

# **Biblical Church Government**

## ***Elders and Deacons***

*A Scriptural Analysis*

*For the Guidance of*

*and*

*Implementation at*

*Coopertown Community Church*

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as approved by

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# Beginning with Jesus

## Jesus – The Head of the Church

Before we can effectively begin any study on the offices of elders and deacons it is essential that we understand the role of Jesus Christ as He relates to the church. Though this may seem obvious, we want to clearly acknowledge His headship, authority, and responsibility in relationship to the church. Jesus, being the second person of the Triune God, is both divine and sovereign and therefore, as head of the church, is the supreme authority in her life.

### *Jesus' Position*

In Ephesians 1:22 and in 4:15-16 we read that Jesus holds a specific position, and that position is the head of the church. Paul writes in 1:22, *“And he put all things under his feet and gave him as head over all things to the church, which is his body, the fullness of him who fills all in all.”* And then in 4:15-17, *“15 Rather, speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, 16 from whom the whole body, joined and held together by every joint with which it is equipped, when each part is working properly, makes the body grow so that it builds itself up in love.”* Paul later writes in chapter 5 verse 23, *“Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior.”*

Mark Driscoll, in a message series on Doctrine, Church: God Sends, says, of Jesus' position, *“He is the apostle who plants a church. Hebrews 3:1 says Jesus is the Apostle. Apostles are people who plant churches. There's no faithful Christian church that comes into existence unless Jesus plants it. Now, people are working with Him, but Jesus is the one who ultimately plants it.”* He goes on to say, *“Jesus is the leader who grows a church. In Matthew 16:18 Jesus says, “I will build my church . . . Jesus is Senior Pastor in every church. 1 Peter 5:4 calls Him “Chief Shepherd.””*

### *Relationship with His Body*

When we grasp an understanding of this position that Jesus holds in the life of the church, we can also begin to understand some practical implications of His relationship with His body. First, we see that it is Jesus who is in authority over the church. It is Jesus who makes the body grow, emphasizing His care for the body. In Ephesians 5:26-29 there is a description of the ways in which Jesus impacts the church. The Scriptures tell us that Jesus sanctifies her, cleanses her, presents her in splendor to be unblemished and holy. It goes on to say that He nourishes and cherishes the church. He is not content to just rule the church, His body, He is intent to practically transform her character, behavior, and status. This begins in salvation and continues by a sanctifying work. He accomplishes this by the presence of the Holy Spirit and the presentation of gifts to qualified persons for the building up of that body. In Ephesians 4:11-12 we read of this provision, *“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”* These are not offices of the church but gifted persons given to the church for leadership. R. Kent Hughes writes, “. . .

the apostles and prophets are *foundational gifts* to the Church. The previous mentions of apostles and prophets in 2:20 and 3:5 indicate that “apostles” were the Twelve, and “prophets” were those who preached in association with the apostles (c.f. Acts 11:27ff.; 13:1ff; 21:4, 9; 1 Corinthians 14:1). The apostles and prophets were given to the Church to get her established, but now their role is assumed by the canonical writings of the New Testament. The apostles and prophets with their unique endowments did not extend beyond the apostolic age.”<sup>1</sup>

### ***Jesus as Mediator***

To further establish this work of Jesus, the Holy Spirit inspired the writer of Hebrews to include an explanation of Jesus’ work as the “great high priest” (Hebrews 4:14). Later in Chapter 10 verse 14 Jesus’ work is described, “*For by a single offering he has perfected for all time those who are being sanctified.*” This sets the context for that wonderful passage in chapter 10 that emphasizes the necessity of meeting together. It says, “19 *Therefore, brothers, since we have confidence to enter the holy places by the blood of Jesus, 20 by the new and living way that he opened for us through the curtain, that is, through his flesh, 21 and since we have a great priest over the house of God, 22 let us draw near with a true heart in full assurance of faith, with our hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and our bodies washed with pure water. 23 Let us hold fast the confession of our hope without wavering, for he who promised is faithful. 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.” The church is enabled to be who she is only by the work of Jesus as He serves as the great high priest. According to this passage, people are enabled to meet together, encourage one another, and express the grace and love that is offered by Jesus Christ’s atoning work. The church exists only by the work of her head and great high priest, Jesus.*

As stated earlier, this may seem obvious, but it is essential for an accurate understanding of the offices in the church. In order to continue with this study, any presupposition we may have, must be defined only by the teaching of Scripture and therefore Jesus Christ’s headship has to be established. Acknowledging Jesus as the head of the church (according to the truth of Scripture), establishes the foundation upon which the rest of this material will be built. With that foundation in place, the issue of church government can now be *identified, defined, and developed* for a local church, in this instance Coopertown Community Church, to employ practically and effectively.

## **Biblical Authority of The New Testament**

Having established the fact that Jesus is the head of the church, there are important questions that follow. What does the government of the church consist of beyond Jesus? What does the Bible say about the government of the church and those

offices? Why and how do we operate according to the teaching of the Scriptures in these matters? Is all this really that important? What are the challenges that face the church today with elder government?

The importance of this matter of church governance is best addressed by a study of the Bible and its teaching. Phil Newton writes the following, “Christ gave elder leadership to the church for its growth, development, and unity. Yet tradition often tugs stronger than biblical order for those refusing elder leadership. Others have elders but neglect applying biblical standards to them.”<sup>2</sup> This study will answer the previous questions according to the authority of Scripture and build an understanding as to the standards and practices of Coopertown Community Church’s offices of elders and deacons. We are engaging in this study for two reasons: first, to be biblical in our understanding and second to be biblical in our practice. In order to carry out the practice, it is essential to understand that “church government is important not because outward structures are important, but because outward structures directly affect who can be a leader in the church, what each leader does, and to whom each leader is accountable.”<sup>3</sup>

Alexander Strauch, in his book, *Biblical Eldership, An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, identifies the implications of this information applied to a local church. He says, “For the local Christian congregation that sincerely desires to follow the New Testament church model, Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd, Scripture is the final and sufficient guide, and the elders are Christ’s undershepherds. Using a different but compatible imagery, Paul refers to the elders as “God’s stewards” (Titus 1:7).”<sup>4</sup> Strauch identifies several key elements that we believe are essential. First is the strong desire to follow the New Testament Church model. Coopertown Community Church possesses an unwavering desire to be exactly that, biblical in its practice. Second, an appeal to Scripture must be made with Scripture being esteemed as the final, sufficient guide, and authority for church government. Next we must understand this appeal to Scripture requires a disciplined hermeneutic. Phil Newton, pastor of South Woods Baptist in Memphis, TN writes, “No single text in the New Testament sets forth all the details necessary for structuring a local church. But by combining the various texts addressing leadership, structure, and decision making, a framework for church life can be constructed.”<sup>5</sup> The development of any form of church governance will take the entirety of Scripture and carefully examine and interpret the teaching. Finally, we must understand and apply the reasons for the roles of, and the responsibilities in the offices governing Coopertown Community Church.

## **The Developing Government of the New Testament Church**

### ***Deacons***

So we begin by analyzing the developing government of the church according to Scripture. The New Testament church underwent some defining moments in

government beginning very early in her life. In Acts chapter 6, one of those is recorded. At this time the 12 Apostles (Judas had been replaced by Matthias as recorded in Acts 1:12-26) were leading the church in Jerusalem. The Apostles were not able to maintain their responsibilities of teaching, prayer, and benevolence ministry to the church. They took time to teach the church about the importance of the elders remaining focused on teaching and prayer and the office of deacon was first established to relieve them in the area of benevolence.

### ***Elders***

The second defining moment is not recorded so succinctly in Acts but is given great attention in other passages of Scripture. Luke, the writer of Acts, does record the actions of the Apostles in the establishment of elders, the other office of the church. He first recognizes their position and authority in the New Testament church in Acts 11:30. Here they are given authority to administrate famine relief efforts to the church in Jerusalem after resources had been gathered by the church in Antioch and sent to Jerusalem. In Acts 14:23 we have the first mention of men being appointed as elders by Paul and Barnabas in various churches. This mentions that the men were established as elders by the Apostles prayer and the laying on of hands.

### ***Leading/Managing***

Seven passages in the New Testament focus on the word προιστημι (pro-istāmee), a Greek word, which means “to be at the lead, direct, rule, or manage.” Of those seven uses, three are directly related to the offices of elder and deacon while one alludes to the offices. We find these in 1 Timothy 3:4, which addresses overseers; 1 Timothy 3:12, which addresses deacons; and 1 Timothy 5:17, which identifies elders (a word which we will later see is used synonymously with overseer); and 1 Thessalonians 5:12, which identifies those who rule over you in the Lord. It is clear from the use of the Greek language, that the responsibilities, of these who fill these offices, are to manage the affairs of the church.

