

Beloved Brothers and Sisters of Mill Springs,

*“I thank my God in all my remembrance of you, always offering prayer with joy in my every prayer for you all, in view of your participation in the gospel from the first day until now.” (Philippians 1:3-5, NASB)*

## **Introduction**

Back in May of this year, I began what became a 7-part series of sermons on the subject of “Biblical Eldership.” Stemming from this series, next month (August 2022), the church will hold two votes:

1. Shall we have a plural eldership at Mill Springs? (Aug 14)
2. Shall Bro. Scott Benjamin, Bro. Richard Hall, and Bro. Wayne Massey serve alongside Bro. Greg Lindsey as elders? (Aug 28)

Obviously, the second vote hinges on the first. If the church votes “no” on August 14, then the August 28 vote will be scrubbed.

My hope in this paper is to explain *in writing* the “why” of this matter of “Biblical Eldership,” and also to encourage you to come to me with any remaining questions you may have. I will gladly and respectfully hear you, and do my level-best to make sure your question receives an answer.

## **How This Came About**

In my first and second “Biblical Eldership” sermons, I discussed the responsibility that I bear as a pastor (or *elder* or *overseer*; these terms are used interchangeably in the NT) to sort out truth from error, as well as to teach, defend, and live the truth (see 2 Tim 1:13-14; 2:15; 1 Tim 6:3-4a). Arguably, a pastor’s number one responsibility is to stay true to Scripture — and to do this no matter how much others may hate, malign, and attack said Scripture (see 1 Tim 6:20-21).

I also quoted Pastor John MacArthur’s contention that, “No generation of people has been exposed to *more lies and more liars* than this one. The Internet has created an *explosion* of lies that is beyond human comprehension.”

This quote goes to the *practical* heart of why I began this series on biblical eldership in the first place: because of the dearth (lack, inadequate supply) of discernment (being able to judge things wisely, to comprehend them for what they truly are) among

Christians today in the face of perhaps *unprecedented* deception. If satanic lies are abounding as never before, while at the same time professing Christians are sorely lacking discernment, then the situation is urgent and demands an immediate biblical response.

That biblical response is readily seen in the words of the Apostle Paul in Acts 20:28 “Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you *overseers*, to *shepherd the church of God* which He purchased with His own blood.”

Note: “Overseers” are “elders,” are “pastors,” are “bishops” (to use the older word). As mentioned earlier, these terms are used synonymously in Scripture to refer to the same biblical office.

Paul says that the overseers are to guard *themselves* and *God’s people* spiritually.

And notice carefully the *plural*: “yourselves, overseers.”

Simply put, the responsibility of guarding the flock of God (a local church) is too large and complex for a single shepherd. Attacks on the gospel and church in 2022 are coming at a speed and intensity never before seen. I have been made to feel this sharply, hence my bringing this matter of biblical leadership to the church body. My contention is that Scripture shows us *clearly* what is needed for the adequate guarding of God’s flock: a plurality of elders.

### **The Biblical Case for Elders**

Upwards of *twenty times*, the Book of Acts and the epistles speak of elders. The teaching isn’t obscure, but clear. Consider these Scriptures and see for yourself:

- Acts 11:30
- Acts 14:23
- Acts 15:2, 4, 6, 22-23
- Acts 16:4
- Acts 20:17
- Acts 21:18
- Acts 22:5
- 1 Tim 4:14
- 1 Tim 5:17
- Tit 1:5
- Jms 5:14

- 1 Pet 5:1, 5

Is it any wonder that Prof. Andreas Kostenberger of Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary would summarize these verses this way? “The biblical pattern is for a group of elders to give joint oversight to a local congregation, with one or several pastors being primarily devoted to teaching and providing pastoral care.”

Simply put, the New Testament reveals that there was no “one-man rule” in the apostolic churches. Every passage speaks of elders in the *plural* (more than one). For example, Acts 14:23 doesn’t say: “When they had appointed *an elder* for them in every church,” but: “When they had appointed *elders* for them in every church.” Nor does James 5:14 say: “Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for *the elder* of the church.” Instead we read: “He must call for *the elders* of the church” — referring to the plural (multiple) overseers/pastors/elders who were serving that one church.

