly, they would say look at Acts 15. The position and authority that James takes at the Jerusalem Council is an argument for an Episcopalian model. He seems to be overseeing a council of a number of churches. They would also say look at Titus' and Timothy's role with several churches and Paul has them interacting, particularly Titus on the island of Crete. And then this is an odd argument, but you'll read it: it's not forbidden in scripture. OK.

Now, what are the arguments against the Episcopalian model? First of all, in the New Testament, *bishop* is not a distinct office, but as we'll see next week, Lord willing, it is a synonym for *elder*. It is absolutely synonymous, so there's no real biblical warrant. There's also no New Testament evidence that bishops were designed to replace the apostles. For example, Paul alone did not ordain Timothy. When it came time to ordain Timothy was Paul the only guy who said, "Timothy, you're the man"? No, he says, "I want you to stir up the gift," remember that he says there in Timothy? Stir up the gift that was conferred to you, by what? The laying on of hands of the elders. So Paul didn't assume the position. That's in 1 Timothy 4:14, by the way. He didn't assume the position of a bishop.

Now, a second model, and we're going to just hurry through these. I'm going to spend most of my time arguing for a biblical model, so I won't give you every bit of argument against and for these models. Now, hopefully I'll cover all that when we get to the biblical approach. The Presbyterian model is the second form of church government in addition to the Episcopalian. This is ruled by elders over both local and regional or national churches, as representatives of the members. You see the chart here. Basically, you have at the very bottom the congregation. And then you have elders ruling over that congregation, elders in each church. And they constitute what's called a session. And then a number of sessions from individual churches come together and form a presbytery, and then a number of presbyteries come together on a large, national level and form a general assembly. That's the structure of the Presbyterian church. The local church

governed by the session is composed of ruling elders, elected by the membership, with the teaching elder as the presiding officer. And the next highest body, as you see, is the presbytery, includes all the ordained ministers or teaching elders, and one ruling elder from each local congregation in a given district. And above the presbytery is the synod, which I didn't include here, and over the synod is the general assembly, the highest court.

So, you get some idea of the structure. You have a combination of ordained men and lay men from each church that constitutes these ruling bodies. Typically, the congregation ordains the ruling elders, while only teaching elders ordain other teaching elders. Now what denominations, very basic in terms of denominations that embrace Presbyterian models? Of course, you'd expect it; Presbyterians of all stripes follow the Presbyterian model, and miscellaneous reformed churches. Sometimes bearing various labels, but if they're reformed, they may or may not embrace the Presbyterian model of church government.

Now, what's the defense for this model? They would say, well, first of all, just practically, it gives an opportunity for gifted men to serve beyond their local church. So, they get to sit in on the presbytery, or the synod, or the general assembly and it uses their gifts beyond the local congregation. They would say that it's a demonstration of the unity of the body of Christ. We're all one and that should be reflected even in how the church is structured. They would say that the distinctions between ruling and teaching in 1 Timothy 5:17 argue in favor. When we get there, I don't think an argument can be made, you'll see that once we exegete that text, but that's one of their arguments.

The example of the Jerusalem Council, they also argue, just as the Episcopalians do, on the basis of the Jerusalem Council. Why is that? Because that's the only known example in the scripture in the New Testament of a number of churches coming together for a discussion about some issue, and so they both want to use that as the basis for a hierarchy, a structure that involves a number of churches. And they would say the command of Titus 1:5, where he is to appoint elders in every city, argues for oversight of those churches from a central, or a centrality of leadership.