One final passage to consider during an examination of the New Testament church’s developing government is found in Titus 1:5. Paul instructs Titus to “appoint elders in every town” as he had directed earlier. The purpose of appointing men to this position is indicated by the statement, “you might put what remained into order.” Paul recognized that the office of elder would lead, direct, guide, and manage the churches. The verb ἐπιδιορθώση (epidiothorse), translated “to put in order,” is used only this one time in the New Testament. The root word ορθως (orthos) means to right, correct, or straighten. The verb here has a unique formation, having the prefix ἐπι (epi), which emphasizes this straightening being accomplished “again with authority.” Therefore we see the appointing of elders was set forth to have men engage in the ongoing or continual task of organizing and managing that which was done before. In a number of places, the New Testament establishes the office of elders for the ongoing work of governing the church (Deacons are not mentioned in the same manner because the responsibilities differ. There is specific attention given biblically to that office, as will be examined later).

## **Elders – The Biblical Examination**

In order to best understand the offices of the church we must examine the words that are used in the Scripture to describe them. We will begin with the office of elder and later examine that of deacon.

One of the most telling passages of Scripture regarding the elders of the church is found in Acts 20:17-38. Here we find the three words that are used to describe the leadership of the church. As this passage unfolds we see that the words are used interchangeably. In verse 17 we find the word *πρεσβυτέρους* (*presbyteros*), which is translated as “elder.” In verse 28 we find the word *ἐπισκόπους* (*episkopos*), which is translated as “overseer” or “bishop,” and finally the word *ποιμαίνειν* (*poimainein*), which is translated “shepherd” or “care,” and in some instances “pastor.” The context of the passage describes Paul calling the elders of the church in Ephesus together to give them final instructions (v. 17). In the course of his teaching Paul refers to them as overseers. This is a position the Holy Spirit has sanctioned, and as overseers they possess the responsibility of caring for the flock, this being the manner by which ministry will occur (v. 28).

John MacArthur, summarizes the importance of this passage as follows, “So the term elder emphasizes who the man is. Bishop speaks of what he does. And pastor (“shepherd”) deals with how he ministers. All three terms are used of the same church leaders, identifying those who feed and lead the church, but each has a unique emphasis.”<sup>6</sup> The use of these words in this manner helps us identify the development of the office of elder in the New Testament and affords us a direction to examine the specific uses of each throughout Scripture. The use of each word will contribute to an overall understanding of the office, its title, qualifications, roles, and responsibilities.

### ***Elders***

We will begin our examination with the word *πρεσβυτέρους* (*presbyteros*), which is translated elder. This word occurs 41 times in the books of Acts through Revelation. Excluding any references to the Jewish leaders, reference to age, and its use in Revelation (prophetic use), the word occurs 19 times. Other than 3 times it occurs in the plural. The singular uses are in 1 Timothy 5:19, when Paul writes, “Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or three witnesses.” It is only logical that this be in the singular when considering a charge against one man amongst a plurality. The other two occurrences are in the addresses of 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> John. Again it is an appropriate use of the singular for the elder John to address his letter.

The intentional employment of the plural case emphasizes the office of elder being filled by a group of men (later we will examine the office of elder as related to women). We will quickly examine some of these records. The first recorded instance of Christian elders is found in Acts 11:30. The elders in Judea were presented a gift to assist them in the famine relief efforts that were anticipated after a prophecy made by Agabus according to the Spirit. The next occurrence is found in

Acts 14:23. Here Paul and Barnabas had traveled to the churches in Antioch and Iconium and appointed elders in every church. It is important to note that the plural case is used for elders and the singular for church, emphasizing that as this office was established, it occurred by placing a plurality of men in one local body. Furthermore, Paul specifically instructs Titus in chapter 1 verse 5 to appoint elders in every town.

### ***Overseers***

Let's turn our attention to the second word for elders, ἐπισκόπους (episkopos). This word occurs 5 times from Acts to Revelation. As mentioned previously the word means overseer, the verb form meaning look at or take care of. It is often translated by the word bishop. Of the 5 uses, 1 refers to Jesus specifically (1 Peter 2:25) as the Shepherd and Overseer of our souls, 2 refer to overseers in the churches (Acts 20:28; Philippians 1:1), and 2 refer to the qualifications for the individual overseer (1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:7).

As we identified earlier, the term ἐπισκόπους (episkopos) and πρεσβυτέρους (presbuteros), are used synonymously in Scripture. There are some however, who don't hold to this. Here is what Alexander Strauch says about this:

Unfortunately, the terms elders and overseers, which occur interchangeably in the New Testament, later came to refer to two completely separate officials: the overseer and the council of elders. Jerome, one of the greatest students of the original biblical languages (Greek and Hebrew) in the early centuries of Christianity, boldly asserted against all the traditions of his day that bishops and elders originally were the same:

'A presbyter and a bishop are the same . . . the churches were governed by a joint council of the presbyters . . . If it be supposed that it is merely our opinion and without scriptural support that bishop and presbyter are one . . . examine again the words of the apostles addressed to the Philippians . . . Now Philippi is but one city in Macedonia, and certainly in one city there could not have been numerous bishops. It is simply that at that time the same persons were called either bishops or presbyters.'<sup>7</sup>

If we consider the use of these words in Acts 20, Jerome, Strauch, and others are correct in their assessment that these words are used synonymously. This also means that when we read in Philippians 1:1 that the letter was written to the "overseers and deacons," it is referring to the two offices of the church and not to a third office of bishop. Let us develop this by considering two more instances where these words are used interchangeably. In 1 Timothy 3:1 Paul addresses the office of "overseer" (and later deacons in verse 8). In the same letter he then addresses the "elders" who rule well (5:17, 19). The same type of thing occurs in Titus 1:5-7 except in the reverse. The first reference is to "elders" who are to be appointed by Titus. The second is to the "overseer" as the steward of God's matters and the qualifications he must possess.

## ***Shepherds or Pastors***

Let's examine the final word that is used to identify this office of elder. The word ποιμαίνειν (poimenein) is translated most often as "shepherd", though the New International Version (NIV), King James Version (KJV), and the American Standard Version (ASV) will occasionally translate it as "pastor". We have already identified its significance in Acts 20:28 therefore let us consider two other occasions that it is used. In Ephesians 4:11 it is used with the word "teacher". It is important to note that this passage is not establishing offices in the church, rather it is amplifying the considerations of the gifts that are used in ministry. Phil Newton addresses this by saying, "Paul couples the terms *pastor* and *teacher* in Ephesians 4:11, and is better translated, "teaching shepherds" or "pastor-teachers." The verb also joins *elders* and *overseer* in explaining the function of elders to shepherd God's flock (1 Peter 5:2)."<sup>8</sup>

## ***Summary***

There are three words used interchangeably in the New Testament to describe the office of elder. "Each provides a clearer picture of the dignity and function of elders in church life: *elder* emphasizes the spiritual maturity required for this office; *overseer* implies the leadership and direction given to the church; *pastor* suggests feeding, nurturing, and protecting the flock."<sup>9</sup> The consistent uses of the three words emphasize the office being fulfilled by a plurality of men in the church. The plurality of men provides the best leadership for the health and welfare of the church, as we will see later.

## **Deacons – The Biblical Examination**

Now we will turn our attention to the development of the office of deacon. As already mentioned, the office of deacon was established early in the life of the New Testament church (Acts 6). The office was established during the ministry of the Apostles, in Jerusalem, allowing those who had the responsibility of the administration of the church and the teaching of doctrine to focus on these matters. Though the office is not specifically named in Acts 6, it is consistent to associate the establishment of the office then (because of the laying on of hands by the Apostles) with the office that is described later in the New Testament. The reasons given for the calling of the seven in Acts 6, to serve the church and alleviate the responsibilities of the elders, is also consistent with the ministry proportioned for the office of deacon later in the New Testament.

Let's begin looking at the office of deacon by studying the word itself. The Greek word, διακονος (diakonos) is used in both the noun and verb forms. The noun means, "servant" or "minister." The verb means "service" or "ministry." Most of the occurrences are used generally, referring to someone who helps or serves. Only on five occasions is it used to describe the office. The first of these is found in Philippians 1:1, in which Paul and Timothy write to the church and the overseers and deacons. Here, as the office of overseers is addressed, it is natural to conclude that the use of deacons also infers the acknowledgement of the office. Had Paul referred only to the saints we would be unable to conclude that these are

indications or the recognition of church offices. Merkle says, “If Paul is merely greeting all those who serve freely and spontaneously, why is it necessary for him to greet these people separately?”<sup>10</sup> The identification of these groups, separate from the church body at large, gives us clear indication of the unique offices.

This designation of deacon as an office becomes clearer when examining the use of the word in 1 Timothy 3:8, 12. The context of this passage indicates that Paul is writing to Timothy, giving him instructions regarding the offices of the church. First we discover those instructions for elders, then Paul indicates the requirements for the office of deacon. The clearest indication that this refers to an office and is not a general reference to those who serve is found in this passage. Paul uses the word in a way that indicates he intends for personal qualities to be evident when one is examined for this office. Though these qualities should be present in every Christian’s life, every person will not be examined, this examination is reserved for those potentially filling the office. Some might question whether Paul truly refers to an office or generally to ministry. Strauch answers this, “The question of whether deaconship is an office or work is easily answered: it’s both. It’s obviously a work to perform, yet it’s an office because it requires qualifications and examination for entry.”<sup>11</sup>

### **Summary**

The office of deacon was established for the specific purpose, of alleviating the responsibility of the elders regarding the provision of benevolence. This allowed the elders to focus on teaching the Word and prayer. The office requires the examination of a candidate and the meeting of specific qualifications before one can be identified with that office. There is a specific relationship between elders and deacons as to their distinct duties and responsibilities.