Even when the New Testament doesn’t specifically use the word “elder,” it still speaks of the church’s leadership in *plural* terms:

- Heb 13:17 “Obey your *leaders* and submit to *them* — for *they* keep watch over your souls as *those* who will give an account — so that *they* may do that with joy, not groaning; for this would be unhelpful for you.”
- 1 Thes 5:12-13 “But we ask you, brothers and sisters, to recognize *those* who diligently labor among you and are in leadership over you in the Lord, and give you instruction, and that you regard *them* very highly in love because of *their* work. Live in peace with one another.”
- Heb 13:24 “Greet *all of your leaders* and all the saints” (KJV: “*all them* that have *the rule* over you”)

As for *why* we read again and again of *plural* church leadership (as opposed to *single* leadership), the reason isn’t hard to figure out. Josh Buice writes: “The greatest *single* pastor will not be nearly as strong as the wisdom of a *collective body of pastors* who put their minds together and serve as a single unit to lead the church. The weaknesses of one pastor are strengthened by the strengths of another pastor who works alongside him in the life of the church. This provides the pastors the ability to make *well-rounded disciples* who become strong and vibrant disciple-makers who multiply year after year.”

Not even one as great as Moses could make *single* leadership work. Remember when his father-in-law, Jethro, saw him in action? “Moses’ father-in-law then said to him, ‘The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these

people who are with you, because the task is too heavy for you; *you cannot do it alone*" (Exod 18:17-18).

And recall this wisdom: "*Two are better than one* because they have a good return for their labor; for if either of them falls, the one will lift up his companion. But woe to the one who falls when there is not another to lift him up" (Eccl 4:9-10).

Brothers and sisters, earlier Baptists understood the wisdom of *plural* leadership quite clearly. *The 1925 Baptist Faith and Message* states: "The churches Scriptural officers are bishops, or elders, and deacons." And before that, the *1813 Charleston Confession* (the first-ever Baptist Confession of Faith in the South) affirmed this: "A particular church, gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ, consists of officers and members. And the officers appointed by Christ, to be chosen and set apart by the church, are bishops, or elders, and deacons" — in other words, *plural* (multiple) elders/pastors/overseers along with *plural* (multiple) deacons, serving together in one church. A plurality.

### **Where Did Elders Go in Baptist Life?**

By this time, you may be asking: "With so much clear, biblical teaching concerning plural elders, why did churches gradually shift to a *single* elder with *multiple* deacons model?" Various explanations are offered, but I suspect Aaron Menikoff is most likely correct: "As the 20th-century progressed, we saw two alarming trends: First, a trend *away* from Scripture. Many American Bible students adopted a critical approach to Scripture that did not take divine inspiration seriously. As a result, what the Bible said became less and less important. Second, a trend *toward* efficiency. The CEO and Board of Directors model that existed in the corporate world became the model in the church — with the pastor as the CEO and the deacons as the Board of Directors. That model stuck throughout the 20th century."

I remember years ago when this shift hit me squarely in the face. I was involved in planting a church east of Orlando back in the late 1990s. Our sponsor church, First Baptist Winter Park, assigned me to work closely with one of their staff members: a dear brother in Christ they called their *Executive Associate Pastor*.

Now ask yourself: Is that the language of the Bible or of the boardroom? Get a Bible concordance and see if you can find an "Executive Associate" anywhere in Scripture.

Given the woeful condition of Christianity in our country today and our call as Christians to know and follow the word of God without reservation, we must return to the Bible *post*

*haste* for how we (among other things) organize the church. Thankfully, in this regard, we are blessed with a clear and consistent biblical pattern.

Phil 1:1-2 “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to *all the saints* in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, *including the overseers and deacons*: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.”

## **The Qualifications for Elders**

The Scriptural qualifications for elders are found in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9. They make clear that this office is limited to men. Women may certainly teach in other appropriate settings and circumstances (see Acts 18:26; 2 Tim 1:5; 3:13-15; Tit 2:3-5), but by the word and will of God, they are prohibited from filling the office and role of pastor/elder/overseer. Men and women are without question equal *in standing* before God, but they are called to serve in *distinct roles* in the church.