The arguments against are pretty direct. Scripture nowhere calls for elders to have authority beyond their local flock. We'll see a number of texts; not a single one of them calls for elders to exercise their gifts or authority beyond their local flock and congregation. Acts 15 cannot be

used to defend Presbyterianism, or for that matter, Episcopalianism for several reasons. First of all, the apostles were there, that changes everything. If we had an apostle, then maybe that would be different. If we were like some churches in our area and had an apostle, then maybe we could argue in favor of this. The church at Antioch voluntarily requested the help of the Jerusalem church, it was not a hierarchy where they had no choice but to go to Jerusalem and be told what to do. They voluntarily requested the help of the Jerusalem church in Acts 15. The entire Jerusalem church sent the letter according to Acts 15:22. That prompts Grudem to write, “If this narrative gives support,” that is, Acts 15, “to regional government by elders, it therefore also gives support to regional government by whole congregations.” That’s exactly right. That’s not at all what the argument is.

Now, while I would argue against both Episcopalianism and Presbyterianism, you need to realize that while there may not be an organizational structure that connects churches, cooperation among churches, recognizing our basic unity with other evangelical, bible-believing churches, certainly is evident in the New Testament. I think really looking at the Jerusalem Council definitely forbids this sort of absolute independence in attitude and in how we practice the rule and government of the church in local congregations. Look at the relief that’s sent back and forth between the churches in the New Testament. There was a sense of community, and I think, while I do believe and embrace independence, and we’ll look at that in a moment, it doesn’t destroy recognizing the basic unity that’s ours in Christ.

Now, the final form of church government is congregational. Don’t be confused by that label, let me define it for you. When historical theology defines this term, it’s defined in this way: ultimate authority for each local church resides within that church, each church is completely autonomous. In other words, if you believe in a congregational form of government, you believe that the structure and government of this church is all contained right here in this church. There’s not someone else somewhere outside of our church that has a right to rule and govern within this church, so we are congregational in that sense. There’s the definition I gave you.

There are a variety of denominations that embrace this: congregational churches, Baptist churches, Mennonite, evangelical free, independents. And there’s a great diversity, there are many faces, if you will, of congregationalism. Let me give you several of them, five of them, to

be exact. Congregationalism, that is when the rule of the church happens from within that church, takes several different forms. First of all, there is the single elder or single pastor view of congregationalism. That's where one guy is the main guy. As one legalistic pastor who has now been defrocked, or was attempted to be defrocked, once put it, he said 'I'm not only the dictator in my church, I'm the only tater.'

This single pastor model of congregational view is practically a combination of democracy (the church members are involved to some degree) and monarchy (because one man holds a lot of power and wields that power). But you can see here that typically this is the form it takes. You have a pastor, you have a deacon board, and you have a congregation. That deacon board can be an elder board if one man is exercising really the single authority in the church. Practically speaking then, it can become a single elder, single pastor model. Let me go back. Many of you grew up in this type of church. You recognize that; you know exactly what it looks like, what it smells like, and you understand this. This is one form of congregational. Remember, congregational means in the sense that the structure of the church, the order, the authority of the church resides within this individual congregation and not outside of it.

A second form that congregational authority takes is the corporate board model. Basically, you have a church board that holds the pastor accountable and that as the pastor is over the congregation, the congregation elects the church boards, so that's kind of how it flows. It's a sort of CEO model of the way the church functions, pulled out of the corporate world and there are churches, particularly a number of seeker-sensitive type churches function this way. They borrow that CEO model and that's how they order and structure the church. Another form of congregationalism is pure democracy. And that's where, literally, the only people in charge are the entire congregation. Everybody in the congregation has an equal vote on every issue, and literally there's no single person or group of people in charge, it is everybody involved in making every decision. It takes a long time to get anything done in a pure democracy.

Then there is the congregational form of 'no government but the Holy Spirit,' is what Grudem calls it. Basically it's sort of free-flowing; it can be whatever you want it to be. There are various forms this takes; a better term for this would be anarchy because that's essentially what it is. Every person does that which is right in his own eyes based on what the Holy Spirit "tells him."

But there are churches that try to function this way. This is absolutely brutal in terms of trying to function as a church. And then the final form that congregational government takes is a plural, local elder board. Essentially, you have the elders as you can see here at the top, one of those elders is usually referred to as the pastor or the teaching pastor, the pastor-teacher is another term. And the elders oversee the congregation.