## **The Duties of Elders**

We will now turn our attention to the specific duties or responsibilities for elders as taught in Scripture. It is important to understand the biblical instructions because it will also influence the understanding for the requirements of the men that fill this office, as well as that of the deacon. It will also afford a foundation to build healthy relationships and expectations within the church, beginning with the officers and extending to the congregation.

John Piper said, “The function of elders may be summed up under two heads: teaching and governing. They are the doctrinal guardians of the flock and the overseers of the life of the church responsible to God for the feeding and care and ministry of the people.”<sup>12</sup> These headings, teaching and governing, offer an easy way to remember the two main roles of the elders. However, there is a lot more to be gathered from Scripture about these functions.

We are going to look at four ways that elders operate in their responsibilities and the four areas to which these operations pertain. We will begin by examining the ways in which they operate, which is their role.

## Roles of an Elder

There are basically four roles of an elder within the life of the church. He is to lead, shepherd, teach, and equip. We will explore these roles according to the biblical teaching.

### **Lead**

We will begin by examining the role of leading. There are four passages that lend to the understanding of elders being men who lead. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”* The word for “rule,” προϊστημι (pro histemi) is the word that means to “manage” or “lead.” It is the same word that is used in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 which says, *“He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God’s church?”* Both of these passages indicate the importance of an elder being able to manage and lead. This is a function or role that the elder must be able to perform. There are two more passages that indicate this same role. Though the word “elder” or the position itself is not specifically mentioned it can be inferred by the context. Look at 1 Thessalonians 5:12, *“We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you.”* The Greek word προϊστημι (pro histemi), used in 1 Timothy 3:4-5, is used here by Paul as well. Here, in 1 Thessalonians it is translated “over you,” emphasizing the positional role of the elders in the church to govern and oversee. Finally in Hebrews 13:17 we read, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account.”* This passage indicates that there are leaders in the church who have the role of watching over the congregation. The interesting thing is that though “leaders” appears as a noun in the English translations, it is a participle in the Greek. An expanded translation would very literally read, “You obey for yourselves, the ones doing the leading of you, and you be submitting for yourselves.” By understanding the tenses and structuring of the Greek we can better understand the relationship and the roles of the church to its leaders. The Greek indicates that by obeying and submitting there are positive results for the participants and there is a responsibility to do so in relationship to those who are leading. Therefore we understand the value by the relationships of the parties involved.

The question may arise, “In what areas should a church obey its leaders?” John MacArthur identifies the following, building on the context of chapter 13, when he writes, “It is the right of such men, under God and in meekness and humility, to determine the direction of the church, to preside over it to teach the word in it, to reprove, rebuke, and exhort.”<sup>13</sup> Members of a local church should recognize and respond to the authority of the elders in spiritual matters, both corporately as the church body and privately as individuals and families.

## ***Shepherd or Care***

The next role of the elder is to care for or shepherd the church. Two passages in particular emphasize this duty of the elder. Look at Acts 20:28, which says, *“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.”* The Greek word ποιμαίνω (poimainō), is translated “to care.” It is formed from the same root word, which is translated “flock.” The same word is also used in 1 Peter 5:2, *“shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight.”* Merkle identifies Jesus as the Good Shepherd “who always feeds His sheep, He strengthens them, heals them, binds their wounds, and brings back those who are straying.”<sup>14</sup> He concludes that Jesus is the “perfect example for those who are undershepherds.”<sup>15</sup> Therefore we can conclude that the elders’ role is to care for the flock, that being the church in which they lead. (In the case of Coopertown Community Church, membership in the “flock” is recognized by the signed covenant of membership filed with the church. This covenant of membership states agreement with the doctrinal statement, core beliefs, constitution, and by-laws as well as a commitment to engage in Christian living and accountability with one another.)

## ***Teach***

There are four significant passages that deal with the role of teaching for elders. As has already been addressed, the matter of teaching Scripture and sound doctrine was also part of the primary responsibility of the Apostles. As the Apostles were equipping other men to lead the church in their absence, they were emphatic that these men be equipped to teach, it held a prominent place in their preparedness for ministry.

Ephesians 4:11-12 says, *“And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.”* “He” refers to Jesus and the context proves that Jesus is providing for the spiritual growth of His church. The text does not refer to the offices that are present in the church, but rather to the roles that would be fulfilled or the abilities that would be necessary for effective ministry. Therefore we see that men have been gifted as teachers and given to the church to equip the body for spiritual growth.

In the pastoral epistles (letters by Paul to Timothy and Titus, two pastors), we find three key verses. In 1 Timothy 3:2, the first reference to this matter of teaching, Paul identifies the distinctive quality of an elder. *“Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach.”* (1 Timothy 3:2) Being able to teach is one of the main qualifications that sets the elder apart from a deacon. This means that an elder must possess a faculty for teaching in ministry to the church. Paul goes on further to instruct Timothy about the matter of teaching by saying, *“Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.”* (1 Timothy 5:17). John Piper writes the following regarding this verse,

“All have to be able to teach (referring to elders), but some “labor,” that is, they devote more time and energy to it, perhaps earning their living by it. Each elder is vested with the right to teach and exercise authority in the church and so must have the qualifications for it.”<sup>16</sup> Referring to the ministry of Timothy, Paul gives him the instruction in 4:13 to publicly read the Scripture, exhort and teach. Though this is directed to Timothy, it emphasizes for elders, those leading the church, the necessity for Scripture to be taught. Finally let’s examine Titus 1:9, which says, *“He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.”* The English translations of this passage do a very good job, but if we were to consider the Greek very literally we would see that what is translated as “sound doctrine” can also be translated as “uncorrupt teaching.” Three things leap out from this verse. First, an elder is required to “hold firm,” a word which also means “to pay attention to,” the truth of the teaching of Scripture. Second, an elder is to “give instruction” according to the correct, uncorrupted teaching of Scripture and sound doctrine. Third he is to be able to identify and refute false teaching and correct, and if required, rebuke those who contradict the true teaching of Scripture. Consequently, the role of the elder as teacher is of great significance to the present church and the future one as well.

### ***Equip***

The final role that an elder is to fill is that of equipping. In 2 Timothy 2:2 Paul instructs Timothy to intentionally invest in other men who will be able to teach others also. Look at this verse, *“and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* (2Timothy 2:2) The model we have observed in the Apostles, and the teaching that they impart, indicates a multiplication of ministry that is essential to the propagation of the gospel of Jesus Christ and the health of the church. Alexander Strauch identifies the significance of modeling for others to follow when he says, *“The greatest way to inspire and influence people for God is through personal example. Character and deeds, not official title, is what really influences people for eternity.”*<sup>17</sup>

There are several Scriptures that emphasize this modeling behavior that is essential for equipping others for ministry:

*“Brothers, join in imitating me, and keep your eyes on those who walk according to the example you have in us.”* (Philippians 3:17)

*“Be imitators of me, as I am of Christ.”* (1Corinthians 11:1)

*“For you yourselves know how you ought to imitate us, because we were not idle when we were with you . . .but to give you in ourselves an example to imitate.”*  
(2Thessalonians 3:7, 9b)

*“I urge you, then, be imitators of me.”* (1Corinthians 4:16; see also Galatians 4:12; 1 Thessalonians 1:5-6; 1 Timothy 4:12; Titus 2:7)

It is clear that Paul recognized the power of imitation. As he instructed the early church to imitate him in his efforts of following Christ, elders are to employ this same type of means to perpetuate Christians in faith and leadership. "Today men and women crave authentic examples of true Christianity in action. Who can better provide the week-by-week, long-term examples of family life, business life, and church life than local church elders? This is why it is so important that elders, as living imitators of Christ, shepherd God's flock in God's way."<sup>18</sup>

## **Responsibilities of an Elder**

Having examined the roles of an elder we now give attention to the responsibilities. Identifying the distinctions between roles and responsibilities is to understand that the elders' roles (abilities and function) are demonstrated as they govern in the following areas of responsibility. Phil Newton defines these areas as Doctrine, Discipline, Direction, and Distinction.

