

The Pattern Of Elders In The Early Church

Today we live in a world of denominationalism and churchianity that goes against the biblical pattern of leadership in the church. Most hold to a pastor (or a senior pastor with assistant pastors, youth pastors, etc) structure where either a single pastor governs the affairs of the church with elders and deacons often referred to as church boards.

The goal of this article is to show from scripture the correct pattern of leadership that is suppose to govern the affairs of the local church.

We will first look at the church in Judea, which at the time of the writing in the book of Acts was going through some tough times thanks to a famine in the land. The church at Antioch decided to send relief to the church there and sent Paul and Barnabas to deliver the relief to the elders of the church there.

Acts 11:28-30

28 And there stood up one of them named Agabus, and signified by the Spirit that there should be great dearth throughout all the world: which came to pass in the days of Claudius Caesar.

29 Then the disciples, every man according to his ability, determined to send relief unto the brethren which dwelt in Judaea:

30 Which also they did, and sent it to the elders by the hands of Barnabas and Saul. (KJV)

That elders were in the church at Jerusalem is evidenced by several other passages.

James 5:14-15

14 Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord:

15 And the prayer of faith shall save the sick, and the Lord shall raise him up; and if he have committed sins, they shall be forgiven him. (KJV)

Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22, 23; 16:4

2 When therefore Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and disputation with them, they determined that Paul and Barnabas, and certain other of them, should go up to Jerusalem unto the apostles and elders about this question. (KJV)

4 And when they were come to Jerusalem, they were received of the church, and of the apostles and elders, and they declared all things that God had done with them. (KJV)

6 And the apostles and elders came together for to consider of this matter. (KJV)

22 Then pleased it the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas; namely, Judas surnamed Barsabas, and Silas, chief men among the brethren:

23 And they wrote letters by them after this manner; The apostles and elders and brethren send greeting unto the brethren which are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia: (KJV)

16:4 And as they went through the cities, they delivered them the decrees for to keep, that were ordained of the apostles and elders which were at Jerusalem. (KJV)

In the churches Paul had established he set a leadership by the plurality of elders in the cities of Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch.

Acts 14:20-23

20 Howbeit, as the disciples stood round about him, he rose up, and came into the city: and the next day he departed with Barnabas to Derbe.

21 And when they had preached the gospel to that city, and had taught many, they returned again to Lystra, and to Iconium, and Antioch,

22 Confirming the souls of the disciples, and exhorting them to continue in the faith, and that we must through much tribulation enter into the kingdom of God.

23 And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed. (KJV)

Also in Ephesus.

Acts 20:17

17 And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. (KJV)

Plus he gave instructions to the Timothy who was in Ephesus regarding elders in 1 Timothy 3:1-7; 5:17-25.

Also in Philippi.

Philippians 1:1

1 Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: (KJV)

What is a bishop? Simply an elder (Strong's Number 1984).

Also on the island of Crete.

Titus 1:5

5 For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee: (KJV)

According to Peter elders also existed in Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia.

1 Peter 1:1

1 Peter, an apostle of Jesus Christ, to the strangers scattered throughout Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia, (KJV)

1 Peter 5:1

1 The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: (KJV)

There is also strong probability that elders were mention in letters written to Thessalonica and Rome.

1 Thessalonians 5:12

12 And we beseech you, brethren, to know them which labour among you, and are over you in the Lord, and admonish you; (KJV)

Hebrew 13:17

17 Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls, as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you. (KJV)

Isn't it strange that that pastors as we know them today, were never mentioned? Why didn't they ordain pastors in every place? Why didn't they address the letters to the pastors of each city? The reason? Because the office of pastor as we know it today is not the same as seen in scripture. In fact, we only find the word pastor(s) in the New Testament once and that is in Ephesians 4:11. What do we find was established to govern the church in every city? Nothing other than a plurality of elders. Be a noble Berean and search it out for yourself (Acts 17:11).