Now what I want us to do tonight is I want to lay out the evidence for this final form because I believe this is what the scriptures teach: that our church is to be autonomous in the sense that there is no one over this church who isn't a part of this church. But I believe the authority and the outworking of the government and structure of this church from within, is not congregational in the sense of everybody voting in a pure democracy, it is not one single man leading as the dictator, instead it is a plurality of godly men leading each church.

Beginning tonight and for a portion of next Sunday night, I want to defend the biblical pattern and instruction of a plurality of elders in every church. Now, this foundation, folks I realize that you're not going to have your devotions from this, o.k.? I know that this is not going to be particularly applicable and moving in some special sense. But this is absolutely crucial and foundational for us to go over and let me go over the reasons in my mind why. Why should we do this? Why should I take the time to lay this foundation?

There are essentially two reasons. Because most of us grew up in one of the other models of churches, one of the other kinds of structures of churches. That's what we bring when we come into church. That's how we think of the government of the church, and if it doesn't function that way, we get frustrated. You know, somebody says, 'Wait a minute, what do you mean the elders are doing that, we didn't vote on that!' Well, what's happening? You're importing another structural model into the life of the church. And so it's absolutely foundational because most of us grew up in churches with a different model than a plurality of godly men leading the church.

In fact, let me just take a little survey. How many of you would say that you grew up in a different model than that? Let me see your hands. That's what I thought. So you can see why it is so foundational for us not to just pass over this, but to really lay this foundation solidly. Because this is the church; this is how the church is to operate. And if we don't understand that, if we don't have a base for that, then our minds and our thinking about how the church ought to



function simply imports our history. And every time there's a problem, our minds run back to how they solved problems in the Baptist business meeting, usually by fisticuffs, at least in the ones I grew up in.

There's a second reason I think it's important for us to make sure we have a handle on this. Not only because most of us grew up in one of these other models, but rarely is the model of church government, whatever it is, biblically defended. It just sort of happens. It's either assumed or it's ignored. Most of you who grew up in a certain kind of church government, even if you were there your whole life, you have no idea why that model was embraced, it was just assumed. And so not only did we grow up in different models, but we don't even know why we grew up in different models. And so it's absolutely essential that I take some time and lay the foundation solidly so that you understand how the church is to function.

Alright, let's look together at the evidence for a plurality of leaders in each church. You have to start, I believe, with the Old Testament pattern because the Old Testament pattern provides for us the Jewish mindset. The most common New Testament word for the church's leader is the word *elder*. What we need to do is go back into the Old Testament and examine what would have been in the minds of the apostles from studying the Old Testament office of elder. Now don't misunderstand what I'm saying. The church did not exist in the Old Testament. The Old Testament office and the office in the church are not identical. But we can learn something from the model. We can see the mindset with which they came into the church of Jesus Christ.

Let's begin by looking at the two primary Hebrew words for "elder". The first is *zaqen*. It means literally "old." It speaks of mature age. It's usually plural, in other words, it occurs as "elders" not "elder" singular, but it's usually "elders" when it does occur. It's 178 times in the Old Testament, and about 100 of those times it's used as a technical term for those in authority. So, there is a frequent usage of this word in the Old Testament. Now, there's one other Hebrew word and it's the word *siyb*. It's an Aramaic word and it's also usually used in the plural. It means literally "gray-headed." It's only five times in the Old Testament, all in Ezra after the exile because they began to use Aramaic after the Babylonian exile. That's why this only occurs then. So primarily, then we're looking at the word *zaqen*.

Now, how exactly were there elders in the Old Testament? Who were these men and what did they do? Well, when you look at the Old Testament data, you begin to realize that there was an Old Testament pattern of elders within a house or a family, first of all. This is one place there were elders, there were elders within a family. The families were much tighter knit than our families are typically today. Usually the family did not live in many places scattered all across the country, they lived together, perhaps even as they do in modern Israel. They would even add on to the family house, if you will, and simply make another room when someone in the family got married and they would just continue to sort of add on a sort of Rubik's cube of houses and structures as the family grew. And so within that context, within the family, there were older men who were the leaders, who were the elders.