### ***Doctrine***

As we have examined the role of elder as teacher, it is important to understand that the material that is taught is also significant. We have already seen how the teaching of Scripture is to be the focus of the elders' attentions. In Titus 1:9 Paul instructed that the teaching should focus on "sound doctrine." The Greek word broadly refers that which is "healthy" or that "which is uncorrupt." Alistair Begg said,

"The elders must be solidly committed to the foundational truths of the Bible. And if they do not know the foundational truths of the Bible, they should not be elders, because we can't ask them to be committed to things they don't even know. Therefore, it is incumbent upon us to instruct our church in such a way that the men of the church are growing up under solid biblical teaching and, are beginning to put together their own systematic theology, are being able to understand the broad sweep of God's purpose in the world, are being able to distinguish between truth and error, are becoming those who are solidly committed to the foundational truths of the gospel; not the kind of men who can be blown about by every wind of doctrine."<sup>19</sup>

When we think about the role of an elder as leader, he should lead the flock under his care into biblical truths. In the book of Acts we have recorded the instructions of Paul to the elders of the church in Ephesus. *"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. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them."* (Acts 20:28-30) Notice that Paul gives reasons for the elders careful attention to the protecting of the flock. He identifies, in a figurative sense, men who will come as wolves to "speak twisted things," which would be the matter of corrupt doctrine. If this type of false teaching is allowed into the church, people will be drawn away from the truth.

In Hebrews 2:1 the church is instructed as follows, “Therefore we must pay much closer attention to what we have heard, lest we drift away from it.” Note that the directive is to “pay close attention” for an outcome could occur. That outcome is that we may drift from the truth. The Greek word can also mean to “carelessly pass,” which should remind us of the need to be alert and diligent in the sound teaching of the faith. This illustration also brings to light the necessity for the elders to operate in that mode of shepherd or care-giver.

### ***Discipline***

“Coupled with doctrine is the matter of discipline. The word conveys the idea of training, admonishing, encouraging, correcting, and at times, removing someone from church membership in a local assembly or “flock” (This type of discipline does not equate with excommunication from the universal church). Church discipline has grown out of favor in most circles, but it is critical for maintaining healthy congregations.”<sup>20</sup> Look at 2 Thessalonians 3:6, “*Now we command you, brothers, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, that you keep away from any brother who is walking in idleness and not in accord with the tradition that you received from us.*” Paul identifies a believer who is not living in accordance to the teaching that had been established in the church. He gives a specific command for them to discipline that believer by keeping away from him. Later in the same passage he says, “*If anyone does not obey what we say in this letter, take note of that person, and have nothing to do with him, that he may be ashamed. Do not regard him as an enemy, but warn him as a brother.*” (2Thessalonians 3:14-15) The consequence of disobedience and inappropriate living is discipline.

Mark Dever, senior pastor of Capitol Hill Baptist Church, writes in reference to discipline, “One more thing: Did you notice how serious were the consequences Paul mandated in these descriptions of church discipline? “Put out of your fellowship . . .” (1 Cor. 5:2); “hand this man over to Satan” (1 Cor. 5:5); “. . . not to associate with . . . do not even eat . . . with such a man” (1 Cor. 5:9, 11); “keep away from . . .” (2 Thess. 3:6); “take special note of him. Do not associate with him, in order that he may feel ashamed” (2 Thess. 3:14-15); “. . . handed over to Satan . . .” (1 Tim. 1:20); “rebuked publicly” (1 Tim. 5:20); “Have nothing to do with them” (2 Tim. 3:5); “have nothing to do with him” (Titus 3:10).”<sup>21</sup> Church discipline is significant if a church is to be healthy. It is incumbent upon the elders to make this a matter for careful consideration, scrutinizing the manner and means by which discipline in the church will be implemented for the restoration and sanctification of individuals, as well as the church body and her protection.

### ***Direction***

“Direction involves the decision making, planning, administrating, delegating, and even governing the details of church life.”<sup>22</sup> 1 Peter 5:1-2 reads, “*So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: 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.*” (1Peter 5:1-2) Giving oversight and

direction to the church means that the elders are responsible to know and understand the gifts, resources, strengths, and weaknesses of the people who comprise the body and lead accordingly. This will require a variety of the aforementioned roles of leading, teaching, shepherding, and equipping.

### ***Distinction***

The final area in which the elders are responsible is that of distinction. The elders should be men of different standards than that of the world. It is essential for them to be distinct according to several considerations. Here we are approaching the qualifications for elders, but it is also a responsibility that each elder must maintain, and therefore distinction from the world is a worthy area of responsibility for an elder. To summarize, they should be distinct in the areas of doctrine, family life, business practices, social life, and stewardship.

## **The Duties of Deacons**

Having examined the office of elder we will now turn our attention to the office of deacon. As we examined both roles and responsibilities for elders we will utilize the same formula for deacons.

### **Roles of a Deacon**

#### ***Complement***

The first thing to note about the role of a deacon is found when considering the rationale for the inception of the office. Deacons became instrumental in the life of the church to make sure that the needs of people (widows and orphans in that particular time) were being taken care of. The elders found it difficult and at times, unmanageable to meet these needs so they recommended establishing deacons to assist them with the administration of service to the church. Therefore the first thing to note is the complementary role of the deacon to that of the elder. Alexander Strauch writes, "The two offices of overseers and servants, are meant to complement one another. One is the office of pastoral oversight; the other is the office of practical service to the needy."<sup>23</sup> Therefore, if deacons are to complement elders, their primary role is to cooperate and communicate with the elders concerning the needs of the church.

#### ***Care-giver***

The deacon is also to care for the church. This care is focused on the material and temporal issues of church life. At first this may appear to mean that the office does not deal with spiritual matters, that is not the case. By taking care of the physical needs of the church, spiritual needs are also addressed. Merkle writes,

"There are some clues as to the function of deacons based on the requirements in 1 Timothy 3. Grudem offers some possibilities.

[Deacons] seem to have had some responsibility in caring for the finances of the church, since they had to be people who were “not greedy for gain” (v. 8). They perhaps had some administrative responsibilities in other activities of the church as well, because they were to manage their children and their households well (v. 12). They may also have ministered to the physical needs of those in the church or community who needed help [Acts 6] . . . Moreover, if verse 11 speaks of their wives (as I think it does), then it would also be likely that they were involved in some house-to-house visitation and counseling, because the wives are to be “no slanderers.”<sup>24</sup>

Strauch writes, “We must not forget that the real treasures of the church are its people, not its pews and buildings. The deacons hold a distinct office of loving service to those who are in distress, to those who are dear to God’s heart. Deacons have the honor of modeling, for the local church and a lost world, God’s compassion, kindness, mercy, and love.”<sup>25</sup> By caring for the church, deacons impact the body in spiritual ways as well. James writes, “Religion that is pure and undefiled before God, the Father, is this: to visit orphans and widows in their affliction, and to keep oneself unstained from the world” (James 1:27). By their ministry, deacons then play a vital role in the purity of the faith as they serve the church. It is a spiritual ministry as well.

## **Responsibilities of a Deacon**

As deacons complement the elders and care for the body, they exercise their roles in certain areas of responsibilities. They exercise responsibility in the areas of finances, benevolence, visitation, and possibly other areas of physical maintenance.

### ***Benevolence***

As the deacon fulfills the role of care-giver he does so in several areas. One of these is benevolence. Having responsibility in the area of benevolence also necessitates responsibility in the area of finances. We will first identify the area of benevolence and consider finances later. Strauch identifies examples of the use of word *diakonia* (service) when used to supply the needs of the poor.

“And in the proportion that any of the disciples had means, each of them determined to send a contribution for the *relief* [*diakonias*, poor relief] of the brethren . . .” (Acts 11:29; italics added).

“And Barnabas and Saul returned from Jerusalem when they had fulfilled their mission [*diakonia*, supplying the needs of the poor], taking along with them John, who was also called Mark” (Acts 12:25).

“ . . . that my service [*diakonia*, charitable offerings] for [the poor in] Jerusalem may prove acceptable to the saints . . .” (Romans 15:31b).

“ . . . begging us with much entreaty for the favor of participation in the support [*diakonia*, charitable offering] of the [poor] saints” (2 Corinthians 8:4).

“For it is superfluous for me to write to you about the ministry [*diakonia*, poor relief] to the saints . . .” (2 Corinthians 9:1).

“ . . . because their widows were being overlooked in the daily serving [*diakonia*] of food” (Acts 6:1c).

“Then they themselves also will answer, saying, “Lord when did we see You hungry, or thirsty, or a stranger, or naked or sick, or in prison, and did not take care [*diakoneo*, minister relief] of You”” (Matthew 25:44).

“ . . . but now, I am going to Jerusalem serving [*diakoneo*, supplying the needs of the poor] the saints. For Macedonia and Achaia have been pleased to make a contribution for the poor among the saints in Jerusalem” (Romans 15:25,26).

### **General Service**

There is also a sense in which the deacon is to serve the body in a variety of ways. John MacArthur refers to the Greek words for deacon as follows:

The New Testament text uses three primary words to refer to deacons: *diakonos*, which means “servant”; *diakonia*, which means “service”; and *diakoneo*, which means “to serve.” The original use of this group of words seems to have been specific, meaning the service of waiting on tables or serving people food. But it broadened beyond that and came to mean any kind of service.<sup>26</sup>

### **Finances**

The deacon’s character is to be scrutinized according to finances. When the lists of qualifications are given, it is said that he should not be “greedy for dishonest gain” (1 Timothy 3:8). We can assess the reason for scrutinizing their abilities to manage finances to be because they are responsible for the appropriation of finances in their care and service of the body. It is essential that a deacon not possess a propensity for improper financial gain in order to best minister to the church and to maintain a good reputation being above reproach.