Regarding an overseer/elder/pastor, the Apostle Paul tells Timothy the following: 1 Tim 3:2 “An overseer *must* be

- *above reproach* – a man of integrity, against whom no legitimate charge can be brought; he must have a personal reputation that is a credit to the church
- *the husband of one wife* – *lit.*, a “one-woman man,” in the sense of being loyal to one woman and to one woman *only*. Paul’s emphasis is on the man’s moral and sexual purity, his fidelity and devotedness to his wife; the man honors the sacred covenant of marriage and is neither a man of wandering eyes nor adulterous relationships. Alexander Strauch explains: “In a sexually immoral world, God is concerned about *faithful monogamous marriage*. This is a key testing ground for those who would lead in Christ’s church.”
- *temperate* – sober in judgment, clear-headed, stable
- *self-controlled* – able to keep himself (his desires and actions) in check
- *respectable* – worthy of esteem, admiration; the kind of man who makes faith in the gospel of Christ attractive
- *hospitable* – gladly welcoming of others into his home; open, kind, gracious, and loving toward others
- *skillful in teaching* – adept at faithfully communicating biblical doctrine; able to teach the Bible with effect (Note: This is *not* a biblical requirement of those who serve as deacons.)
- *not overindulging in wine* – not having a reputation as a drinker; an elder/pastor/overseer cannot allow his thinking and his judgment to be clouded by alcohol — ever; Satan will be sure to capitalize otherwise.

- *not a bully, but gentle* – not a blustering, intimidating man, throwing his weight around to get his way
- *not contentious* – not a quarrelsome *hot-head*, ready in a flash to launch into a fight over the least thing
- *free from the love of money* – without “dollar signs” in his eyes; absent a materialistic heart that sends him chasing after wealth
- *He must be one who manages his own household well, keeping his children under control with all dignity (but if a man does not know how to manage his own household, how will he take care of the church of God?)* – William MacDonald comments: “In an overseer’s own home, the number of persons is comparatively small. They’re all related to him, and most of the members are very much younger than he. In the church, on the other hand, the numbers are apt to be much greater and, with this increase in numbers, there goes a corresponding diversity of temperaments. It’s obvious that if a man is unfit to rule in the smaller sphere, he would be clearly disqualified for the larger.”
- *and not a new convert, so that he will not become conceited and fall into condemnation incurred by the devil* – the devil who was cast out of heaven on account of his pride. A new Christian simply lacks the necessary understanding in the faith to take on the role of overseer/pastor/elder.
- *And he must have a good reputation with those outside the church, so that he will not fall into disgrace and the snare of the devil.*” MacDonald comments: “The snare of the devil is the trap which Satan lays for those whose lives are not consistent with their profession. Once he has caught men in this trap, he holds them up to ridicule, scorn, and contempt.”

These are the qualifications for those who would be elders. And again, what is a biblical eldership? It is “a group of elders/pastors/overseers giving joint oversight to a local congregation, with one or several pastors being primarily devoted to teaching and to providing pastoral care” (Kostenberger).

### **How Are Elders and Deacons Related In the Church?**

In a nutshell, elders *shepherd* the church, while deacons *serve* the church.

Elders minister primarily to the *spiritual* needs of the church, being devoted (in the main) to preaching, teaching, leading, and providing pastoral care. Deacons minister primarily to the *physical* needs of the church, being devoted (in the main) to carrying out ministries of mercy and help. In the words of *The 1813 Charleston Confession*: “[This is the way] a particular church is gathered and completely organized according to the mind of Christ.”

The elders and deacons would serve *together* — each in their God-ordained sphere — for a strong, well-defended, maturing, growing, and ultimately *blessed* Mill Springs.

### What About the Congregation?

When the various texts of Scripture are brought together, the result is what has been deemed historically as “elder-led congregationalism.”

Consider the following:

- Eph 5:23. The Lord Jesus is the head of the church.
- Matt 18:15-17. Under Christ’s authority, the final authority in the affairs of the church is the church itself (v.17).
- 1 Cor 5:1-5. The gathered church — not the elders *only* — removes the unrepentant sinner from the assembly.
- Acts 15:22-31. Even when the apostles themselves were present, agreement was secured with *the assembly* of the Jerusalem church (v.22).

So we can say upon biblical grounds that, *under the Lord Jesus Christ*, the final authority on earth (when it comes to matters of the church) is the local church — the *congregation*.