You see this on a number of occasions in the Old Testament. Let me give you a couple of examples. In Genesis chapter 50 verse 7, this is early on, now, I mean we're all the way back in the age of the patriarchs. "...Joseph, [we're told] went up to bury his father, and with him went up all the servants of Pharaoh, [and] the elders of his household..." The elders of his household, those older men who were part of the leadership of that family. In Psalm 105 verse 22, in reference back to Genesis, we read that there were Pharaoh's elders. Pharaoh had elders as well. In 2 Samuel 12 verse 17, "The elders of... [David's] household stood beside him in order to raise him up from the ground, [this is, of course, the encounter when the baby was dying] but he was unwilling and would not eat food with them." The elders of David's household. So, understand that, first of all, there were within every family, within every household, these older men who were considered the leaders of the family.

There's another context in which the word "elders" occur in the Old Testament. There were elders within each city. They administered the local government there. Turn, for example, with me to Deuteronomy chapter 19, you'll see this throughout the law. Let me just give you a couple of examples. Deuteronomy 19, in verse 11 it says, "But if there is a man who hates his neighbor and lies in wait for him [so here you have premeditated murder]...rises up against him and strikes him so that he dies, and he flees to one of these cities, then the elders of his city shall send and take him from there and deliver him into the hand of the avenger of blood, that he may die." In other words, he flees, to one of the cities of manslaughter, you remember those special cities that were for the protection of the person who accidentally kills someone. And here you have the

elders of his city sending for him and saying, “Wait a minute. That was not manslaughter; he deliberately took that person’s life.” So, individual cities had elders.

You see it again, just a couple of chapters over, in chapter 21. He goes on to say in verse 1, “If a slain person is found lying in the open country in the land which the LORD your God gives you to possess, and it is not known who has struck him, then your elders and your judges shall go out and measure the distance to the cities which are around the slain one. It shall be that the city which is nearest to the slain man, that is, the elders of that city, shall take a heifer of the herd...” And so forth, and it lays out instructions. But what I want you to see is that there were elders at individual cities, you see it again in verse 19. Chapter 22 verse 15, laws of morality, it says that if a man takes a wife, if he goes into her, charges her with shameful deeds, publically defames her, says she was not a virgin, verse 15, “...then the girl’s father and her mother shall take and bring out the evidence of ...[her] virginity to the elders of the city...” I’m not going to get into the evidence for virginity tonight, that’s a different sermon for a different time. But the bottom line is there were elders of every city.

Judges 8:14, Gideon captures a youth from Succoth and questioned him. “Then *the youth* wrote down for him the princes of Succoth and its elders, seventy-seven men.” So you can see that this concept continued in the life of the city, or in the life of the country, rather. In Ruth chapter 4, Boaz speaks of the elders of the city in verses 9 and 11. So, there were elders within a family, there were elders within a city, older men who were responsible for the leadership of that city. But there’s another form that “elders” takes in the Old Testament, there were elders within the nation of Israel. They’re called the elders of Israel. Now, this shouldn’t surprise us because the truth is other nations around Israel had elders. In Genesis 50, I read part of this verse to you earlier, but I left off the last line: “...all the elders of the land of Egypt...” went up with Joseph to bury his father. So, Egypt, a pagan country surrounding Israel, had elders, those key leaders. In Numbers 22 verse 7 we read of the elders of Moab and the elders of Midian, two surrounding countries in that encounter with Balaam.

But when you come to Israel, the same concept of the leaders of the nation called elders existed there as well, by the time of Moses. For example, in Exodus chapter 3, turn back there for a moment. Exodus chapter 3 verse 16, God says to Moses, “Go and gather the elders of Israel

together and say to them... [Here's what I'm about to do]." You see it again in chapter 4 verse 29, Moses and Aaron "...went and assembled all the elders of the sons of Israel..." Chapter 12 verse 21, the same thing, chapter 17 verse 5, chapter 18 verse 12, and so forth. The point I want you to see is that by the time of Moses there was already this group of men designated as the elders of Israel.