## **Qualifications**

### **Qualifications for Elders**

(adapted from John Piper’s [Biblical Eldership](#))

What follows is an examination of the qualifications for both elders and deacons. As some of these qualifications are applicable to both offices, they will be addressed first to elders and duly noted when applicable to deacons.

### ***Aspiration – 1 Timothy 3:1***

This is probably the most important qualification or requirement for an elder. If an elder is to do their work with gladness and not as a result of compulsion, or even worse, guilt, he must desire to fill this position. By the nature of the responsibilities, the requirement of time, and spiritual warfare, if a man does not aspire to this position, he will very likely be discouraged, overwhelmed, ill-prepared, and lacking in joy at the service he provides his church. Possessing a desire will not necessitate these things, but it will provide a necessary fortitude and motivation to stay the course during difficult times.

### ***Irreproachability – 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6***

Most translations use the phrase “above reproach” to translate this idea. The word gives the sense that there is no cause given for others to think badly of the individual, the church, or the Lord. Irreproachability is a defining consideration for an elder concerning his reputation among people, not necessarily his relationship with Jesus Christ.

### ***One Woman Man – 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:6***

This qualification is addressed by the use of the phrase “μιάς γυναικὸς ἄνδρα” (mias gunaikos andra) in 1 Timothy 3:2, which literally means “one woman man.”

### ***Temperate – 1 Timothy 3:2***

This qualification emphasizes the standard of self-control and mastery of appetites. It is not only relegated to wine, a drink that could be misused, but to other areas as well.

### ***Sensible – 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8***

This word is related to the word σώφρωνεω (sophroneo), which means, “to be of sound mind.” The idea is that a man would have good judgment, especially in terms of knowing himself well, and understanding people, their responses, and their behaviors. Employing sensibility could also be described as using discernment so there is no disparities between your opinion of yourself and other’s opinions of you.

### ***Respectable – 1 Timothy 3:2***

This qualification establishes the need for the elder to be a man of propriety. Some translations use the word dignified. This identifies the need for a person who comports himself in situations so as not to offend unnecessarily or act without consideration of others.

### ***Hospitable – 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:8***

For an elder to represent Jesus and the church, he must be a man who is kind to newcomers, making them comfortable. It means he must be available for guests to come into his home and he is not a secretive person.

***Able to Teach – 1 Timothy 3:2; Titus 1:9***

This qualification does not necessitate public communication skills. What it does necessitate is the knowledge of Biblical doctrine. Titus 1:9 says, ““He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.” Therefore, an elder must be able to explain doctrine to people and know enough theologically to spot serious error and show why that error is wrong and harmful.

***Not Addicted to Wine – 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7***

Similar to temperance the elder must not be found as one who is addicted to anything harmful or debilitating. Freedom from enslavements should be highly prized and no bondage to any substance yielded to.

***Not Belligerent – 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7***

An elder should be one whose temper is under control. He should not be given to quarreling or fighting. This especially means that his feelings are not worn on the sleeve and that he not carry resentments or be found hypocritical.

***Gentle – 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7***

As a shepherd of the flock, an elder should be found to be gentle. He must be inclined to tenderness and caring, resorting to toughness only when circumstances require this form of love. His words should be disarming, helpful, and encouraging rather than divisive, harmful, and alarming.

***Peaceable – 1 Timothy 3:3***

This is a qualification that would be almost identical with “not belligerent.” As a matter of assessment, these last three qualifications seem to go together as a unit of thought, emphasizing the need for peacemaking over and against factiousness and troublemaking. Considering this the employment of the tongue towards godliness is essential in all of these as well.

***Not a Lover of Money – 1 Timothy 3:3; Titus 1:7***

An elder will be required to put the kingdom of God first in all that he does. Therefore, his lifestyle should not reflect a love of luxuries and materialism. Instead he should be a generous giver, one who is not anxious about his financial future. Money issues will not rule him in the decisions required for ministry.

***Leader of a Well-Ordered Household – 1 Timothy 3:4-5; Titus 1:6***

The home is a proving ground for ministry. However, this doesn't mean perfect ground. The home of an elder should be well-disciplined so that the children regard the instructions of their parents, revering their father and honoring their mother with a tender love. The relationship of the couple should be openly admirable.

The explanation in Titus expands the issue of the children beyond relationships in the home to their behavior in general. They are not to be accused of “wild living” or of being “insubordinate.”

### ***Mature Believer (Not a New Convert) – 1 Timothy 3:6; Titus 1:7***

There is a tendency for new believers to be given too much responsibility and easily swell with pride. Through trials and testing of faith, the Christian is seasoned in a humbling process and a growing protection against pride in that. What time does for a believer is to secure evidence that humility is a fixed virtue and not easily overturned.

In Titus we read that the elder must not be arrogant, in other words he is to be humble. This means that he should not speak much of himself or his achievements. He is to count others better than himself and so be quick to serve. He is a man who will sincerely credit and honor God for any accomplishments.

### ***Good Reputation with Outsiders – 1 Timothy 3:7***

This qualification is similar to irreproachability, yet here it is explicitly focused on the outside unbelieving world’s view. This doesn’t mean that the world establishes the standards, but it does mean that the elder meet the standards for decency and respectability, for in those areas the standards of the church should be higher.

### ***Lover of Goodness– Titus 1:8***

An elder should love to see good done and love to be involved in doing good. It is more than a fashionable desire; it is a motivating desire.

### ***Just– Titus 1:8***

An elder should care about the treatment of people. He should want people treated fairly and justice in the world at all levels.

### ***Devout, Holy – Titus 1:8***

The elder should be a person of devotion to Christ through prayer and meditation. This devotion will be expressed by a love for worship and a deep personal relationship with the Lord.

### ***Self-Control – Titus 1:8***

The focus of self-control is especially in the area of sexuality. He should not be in the grip of lust, nor toy with pornography. He should be utterly faithful to his wife.

## **Qualifications for Deacons**

We have examined the qualifications for elders, and now we turn to that of deacons. In order to efficiently accomplish this we will begin by comparing and contrasting the qualifications of the two offices. Scripture identifies similar qualifications as well as those distinguishing the two. Below is a chart identifying this. Following the

chart will be the explanation of distinctive qualifications (the previous explanations for elders will be sufficient for the similar qualifications).

**Deacons**

- 1. Dignity
- 2. Not double-tongued
- 3. Not addicted to much wine
- 4. Not fond of sordid gain
- 5. Holding to the mystery of the faith with a clear conscience
- 6. Beyond reproach
- 7. The wife's character
- 8. Husband of one wife
- 9. Good manager of his children and his own household

**Elders**

- \_\_\_\_\_
- \_\_\_\_\_
- 1. Not addicted to wine
- 2. Not fond of sordid gain
- \_\_\_\_\_
- 3. Beyond reproach
- \_\_\_\_\_
- 4. Husband of one wife
- 5. Manages his household well
- 6. Temperate
- 7. Prudent
- 8. Respectable
- 9. Hospitable
- 10. Able to teach
- 11. Not pugnacious
- 12. Gentle
- 13. Uncontentious
- 14. Not a new convert
- 15. Has a good reputation with those outside the church
- 16. Not self-willed
- 17. Not quick-tempered
- 18. Lover of what is good
- 19. Just
- 20. Devout
- 21. Self-Controlled

***Dignified – 1 Timothy 3:8***

Though this word may appear to be similar to respectable or above reproach, the Greek word is not the same as used describing an elder. Here the word incites a meaning of reverence and honor. The deacon is to be a man who is revered and honored because their moral and spiritual conduct deserves esteem from others.

***Not Double Tongued – 1 Timothy 3:8***

It has been said, “A man is no better than his word.” There is nothing so dangerous in a Christian community as the misuse of the tongue and inappropriate speech. Double tongued is a euphemism for speech that is insincere, deceitful, or manipulative. The tongue that speaks this way, indicates a mind that thinks this way; and because a deacon’s ministry offers personal interaction the misuse of speech could destroy a church from the inside.

***Holding to the Mystery of the Faith with a Clear Conscience – 1 Timothy 3:9***

The deacon is to live in harmony with the truth of God’s Word so that his moral and spiritual conscience is one of integrity and strength. There is a great need for men who know and employ the truth of Scripture consistently and appropriately. The deacon who possesses this qualification will employ the Scripture for the glory of God and the benefit of those in their care, rather than for selfish or personal gain as they relate to people.

***Wives - 1 Timothy 3:11***

The next qualification, unique to deacons, addresses their wives. At this point one may ask the question as to why elder’s wives are not addressed. Alexander Strauch writes, “The answer lies in the nature of the diaconate, which is not a teaching, governing office like the eldership. First Timothy 2:12 states, “but I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man . . .” Pasto-elders (shepherds) teach and govern the whole church. Their wives are not to assist in the governing of the church.”<sup>27</sup> Strauch then draws a distinction in the role of deacon’s wives when he says, “The diaconate, on the other hand, provides loving service to the needy. Wives can assist their deacon husbands in this service without violating their God-ordained role in the local church.”