*And yet*, consider these passages:

- Heb 13:17. “Obey your leaders and *submit* to them.”
- 1 Thes 5:12. “*Recognize* those who diligently labor among you and are in leadership over you in the Lord, and give you instruction.”
- 1 Tim 5:17. “The elders who lead well are to be considered *worthy of double honor*, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.”
- 1 Pet 5:5. “Be *subject* to your elders” (referring to the elders who, 5:2-3, ‘shepherd the flock of God... exercising oversight... proving to be examples to the flock’)

Bringing these eight passages together, we see that, while the *congregation* is clearly the final authority (under Christ), it is also called to *submit* to the elders/pastors/overseers that Christ has given (Eph 4:11) — that is, to be *inclined* to follow their duly-appointed, biblical, and Christ-honoring leadership.

All of this yields *elder-led congregationalism*, and involves *mutual* love, respect, care, and honor *between* the elders and the congregation. The congregation (under the authority of the Lord Jesus) is willing to be led by worthy elders. And worthy elders are willing to lead the congregation lovingly, humbly, helpfully, and above all biblically — to the glory of God (1 Cor 10:31).

Elder-led congregationalism means that elders/pastors/overseers are *stewards* of the congregation, with *delegated* and *limited* authority before God, charged to *shepherd* God's flock. They must be godly and trustworthy men who possess a genuine, selfless, sacrificial love for the church.

Elders are *not*: "... CEOs of the company called 'the church.' They are not social workers. They are not entertainers. They are not generals of God's army. They are not mini-fathers to the congregation. They are not project managers. They are not called to control people or micro-manage Christian lives. Elders are not to politicize the church. They do not have inherent spiritual authority in the church. Pastors are not your personal, vicarious saviors. The church does not belong to the pastors; it belongs only to Jesus, who died and shed His blood to purchase the church (Acts 20:28). Elders do not build the church; only Jesus builds the church (Matt 18:16). Elders do not judge the church; only Jesus judges the church (Rev 2-3). Elders are not to use the church, but are called to serve the church. Elders are not preeminent in the church; only the triune God is preeminent — the only One to whom any glory belongs." Cliff McManis

In summary, elder-led congregationalism is *mutual* love, care, and honor between elders and congregation. It is beautiful, lovely, wise, and good. It is the biblical pattern.

The full picture then is this:

- Elders *shepherding*
- Deacons *serving*
- The Congregation being the final authority (under Christ) in the affairs of the church — *loving, helping, encouraging, and praying* for one another — all to the glory of God (Rom 11:36)

### **Rapid-fire Questions and Answers**

*How many elders should a church have?* The Bible doesn't specify an *exact* number. It only reveals a *plurality* (more than one). In determining how many elders to have, look for two things: men who meet the biblical qualifications (1 Tim 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9), and men able to testify credibly that they sense God leading them to this work (Acts 13:2).

*Would we ordain the elders?* In the sense of setting them apart for the work of shepherding the church, *yes*, with the laying on of hands (a symbolic action found repeatedly in the New Testament when a person is designated or appointed for a sacred purpose). See, for example, Acts 6:6; 13:1-3; 1 Tim 4:14; 5:22.

*Are elders to be paid?* Obviously, if an elder works for the church full-time, he should be paid. Like everyone else, he has to be able to live, support his family, and meet his financial responsibilities. “For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while it is threshing,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” (1 Tim 5:18). But while his salary may come from the church, other elders may be self-supported, drawing a salary from outside the church. Presently, when a brother fills in for me on the Lord’s Day, he is remunerated. This would continue to be our practice.

*What would be your relation to the elders?* I would be one of them. We would be peers. By virtue of my work on the church’s behalf, I would of necessity serve as a kind of “first among equals.” But I want to be very careful in how I express this. “First among equals” *does not* mean “*superior* to the rest.” I would not be the “boss” of my fellow elders. They would not be merely my “aides” or my “advisors,” in which I make all the decisions that they then dutifully carry out.

Such an arrangement is *unbiblical*. In a biblical eldership, decisions are reached *jointly* by all the elders. They talk together, listen together, and pray together. They wait on the Lord together. They involve the congregation, and get help to pray over important decisions. The elders are peers.