When the monarchy came along and kings began to rule in Israel, this group still stayed, it continued as an advisory body. So in 1 Samuel, I'm sorry this is kind of small, I'm not going to read all of these to you, I apologize for that, but I have a number of references here. In 1 Samuel 8:4, for example, "...all the elders of Israel gathered together and came to Samuel..." And then on and on it goes as you go into the history of the monarchy. Abner consulted with the elders of Israel, 2 Samuel 3:17. 2 Samuel 5:3, "... all the elders of Israel came to the king at Hebron, and King David made a covenant with them before the LORD at Hebron; [and] then they anointed David king over Israel."

A number of references you can jot down, or I'll print these notes and have them for you, maybe next week in the back, so that you can get these various references. But what I want you to see is that it started, this national body over the nation, by the time of Moses, it continued during the monarchy. It was also influential even during the exile. You remember when they were carried off into Babylonian captivity, Jeremiah 29:1 says, "Now these are the words of the letter which Jeremiah the prophet sent from Jerusalem to the rest of the elders of the exile..." And it lists several other offices that were present at the time.

You see it throughout Ezekiel as well, Ezekiel 7:1, Ezekiel 8:1, and so forth. This group called "the elders of Israel" continued to be influential even after the return from Babylon. Ezra 5:9, "Then we asked those elders and said to them thus, 'Who issued you a decree to rebuild this temple and to finish this structure?'" So the elders of Israel were there when they returned to the land after Babylon. The same thing in Ezra 6:7, Ezra 10 verses 8 and 14. Sometime after that, and we don't know exactly when, but the synagogue began. There's a lot of debate about when it actually began, but when synagogues became the focus of every community's worship, each synagogue had its own elders. They were really the mainstays at the synagogue, and it was out of them that the head of the synagogue was selected.

You see them a couple of times in the gospels, for example in Luke 7 verse 3, you have the Jewish elders asking to come and save the life of his slave. And in John 12:42, the Greek word lets us know that it's a reference here to the leaders of the synagogue, the elders of the synagogue, John 12:42 as well. So, what you have is, even in the synagogue, in every individual synagogue where the Jews met for worship, there were a plurality of elders. When you come to the period between the Old Testament and the New Testament, the Maccabean period and the gospels and Acts, the expression "elders of Israel" comes to describe the Jewish Sanhedrin. This is the group that you meet in the New Testament who ultimately meet to decide the fate of Jesus Christ. It's the highest ruling body of Judaism. They believe that Moses established this when he appointed the seventy back in Numbers chapter 11. And it was an absolutely strategic body.

Now, why do I go through all of that? That's the Old Testament background. Here's why: clearly in the Jewish mind, when you mention "elders" you were referring to a plurality of godly leaders. And with this kind of history, it was only natural for the concept of elder-rule to be adopted by the first churches, all of which were primarily Jewish. As we look at evidence for plurality, we looked at the Old Testament pattern, the Jewish mindset, elders over houses or families, elders over cities, elders over nations. But there are a number of New Testament passages that set for us a clear apostolic example. Now, I'm going to try to breeze through these pretty quickly, we'll see how far we get. But I want you to see that when you come to the New Testament, without question we're talking about a plurality of elders in each individual church.

When you look first of all at the Jerusalem church, you see this pattern. I listed a number of texts here for you about the Jerusalem church. Elders played a dominant role in the life of the church in Jerusalem, and in the Jerusalem council. But I want you turn specifically to Acts 15, because in Acts 15, we get a little feel for this Jerusalem church. Acts 15 and notice verse 4. When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Jerusalem, verse 4 says, "...they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they reported all that God had done with them." Now, it's here in English, it's very clear in English. But let me tell you it's crystal clear in Greek. What you have here is the Jerusalem church; the singular word for church is used. When Paul and Barnabas arrived at Jerusalem they were received by the church, singular, and the elders, plural.