There are four qualifications given to evaluate the wives of deacons. They are to be dignified (the same word used of deacons in verse 8), not slanderers, sober-minded, and faithful in all things. The first qualification, dignified, requires them to be regarded with the same manner of respect as their husbands.

The second qualification, not slanderers, is a unique qualification. The Greek word, when used in the singular case, is the same word for devil. Here, being used in the

plural as an adjective, the word identifies that they need not be malicious talkers. From this we conclude they are not to be gossips. Gossip will create division, hatred, and will be utilized by Satan to destroy the church. At the root of gossip there potentially exists unrestraint, bitterness, jealousy, pride and wounded feelings, as well as un-forgiveness. Therefore, the deacon's wife must be a peacemaker in her speech. Their words should bring healing to relationships through the use of love and truth.

The next quality the wife of a deacon must possess is temperance. Some translations identify this as sober-minded. The word clearly indicates that she must possess personal orderliness, sound judgment, good conduct, and composure in all circumstances.

Finally she is to be identified by her faithfulness. This phrase emphasizes a number of things. There is to be fidelity between her and her husband. She is to be trustworthy and dependable in relationships. There should be an unshakeable loyalty to her Lord, His Word, her family, and the church.

## **Daily Operations**

With all of the previous things in mind, we now turn to the daily operations of ministry and the relationships between these officers. First let's examine the relationships of the elders and then we will examine how elders and deacons relate.

### **Elders Governing Together**

One of the most important, aspects of elder leadership in the government of the church is unity. To this point the issue of the plurality of elders has not been addressed. It is essential to understand the biblical teaching regarding plurality of elders in the New Testament church for the further understanding of the cooperation in unity to be developed. Throughout the New Testament the Apostles and other church leaders modeled plurality in unity that would be necessary for the church leaders succeeding their years of service.

#### ***Biblical Evidence for Plurality***

The first key passage we will examine is found in James 5:14. It reads, *"Is anyone among you sick? 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."* (James 5:14 ESVS) Note the use of the word elders occurring in the plural in conjunction with the singular use of the word church. James identifies that churches possessed a plurality of elders. In Acts 14:23 we read that Paul appointed a plurality of elders in every church; it reads, *"And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed."* (Acts 14:23 ESVS)

There are twenty-four instances the word "elders" is used in the New Testament during the period of the church age. This does not include the twelve occurrences in

the Book of the Revelation. When the same word is used in the singular it occurs only four times and three are in specific reference to one man, the fourth instructs the handling of a charge brought against an elder. The word “overseers” occurs two times in the plural and three in the singular. Two of the singular references identify the qualifications of a man, naturally considered on an individual basis. The other one time is in direct reference to Jesus as the overseer of souls. The two instances “overseers” is used in the plural reference the leadership of the church.

The case for a plurality of leadership is a case that is clearly made in the New Testament by the use of the words alone. However, this is not the only evidence. Alexander Strauch writes:

In addition to explicit statements regarding a plurality of elders, other examples of shared leadership exist throughout the New Testament (Acts 13:1; 15:35; 1 Cor. 16:15,16; 1 Thess. 5:12,13; Heb. 13:7,17,24). On the local church level, the New Testament plainly witnesses to a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership. Therefore leadership by a plurality of elders is a sound biblical practice.<sup>28</sup>

In 1 Timothy 5:17 we find a key reference to the plurality of elders in the church. It reads, “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.” Though this verse does not address the multiple roles of elders specifically, logically we may conclude that there are multiple gifts given to a variety of men filling the one office of elder for the health of the church.

*The context of this verse also teaches the church regarding her responsibility for paying specific elders as determined by that church. The term “double honor,” does not indicate a hierarchy or elevated position of an individual among the elders. Verse 18 says, “For the Scripture says, “You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,” and, “The laborer deserves his wages.”” This identifies a financial remuneration be given to those who labor in the matter of teaching. Kendall Easley writes, “Further, it would be up to each church to determine whether such elders would equal all or only some of the paid ministers, whether the elder council would be partly paid ministers and partly lay volunteers, or whether it would consist entirely of laymen.”<sup>29</sup>*

Kendall Easley, Ph.D quotes Paige Patterson writing in *A Pilgrim Priesthood: An Exposition of First Peter* (page 178):

Clearly, the early church had a plurality of elders (Acts 10:17). These spiritual leaders doubtless served their local congregations in a variety of ministries which were dictated, at least partially, by the spiritual gifts which each possessed.<sup>30</sup>

### ***Further Evidence for Plurality***

Easley writes the following statement referencing Baptist history:

Thus a clear testimony in Baptist life has witnessed to a plurality of elders as the norm in the New Testament churches. This testimony stretches from the beginnings of Baptist life to the SBC of today. While not all Baptists throughout history held to a plural view of the eldership as the NT pattern, certainly a plurality of elders was affirmed in theory, if not in practice. Was this opinion founded on solid biblical footing? Baptists are people of the Bible.<sup>31</sup>

Alexander Strauch writes an entire chapter, *Shared Leadership*, in his book. Following are several statements he makes regarding the pitfalls of what he calls “monarchical leadership,” as well as the benefits provided from plurality of leadership.

### **Pitfalls**

Addressing fatal flaws or blind spots that an individual possesses Strauch writes, “They deceive us. They can even destroy us. This is particularly true of multitalented charismatic leaders. Blind to their own flaws and extreme views some talented leaders have destroyed themselves because they had no peers to confront and balance them and, in fact, wanted none.”<sup>32</sup> Later he says, “Left to ourselves, we do mainly what we want to do, not what we should do or what is best for others.”

Other pitfalls that loom before an individual leader may be things such as personal fame, personal gain or greed, personality imbalances, unholy ambitions, self-deception, and narrow-mindedness. In order to avoid these pitfalls leaders must have relationships with colleagues who will provide accountability in every area of life.

### **Benefits**

Now we will examine how plurality in eldership and leadership benefits the church. The first area that is impacted by the plurality of elders is within the elder body itself. The second area naturally extends to the church. Here is what Eroll Hulse, editor of the magazine, *Reformation Today*, wrote, “Within an eldership extreme ideas are tempered, harsh judgments are moderated and doctrinal imbalances corrected. If one elder shows prejudice toward, or personal dislike for any person, in or outside the church, the others can correct that and insist on fair play and justice. If one elder is in a fierce mood over some offender, that offender has others to whom he can appeal.”<sup>33</sup>

This relationship of elders together provides accountability, partnership, balance, motivation, encouragement, counsel and wisdom, persevering prayer, humility, trust, and respect for the perspectives and gifts of others within the body of Christ that will perpetuate kingdom growth and sustained health for that church.

Strauch uses the phrase, “First Among Equals” to describe this structure. The use of “first” identifies several areas of an individual that may stand out among the collective group. They may be evident in the following areas, the unique gifting of

the Holy Spirit, leadership abilities, biblical knowledge, counseling skills, specific training and experience, and lastly dedication. It should be noted that an individual may be marked by any number of these unique things, but that does not indicate greater authority or responsibility from the collective whole.

John MacArthur observes the following:

All the biblical data clearly indicates that the pastorate is a team effort. It is significant that every place in the New Testament where the term *presbuteros* is used it is plural . . . Much can be said for the benefits of leadership made up of a plurality of godly men. Their combined counsel and wisdom helps assure that decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single individual. In fact, one-man leadership is characteristic of cults, not the church.<sup>34</sup>

Strauch says, “The advantage of the principle of “first among equals” is that it allows for functional, gift-based diversity within the eldership team without creating an official, superior office over fellow elders.”<sup>35</sup> A position of leadership doesn’t necessitate spiritual superiority or authority, it merely reflects practical operation.

There are also a number of ways in which a plurality of elders benefits the church body. Phil Newton writes, “Every church needs a plurality of men who will faithfully exemplify the Christian life and clearly articulate the teachings of Scripture as they take care of individual flocks that make up the church of the Lord Jesus Christ.”<sup>36</sup>

Hebrews 13:17-18 identifies the relationship of elders to the church, saying, *“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.”* The leaders of the church (elders) are to watch over the people in their care. The church benefits from that watchfulness as the elders observe potential theological dangers that may come from outside of the church as well as from inside. The elders may also be alert to misguided or unhealthy behavior that people exhibit and prevent those from overcoming the body. The elders will be alert to the Lord’s plans for the increased health of the body and the implementation of those plans through teaching, discipleship, community and other elements that build health in the church.

As Hebrews explains the elders will give account for their actions. This is a mutually beneficial relationship among the elders themselves and in relationship to the church body as a whole. As the elders and the body relate, there is to be a level of submission to the leaders on the part of the body that brings joy to the ministry of the elders, thus strengthening the church. Newton recognizes this by stating, “A church’s insistence on strong spiritual leadership adds stability, unity, and health to the congregation.”<sup>37</sup>

Finally, the strength of a plurality of leaders prevents the body from being led by one man who may depend on his charisma, abilities, and limited knowledge, limited wisdom, and limited understanding. The plural elder body provides balance and

accountability for one another. The danger is found in authority without accountability; authoritarianism is more likely avoided by a plurality of elders, which offers prevention from egotism and dictatorial leadership.