So think of my relation to the elders like this:

- Not... FIRST among equals
- But... first among EQUALS

*Why is biblical eldership important?* Because it’s *biblical*. As Alexander Strauch writes: “First, God’s word *teaches* pastoral eldership. Many of our church problems are the result of outright disobedience to the clear instructions of Scripture. Second, biblical eldership promotes the *true nature* of the New Testament church. The church is the family of God, and thus its leadership structure should harmonize with and promote the family nature of the church. Third, biblical eldership provides the leaders of the church with *genuine accountability*. Because of the realities of sin, human depravity, and Satan, we should require that people in positions of authority within the church have genuine peer accountability. Fourth, biblical eldership provides *true peer relationships*. Having

true peer relationships within the leadership body of elders, sharpens, balances, comforts, protects, and strengthens the elders themselves. And fifth, biblical eldership provides *more balanced pastoral care* for the church. Each elder contributes his own wisdom, perspective, knowledge, and experience to group decision-making and the care of God's people. This provides the local church with a more balanced leadership body, and protects the church from one person's extremes and imbalances."

*If we implement a biblical eldership here, what will change?* Let me speak first to what *won't* change:

- The congregation will remain the final authority (under Christ) in the affairs of the church.
- The way we conduct the business of the church will remain the same. We will still have our business meetings — standing and special, as usual.
- The budget will remain the same — unless and until authorized by the congregation.

What *will* change:

- Our *one* elder/pastor will have a *team* of men (fellow elders) with which to meet, plan, pray, and serve.
- The *spiritual* needs of the body will be better served by the combined insights, gifts, and abilities of a team of elders rather than a solitary elder/pastor.
- The *deacons* will be freed to focus on and better serve the *physical* needs of the body, without also trying to deal with elder/shepherding matters (as they are currently being asked to do).
- The *elders* will be freed to focus on and better serve the *spiritual* needs of the body, without also trying to deal with deacon matters.
- As *shepherds*, the elders will meet to discuss and pray over the spiritual needs we see among the flock, and to go to those needs with the word of God, prayer, and wise, loving action.
- The *elders* will grow in their biblical and theological understanding as they meet together, discuss, and pray. In the words of Prov 27:17 "As iron sharpens iron, so one person sharpens another."
- In the gatherings of the church, the *elders* will pray, read Scripture, exhort the body, preach, and teach. They will regularly share encouragement, prayer needs, updates from the elders in our Lord's Day gatherings. I will be the elder who handles the *bulk* of the preaching and teaching (as now, being full-time), but you *will* also hear from the other elders from time to time.

## Conclusion

My beloved brothers and sisters in Christ, I've done my best in recent days to explain church eldership and to urge its implementation at Mill Springs. I've done so (ultimately) because I see it to be biblically faithful and advantageous.

As you heard me say several times during the Biblical Eldership series, the only way we are ever going to be able to *maximize* our fruitfulness as a local church (to the glory of God) is if we follow the *biblical pattern* of church leadership. And that pattern is a *plurality* of elders, in the context of elder-led congregationalism.

I say this, being interested *only* in teaching and preaching what the word of God says. *With all my heart and soul, I want my theology to be driven by biblical exegesis rather than by any system imposed on Scripture.* (Underscore this statement and keep it on file for future reference.)

Thank you for reading this paper, considering its content, listening to my preaching, studying God's word for yourself, and praying to our Heavenly Father, as we head together toward the votes of the congregation on Aug 14 and Aug 28 (potentially).

Allow me to reiterate: If questions remain, please reach out to me. I *want* you to get a biblically faithful answer to your question(s).

In closing, I humbly submit for your consideration the wisdom of the venerable Texas preacher and teacher, Dr. S. Lewis Johnson (d. 2004): "If God has set forth a certain thing in Holy Scripture as *agreeable to Him*, then it is always *best* to leave it that way and not think of rationalizations by which we can *avoid* it. There is a *tendency* in every one of us to be just a little wiser than God. And yet He has given us in Holy Scripture a beautiful plan for the effectual functioning of the local church."

That "beautiful plan" is known as biblical church eldership.

Respectfully, with love and prayers in Christ Jesus our Lord, I hand this matter to you.

Gregory A. Lindsey  
July 31, 2022  
Rom 11:36