You see this same pattern down in verse 22, “...it seemed good [after the decision was made that]... the apostles and the elders [plural], with the whole church [singular], to choose men from among them to send to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas—Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren, and they sent this letter...” What I want you to see is there’s a singular church, in this case the Jerusalem church, with a plural number of leaders. Now, James, as we’ve learned in the study of James, was the key leader in the Jerusalem church. I want you to notice what he says about the life of the church in the epistle that bears his name.

Turn back to James chapter 5 verse 14. How did he understand how the church is to function? Remember this letter was sent to Jewish believers who’d been dispersed because of the persecution, probably that of Herod Agrippa, in Acts 12. It’s in the mid-40’s A.D. This is probably the first book of the New Testament written. Now notice what he says in verse 14, we’ll study this in a couple of weeks. “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders [plural] of the church [singular]...” One church with a plurality of elders.

You see the same principle when you go back away from the Jerusalem church, back to Acts. Turn back to Acts for a moment. Acts chapter 14 verse 23. This is the first reference to the Gentile leaders of the church. It’s at the end of Paul’s first missionary journey, but really, it’s the very beginning of his ministry. And notice it says in verse 23, he “...appointed elders [plural] for them in every church [singular]...” There’s a special use of a Greek preposition here, probably we could translate it something like this, ‘Having appointed for them church by church, elders.’ It’s referring, of course, to the churches that he’d founded before in Antioch of Pisidia, and Iconium, and Lystra and Derbe. So, one of the key patterns in organizing a new church was appointing elders, and most commentators agree that this was Paul’s pattern everywhere he went.

Turn over to Acts 20 verse 17. In Acts 20, you remember, Paul is concluding his third missionary journey. He’s heading to Jerusalem for the feast of Pentecost, somewhere around May 57 A.D. Earlier on that same missionary journey, he had established the church in Ephesus, and he’d stayed there for about 3 years, we’re told. His ship on the way, docks in Miletus for several days to load and unload cargo, and Miletus is only about 40 miles south of Ephesus. So, Paul seizes the opportunity, calls the Ephesian elders to Miletus and this is the only record of Paul speaking directly to the elders. What I want you to see in verse 17 is that, “From Miletus he sent to

Ephesus [the church in Ephesus] and [he] called to him the elders of the church.” Notice what he says to them down in verse 28, “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock [singular, one flock], among which the Holy Spirit has made you [plural] overseers [plural]....” So, the church in Ephesus had a plurality of godly men leading and pastoring it.

We went to 1 Timothy 5:17 earlier. Timothy is in Ephesus when he receives that letter and there’s a plurality of elders as we saw. Philippians chapter 1 verse 1, “Paul and Timothy...To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers [plural] and deacons....” Now at this point the church in Philippi was a little more than 10 years old. Paul is under house arrest in Rome; the Philippians, you remember had sent an offering to Paul in Epaphroditus to be his personal assistant, and Philippians was his response. And in verse 1 of chapter 1, he identifies two basic offices in the church, overseers and deacons. Both are plural and yet there was only one church in Philippi. In fact, some 50 years later, Polycarp writes to the church, singular, and tells them to submit to their deacons and elders, plural.

Titus 1:5, turn there for a moment. Paul had harbored south of Crete in the ship that was taking him to Rome. And after his release from that first Roman imprisonment he visited Crete. The church is there; it probably already had been established, but they were weak, and they were under assault from various false leaders. And so, he left Titus there for one, specific purpose. Verse 5, “For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and appoint elders [plural] in every city [singular] as I directed you...” Small struggling churches in tiny little villages dotted across Crete, and Titus was to appoint multiple elders in every one of those little cities and villages to lead the church. 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 1, Peter weighs in on the issue as well. He’s writing to churches scattered across Pontus and Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, Bithynia, according to verse 1, chapter 1. Now those were territories, not cities. Notice what he says in chapter 5 verse 1, “Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight...” Every church in those regions had elders.