### **Biblical Models**

On numerous occasions (Matthew 10:24; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13), Scripture uses the organizational structure of three groups to identify the Apostles. Each of these lists is divided into four names, with the first name of each group remaining the same. Among scholars there is consistent agreement that Peter, James, and John were recognized as the leaders of each of the groups.

It is related to Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Though both men were equal, Paul was considered first because he was the chief speaker.

In Acts 15 there is record of the Jerusalem Council. This may be one of the best examples of plurality in operation. It is essential to note the book of Acts was written by Luke, an educated physician, who employed structures of classical Greek in his writing. This is significant because of the use of principles of rhetoric in the account of the Jerusalem council's decision in Acts 15. In Greek rhetoric the use of proofs for an argument were essential. These proofs are evidences of law, witnesses, and contracts.<sup>38</sup> As Acts 15 unfolds each of these elements is present in the account given by Luke.

The Council convenes to settle a matter of circumcision that is brought to them by Paul and Barnabas, who had been in the city of Antioch, Luke's home. There were Jewish believers who were insisting that the Gentile converts had to undergo the rite of circumcision for their salvation to be secured. There was a council of elders which convened to hear and settle the matter. Peter stands first, describing his responsibilities, given by God, to take the gospel of truth to the Gentiles. He presents a marketplace explanation for the matter at hand. This falls into the category of evidences of law, listed earlier. Next Paul and Barnabas give personal account of the work that God had been accomplishing among the Gentiles. Their witness to this was essential in the development of the argument. As matter of further testimony, James then stands and makes a closing remark.<sup>1</sup> James'

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<sup>1</sup> *Though a few scholars attribute a distinct responsibility to James, the majority of scholars agree that he does not hold any special authority over any of the other Apostles. It is important to acknowledge Peter's position among the Gentiles and James position in the church in Jerusalem. These two men would have cooperated to strongly establish the witness of the law answering the critics from either nationality. G. Campbell Morgan writes, "Much has been based upon that "I decide" of James. It has been said that he was the bishop of Jerusalem, that he was in authority over the Church in Jerusalem; but there is not a vestige of proof in the narrative itself, and for the traditions that have gathered round the story, I am bound to say I have no respect. . . It is absurd to believe that James at this moment gave his personal opinion as the final word, from which there could be no appeal. . . The very emphasis on the I shows that he was only expressing a personal conviction. Nevertheless with that opinion the Church agreed. The decision to which they came was not the decision of a man. It was such a decision that when they registered it and wrote it and sent it to Antioch, they did not say, After consultation, James,*

statement contributes to the argument already established by the previous parties and bolsters its strength. The Apostles and elders then respond to the matter by way of aforementioned contract. They, with the church, write a letter to the churches in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia, establishing instructions to guard the religious and social practices and relationships of the believers.

### ***Operating in Unity and Equality***

Recognizing that the office of elder is filled by a plurality of men, vested with unique gifts by the Holy Spirit, it must be considered how elders are to operate with one another. The answer has been given earlier that unity is the key. Alexander Strauch gives good definition to this structure when he writes, “By definition, the elder structure of government is a collective form of leadership in which each elder shares equally the position, authority, and responsibility of the office.”<sup>39</sup>

Mark Driscoll says of the plurality of eldership and his position in Mars Hill Church, “I am not your Senior Pastor. I am one of your elders . . . right now there are thirty-two pastors. I get one vote out of thirty-two guys. I’m not Senior Pastor. I don’t take that title, that’s Jesus’ title. The point is Jesus is Senior Pastor. What I really want to emphasize to you is that we follow Jesus, we submit to Jesus, we learn from Jesus. He is alive, and leaders are those who follow Jesus, but none of us is senior, He is senior.”<sup>40</sup>

Benjamin Merkle makes an interesting assessment if one elder were to be given more authority, “. . . giving more authority to one elder implicitly creates a separate and distinct office. If the “pastor” (the full-time, paid staff) receives more authority than the “elders” (the part-time, non-staff), the outcome is that an unbiblical distinction has been made.”<sup>41</sup>

The Bible clearly teaches a diversity of gifts and abilities, but does not teach that there exists a diversity of office beyond elder and deacons. It is extremely important to note this and operate accordingly. Therefore the structure of relationships among the elders and deacons, as well as the congregation is of utmost significance.

### **Operating Together**

The most difficult part of ministry is often not the theology of certain matters but the implication of that theology in the daily practice. In light of the issue of elders and deacons this is the case. For now we approach the issue of decision making and ministry together. Many people will assess that plural leadership without a designated leader is doomed for failure. It is essential to remember a key theological principle, Christ is the head of His church, and therefore, every decision is to be made under his final authority. Therefore, the elders possess the weighty

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*the bishop, speaking ex cathedra, has decided. They said something far more full of dignity, “It seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us.” – G. Morgan Campbell, The Acts of the Apostles. Published by Fleming Revell Company 1924. Page 362.*

responsibility of assessing what the Lord's desire is for the particular body they oversee.

### ***Guidelines***

Merkle outlines eight steps in the decision making process of elders:<sup>42</sup>

1. *Pray much.* The elders should regularly pray together as they seek guidance from the Lord.
2. *Put away disputes and arguments.* The elders must learn to discuss issues without arguing and fighting.
3. *Pacify anger.* The elders must be able to control their emotions and their words.
4. *Practice mutual consideration and humility.* The elders must not value their own opinions over those of their fellow elders but must be willing to listen and value the input of others.
5. *Proceed by evaluating every issue biblically.* The Bible must be the standard by which decisions are made.
6. *Promote consensus.* It is best for the elders to make unanimous decisions so that all the elders give their full support.
7. *Prepare to defer.* In most cases where an elder does not agree with the majority, he should be willing to defer to and support the opinion of his fellow elders.
8. *Produce and implement a policy in case of an impasse.* As a last resort, the elders need to have a plan for deciding an issue when one or more elders are not willing to defer.

### ***Voting***

It is important to understand that the plurality of elders and the authority of each man being equals means that the decision making process be extremely clear and defined. In the case of Coopertown Community Church there are explicit statements that define these matters. In the By-Laws of the church Article 3 addresses the matter of voting (the word board refers to the body of elders).

All decisions by the Board shall require a unanimous vote to pass. If after prayer and Bible study on any given issue, unanimity is not reached, the Board will table the issue for further prayer and discussion at the next meeting.

The belief is that this requirement of unanimity coupled with the issue of equality, provides the greatest amount of accountability, honesty, thorough consideration,

prayer, and communication for decisions to be reached. It elevates the significance of every matter and every decision that is made.

## **Elders and Deacons**

The relationship between elder and deacon is important to understand. The responsibilities and roles of an elder have been previously identified as primarily leading and governing the matters of the church through spiritual disciplines of prayer, doctrine, and teaching. The deacon is primarily concerned with providing the elders relief from matters that detract from their ability to focus on these issues.

Under the guidance of the elders, deacons would be responsible for service areas of the church life. These areas could be from benevolence ministry to facility maintenance and logistics. The deacons must have some financial responsibility in order to handle these matters and be accountable to the elders for the administration and disbursement of those finances.

As deacons will relate to the church body in a unique way to that of the elders (by benevolence, service, and a variety of other means), they must also develop and maintain a strong relationship with the elders for matters of counseling and teaching of those in the church. The deacons will be the first to offer biblical counsel and will need to help the elders engage in spiritual matters of individuals and families for the strengthening of the body. This means the deacon must not present himself as a barrier between the elders and church, but instead is to help the two bodies engage in relationship when appropriate.

## **Marriage and Divorce**

The topic of marriage is significant to the matters of elders and deacons. However, the issue of divorce and re-marriage is as significant, if not even more important because it is controversial and difficult to address. There is always emotional investment regarding this matter and usually the circumstances are always unique. Therefore, the matter of divorce and re-marriage must be carefully considered especially according to a biblical hermeneutic.

### **Divorce**

The matter of divorce is addressed primarily in two passages, Matthew 19:15ff and 1 Corinthians 7:10-16 (though Mark's gospel contains a parallel account in 10:11-12). In the book of Matthew, Jesus is confronted by some Pharisees who ask about the lawfulness of divorce. Jesus gives a careful explanation about the sanctity of marriage and grants permission for divorce under certain circumstances.

### ***Sanctity of Marriage***

In verses 4-6 he says, *"He answered, 'Have you not read that he who created them from the beginning made them male and female, and said, 'Therefore a man shall leave his father and his mother and hold fast to his wife, and the two shall become one flesh'? So they are no longer two but one flesh. What therefore God has joined together, let*

*not man separate.”* Notice that Jesus begins by identifying the sanctity of marriage. He teaches that the genders, male and female, have been created for the unique union of marriage and the two genders shall complement one another and be permanently united in that union. He also concludes that the union is not only an action on the part of the couple, but a work of God in their joining. Therefore the conclusion is that every effort should be made to prevent the separation of that union, or its destruction.

