

New Testament Observations about Leadership for Local Churches

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This paper is intended to be an internal document which can help guide a conversation among the elders at Blackhawk Church about the role of the elder at Blackhawk Church.

In the beginning of the new movement....

Jesus gave his followers what we call the great commission:
Matthew 28:19-20 (NIV)

¹⁹ Therefore go and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in^a the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, ²⁰ and teaching them to obey everything I have commanded you. And surely I am with you always, to the very end of the age.”

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Jesus directed his disciples to go and make disciples. Then he wanted them to instruct those disciples so that they would be obedient to his teachings. This implies that the church should have two basic functions:

- Evangelism – reaching out to the lost so that they can become disciples of Christ
- Edification – teaching those people the things of Christ so that obedience happens

This then, seems to be the pattern of what the early followers did:

Acts 14:21-22 (NIV)

²¹ They preached the good news in that city and won a large number of disciples. Then they returned to Lystra, Iconium and Antioch, ²² strengthening the disciples and encouraging them to remain true to the faith. “We must go through many hardships to enter the kingdom of God,” they said.

^a Or *into*; see Acts 8:16; 19:5; Romans 6:3; 1 Cor. 1:13; 10:2 and Gal. 3:27.

¹ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984

This seems to be a prime example of what the disciples (at least Paul and Barnabas) did as they carried out Jesus' instructions. They planted and established new churches in many cities. Then they returned to these new churches to encourage the people.

THE NEXT STEP WAS TO APPOINT ELDERS IN EVERY CHURCH. And we see this **happening...**

Acts 14:23 (NIV)

²³ Paul and Barnabas appointed elders^a for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. ³

7 OBSERVATIONS ABOUT CHURCH LEADERSHIP

1. The new leaders were identified with two basic titles – elders and/or bishops
 - a. “elder” – translates *presbuteros*
 - b. “bishop/overseer” – translates *episkopos*
 - c. The terms are used interchangeably (Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5,7)

Note: This interchangeability of the terms involved shows us some important things about how God wants his church to function from culture to culture and over time. The term “elder” would be a user friendly term to the Jewish converts. They used the term in their culture. The term “overseer” would be a user friendly term to the Gentile converts – it is from the Greek and Roman culture. This means that Paul felt a freedom in terms of “form.” The terms mean different things but they described the same persons and referred to the same “function.” Therefore Paul had freedom to change the forms to fit a culture but the functions transcended culture. The ramifications of this principle (freedom in forms) are huge.

² *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984

^a Or *Barnabas ordained elders*; or *Barnabas had elders elected*

³ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984

2. These leaders were to manage and/or shepherd God's people. This seems to be the primary function.

a. Managing – Paul gave an analogy to one's family:

1 Timothy 3:4-5 (NIV)

⁴ He must manage his own family well and see that his children obey him with proper respect. ⁵ (If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?) ⁴

Paul called the elders God's household managers (*oikonomon* – Titus 1.7)

Just as God holds fathers responsible for the overall leadership of the home; He holds elders responsible for the overall leadership of the church. If the "leaders" mentioned by the author of Hebrews are the elders (the writer doesn't use the term) then the line of authority is clear: God- leaders- congregation (Hebrews 13:17). People are to submit to their authority because, "They keep watch over you as those who must give an account."

Another way of talking about managing in the days of the NT was to use the word "shepherd".

b. Shepherding the church – Elders are commanded to shepherd the flock of God with pure motives (1 Peter 5:1-3). Shepherding includes the ideas of:

i. Guarding (Acts 20:28, 29)

ii. Feeding (Acts 20:27)

iii. Praying (James 5:15)

c. Note: These are also the kinds of things that fathers should do for their children; so it might be helpful to not draw too thick a line between the ideas of shepherding and managing but to see the terms as different ways to describe the same function.

3. Some of these leaders were to be paid for their service.

1 Timothy 5:17 (NIV)

¹⁷ The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching. ⁵

⁴ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984

⁵ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984

Note: Paul was probably just being practical when he gave Timothy this instruction. An individual who gives a lot of time to the ministry doesn't have a lot of time to do something else in order to put bread on the table of his family.

4. New Testament Churches seem to have had more than one elder or bishop.
Acts 14:23 (NIV)

²³ Paul and Barnabas appointed elders^a for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust. ⁶

Note: The exegetical evidence is ambiguous at best. We tend to read our forms back into the New Testament. House churches were the predominant form. Churches couldn't own property for another 200 or 300 years.⁷ There were probably house churches in every city where there were converts. Occasionally the writers would use the word "church" to represent all the Christians in a single city, i.e. the church of Rome or Jerusalem. Paul told Titus: "I left you in Crete... that you might...appoint elders in every town, as I directed you." But we simply don't know how the New Testament churches were really structured. Was there one elder for every house church? What happened when a house church had no one who could meet the character qualifications? Were there at least two elders for every house church? Did they appoint one or two elders to be in charge over all the house churches in one city? We simply don't know. This has led to quite a lot of diversity in how the church has made polity decisions over the centuries.

5. These leaders were to delegate responsibility to other qualified men and women to care for the needs of the church.

The church was in rapid growth mode and the apostles quickly adapted by creating new forms (they had a freedom of forms idea). They soon learned that they could not teach the word of God and "wait tables" at the same time (Acts 6:1-7). Although the term "deacon" is not used in Acts 6 many believe that the term was applied to those men and

^a Or *Barnabas ordained elders*; or *Barnabas had elders elected*

⁶ *The Holy Bible : New International Version*. electronic ed. Grand Rapids : Zondervan, 1996, c1984

⁷ "Not until the 260s, however, is the Greek word "ekklesia", like the word "churches," used to mean both Christian communities and their physical structures." - *Ramsay MacMullen – The Second Church, Popular Christianity A.D. 200-400- p.9*

later women (Phoebe – Romans 16:1). So that by the time that Paul wrote to the Philippians there was a separate office in the church called “deacons” (Philippians 1:1).

Unlike the functions of the overseers (to manage/shepherd) the functions of the deacons are never spelled out clearly. Hence we have lots of historical confusion.

6. These leaders were selected and appointed on the basis of specific character qualifications.

See the lists in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

7. The specific forms for the elder and deacon functions are seldom described in the New Testament.

Functions are supra-cultural and are absolute.

Forms are cultural and non-absolute.

Some “form” questions:

- a. How old should these leaders be?
- b. How should they be selected?
- c. How long should they serve?
- d. What is the best way for these leaders to carry out their function?
- e. When there is more than one spiritual leader who should take primary leadership?

Some “form” answers we have discussed and developed at Blackhawk. These are some of the things that we have spelled out in our by-laws but could look very different from other churches even within the same denomination.

- a. We think that the elder board should be limited in size to eight people for effective decision making.
- b. We have developed our own rotation system to make room for other qualified leaders and to prevent in-grown ownership.
- c. We have decided that the elders should oversee the “paid professionals” who actually carry out the day to day operations of the church and that the only “paid professional” on the elder board is the Sr. Pastor.
- d. We have decided that the Sr. Pastor is the primary leader of the church and that he should function on both the elder board and staff team.

- e. Note: As of October 2018 – The congregation decided that women are also eligible to serve on the Elder board if they meet the qualifications.