You say, “Can this really work? Can a plurality of godly men really work?” Well, I can argue experientially on our own experience here at this church, and back at Grace, and I can tell you absolutely it works. But it certainly worked for Christ. Remember that Christ Himself gave the

church a plurality of leadership, at the level of apostles. He appointed 12 apostles and he sent them out two-by-two with equal rank and authority, but obviously, even among that equality there were clear leaders. Peter was a leader among leaders; he was a first, among equals. So, absolutely, from the Old Testament, to the ministry of Christ, to the New Testament church, this is the pattern.

Now, the question is, and we'll conclude with this tonight. "Why a plurality?" There are several reasons that I think if we could discern the mind of God we might jot down. One of them is, I think, it practically creates enough leadership based on the size of the church. Just a very practical issue, because there's a plurality, as the church grows, the number of gifted men grows, and there are enough men to adequately minister to the congregation. We've seen that in this church. But I think there's several other reasons. I think the plurality serves as a protection against the sinfulness of the human heart. Where you have Mr. Dictator, you have one sinful human heart with very little accountability. A plurality of elders provides accountability, in fact, I read for you earlier 1 Timothy 5:18 and following, that's accountability. If he's unrepentant, then rebuke him in the presence of all, so that the rest may fear. It provides protection. Wasn't it Lord Acton who said that "power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely?" God built into His church a system whereby there wasn't absolute power, that there was measured accountability along with the authority.

Thirdly, I think plurality reflects the concept of the various parts of the body contributing to make the whole function. I think it serves to picture what is supposed to happen across the church. Every elder brings his own unique gifting and perspective. I can tell you that personally. It's a wonderful thing to watch the elders' meeting flow and watch the discussion and see how each one of us bring a different background, a different level of experience, and a different contribution to that discussion, but together, we function well. Number four, I think ultimately a plurality assures wise counsel and effective decisions. You see this over and over again in the scripture. Proverbs 11:14, "Where there is no guidance the people fall, but in abundance of counselors there is victory." Proverbs 15:22, "Without consultation, plans are frustrated, but with many counselors they succeed." Proverbs 24:6, "For by wise guidance you will wage war, and in abundance of counselors there is victory."



A plurality of godly men leading the church enables us to balance each other's strengths and weaknesses so that we together are stronger, and we make wiser decisions. This is the way God designed the church. This is the way He designed this church. Next week, Lord willing, we'll look at each of those key Greek words in the New Testament and what they tell us about how elders are to function. We'll look at the qualifications, briefly, of elders. And we'll finish our study, Lord willing, of elders next week. Let's pray together.

Father, this is more of an instructional time, more of a study, but Father I pray that You would give us a great longing and desire to understand Your mind, to see Your purpose. Father, everything You do has behind it great wisdom and an eternally considered plan. And so Father, we know that we can't even begin to grasp all that You do in setting over Your church a plurality of godly men, and yet we acknowledge Your wisdom, we acknowledge Your greatness, we thank you. And we pray, Father, that you would help us to think biblically. Father, You saw that most of us were raised in churches where there was a totally different model of how the church was led. I pray that You would keep us from being influenced by that, but help us instead to ask, "what does the Bible say?" And help us to bow our knees before Your Word and before Your will. Lord I pray for this church, I pray that you would help us at every point to order ourselves after the scripture. And Lord, may we as the elders of this church, be the kind of men that You want us to be so that we could lead Your church in a way that brings You honor and glory in the church. Lord, I pray for each of these dear people who are a part of this church, help them to grasp what You're doing, and to use their gifts, to use their strengths, to use their abilities to compliment the functioning of the whole so that together we grow up into the measure of the stature which is in Jesus Christ, in whose Name we pray. Amen.