In 1 Corinthians 7:10-11 Paul instructs those who are married. He says, *“To the married I give this charge (not I, but the Lord): the wife should not separate from her husband (but if she does, she should remain unmarried or else be reconciled to her husband), and the husband should not divorce his wife.”* The instruction given by the Lord through Paul, is that married couples should not separate. However, Paul recognizes that there are situations when separation may occur, but that does not necessitate that reconciliation can’t occur. The point is that both Jesus and Paul emphasize the sanctity of marriage.

### ***Exceptions for Divorce***

Though both Jesus and Paul identify the sanctity of marriage there is also an allowance made for certain circumstances. Examining the passage in Matthew will bring further understanding of these exceptions.

The Pharisees understood the matter of the sanctity of marriage and posed a valid question to Jesus. They asked why Moses permitted divorce. Jesus identified the reason as a hardness of heart. He qualifies that this was not the original intent for marriage. Then he gives the specific exception, *“And I say to you: whoever divorces his wife, except for sexual immorality, and marries another, commits adultery.”* It is clear that Jesus only allows adultery as a reason for divorce, any other reason compromises the marriage and therefore re-marriage would be committing adultery. Though this is a seemingly narrow approach to this matter continue to examine the entirety of Scripture, for Paul adds to this exception, thus addressing more complicated circumstances.

In 1 Corinthians Paul examines further situations that were occurring in the early church. At this time there were many marriages being impacted by Christianity. Couples were being divided by one spouse becoming a follower of Christ and the other not be counted among the faithful. This posed a new scenario for the issue of marriage and divorce and Paul gives specific instructions. Paul writes in verses 12-13, *“To the rest I say (I, not the Lord) that if any brother has a wife who is an unbeliever, and she consents to live with him, he should not divorce her. If any woman has a husband who is an unbeliever, and he consents to live with her, she should not divorce him.”*

Paul instructs that if the spouse who did not possess faith in Jesus were willing to remain in the marriage it was appropriate for the believing spouse to continue fulfilling the commitment in their marriage. Then in verse 15 he instructs regarding a second scenario. He says, *“But if the unbelieving partner separates, let it be so. In*

*such cases the brother or sister is not enslaved. God has called you to peace.*" He indicates that if the unbeliever desires divorce, then the believer is to be freed from the commitment of the marriage.

Craig Blomberg writes in his commentary on Matthew, "Perhaps the best approach is to ask what these two exceptions of Jesus and Paul have in common. Both destroy at least one of the two fundamental components of marriage, either the "leaving and cleaving" or the "one flesh" unity. Both leave one party without any other options if attempts at reconciliation are spurned."<sup>43</sup> The party that attempts to maintain the sanctity of marriage and pursues every option to reconcile the relationship is to be freed from the marriage.

### ***Summary on Divorce***

As stated earlier, relationships are complicated and the emotions of these issues tend to run very deep and rich. There are multitudes of issues beyond adultery that can be addressed, such as physical abuse, if the couple were divorced prior to either being a believer, and further complications unique to any relationship. Rather than maintain a legalistic stance, the final determining factor should be for the elders of a church to carefully consider the candidate and at their discretion, based on the facts, and factors, make a determination according to their wisdom and understanding given by the guidance of the Holy Spirit.

## **The Role of Women**

This next section addresses the matter of women as elders and deacons. There is much to be said about this and the matter of biblical interpretation is very complex regarding this topic. To best address the issue the role of each office will be considered individually.

### **Women as Elders**

In Galatians 3:28 Paul writes, *"There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither slave nor free, there is no male and female, for you are all one in Christ Jesus."* This is a wonderful statement about gender equality of men and women. This emphasizes the understanding that God does not view either gender differently as to value.

There are some that use this position (equality in value) to argue that God would not base any distinction of service on the gender of an individual, thus allowing women to serve as elders. However, it is important to note that value and role are two very distinct concepts. The matter of women serving in the role of elders is the issue at stake at here, not the value of women in service.

First it should be noted that equality of genders is not at stake. Second it should be understood that equality of genders does not dissolve role distinction. Third it can be concluded that role distinction does not dissolve equality of genders. Strauch writes, "We need to be perfectly clear about the biblical teaching regarding women

and men as fully equal in personhood, dignity, and value, but distinct in gender roles.”<sup>44</sup>

A primary example of this can be found in the Godhead. The trinity, comprised of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit is the primary foundation for emphasizing equality and distinctive roles. Each member of the Godhead is fully divine. There is no point in which a particular person is denied or limited in their divinity. However, throughout Scripture distinctive roles are ascribed to each person. One of the clearest examples of this distinction in role is found in 1 Corinthians 15:28, “*When all things are subjected to him, then the Son himself will also be subjected to him who put all things in subjection under him, that God may be all in all.*” As the Son, Jesus submits himself to the Father. This does not limit his divinity or make his value of being God any less. Merkle writes, “Although equal in substance to the Father, Christ submits Himself to the Father and obeys His will. This does not mean, however, that the Father is higher or greater than the Son. Both are equally God.”<sup>45</sup>

When we consider the distinctive genders of male and female, we must acknowledge their equality in dignity, value, and personhood. However, we must also acknowledge the distinction in roles as well; as only a woman can bear a child, so only can a man produce the seed. These distinctions should not only be acknowledged but also celebrated. The New Testament identifies that as a husband, the man possesses a responsibility to love his wife “*as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her.*” The role of the man is to model the relationship of Christ to the church as he relates to his bride. Likewise, wives are instructed to submit to their husbands as the church submits to Christ.

The New Testament does identify the prominent place that women held in the life of the church and in the lives of individuals. In particular, Paul identifies Timothy’s grandmother Lois and mother Eunice in his second letter to Timothy. Evidently their faith was instrumental in the development of Timothy’s and Paul celebrates that heritage. In Acts we read of the ministry of Aquila and his wife, Priscilla, as they taught and disciplined Apollos and others. Instructions regarding the wives of deacons identifies their prominent role and the influence they possess. Paul also establishes the value of older women by giving instructions in Titus 2.

Finally, note that by women not serving as elders there is not an inequality placed on women in the church. Instead women should find greater fulfillment, increased passion, and abundant satisfaction by operating in the roles that God has ordained for them in the church life. The equality of their gifting, talents, wisdom, and experience can serve in areas of the church life without being taxed by the strain of time and requirements of fulfilling the office of elder. It is essential that the church celebrate the manner in which individuals fulfill their respective roles in excellence, thus encouraging younger generations to model this biblical pattern.

## Women as Deacons

There is an interesting use of the word deacon in Romans 16:1 referencing a woman named Phoebe, a servant of the church in Cenchreae. The Greek word “διακονον” (diakonon”) occurs only two times in the New Testament, and both times in Romans. In 15:8 it refers to Jesus, identifying Him as a servant to the Hebrew people. In 16:1 it is this reference to Phoebe. It is an interesting noun that can be the same in form, yet differ in case and gender, depending on the word to which it relates. There are some who would attempt to use the text in 16:1 as a proof for a woman filling the office of deacon suggesting that it is used as in a masculine case and identifies with the office of the deacon. However, this text alone does not give enough evidence for this. James Montgomery Boice remarks, “The bottom line is that the text itself is not decisive, and a judgment on this question must be made on other grounds.”<sup>46</sup>

As considered earlier, Paul indicates in 1 Timothy that deacons were established as an office by particular regard to qualifications and examination as consideration was made for a person’s entry. If Paul had intended for women to be considered as potential members of this office, there was every opportunity for him to address women in the context of 1 Timothy. Rather, he addresses the wives of deacons.

Further consideration should be given to the date of the Paul’s writings. The book of Romans is approximately written in 56AD-57AD. 1 Timothy is approximated at 62AD and Titus 66AD with 2 Timothy being written sometime about 67AD. The suggestion for considering the date is to acknowledge that the office of deacon and the instructions could have developed after the recording of Romans. Making allowance for a developing church government during this time would lead to a careful consideration regarding the use of the word “diakonos” being employed generally in Acts as to service compared to a specific use in the Pastoral Epistles to indicate the office.

One of the wonderful conclusions that Paul makes about women in relationship to deacons is their added value to ministry. As deacons perform their duties of service their wives will provide greater fruit as they labor together. This may seem a finite point of division for wives to serve with their deacon husband, but not fill the office. However, it should be our primary goal to esteem Scripture beyond the pragmatism of what culture and context might dictate. For women to fill the office of deacons would be the end justifying the means. If men were to fill these offices and fulfill their roles as defined biblically, the value of women in ministry would increase as their roles were delineated and developed biblically as well.

A final example of this is found in the believer’s relationship to Christ. As Protestants, we recognize that we contribute nothing to our salvation, for it is not by works that we are saved, yet if we were to attempt a role reversal by replacing the work of Jesus with our works and obedience, we would quickly be the primary focus of our salvation on our abilities, rather than the grace of God. We would displace Jesus’ work and undermine the truth of the gospel, all the while offering an outward

appearance of a righteous life, yet inwardly we would possibly be shackled and overrun by sin. It is extremely important for us to note the biblical distinctives of role and value and practice those effectively in organization, attitude, and service.

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