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*What Is
Biblical Church
Leadership?*

**Small Group
Study Guide**



What Is Biblical
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How to Use This Book

This study guide aims to help congregations understand God's design for church leadership and gladly embrace it. It consists of six lessons and can be used in a wide variety of contexts: Sunday school classes, small groups, retreats, committee meetings, and more. The context and pace can be adapted for your unique circumstances.

You'll notice that this study guide does not include lengthy readings or exposition. Instead, it's designed to get participants interacting with the text of Scripture so that they inductively discover a biblical pattern for church leadership. Teachers of this guide should remember to encourage participants to answer questions in light of the Scripture passages listed in the current lesson. At the end of this guide is a section of Teacher's Notes with answers to the discussion questions, which will help leaders teach through the guide in a group. This study guide also contains URLs for six audio interviews that correspond to the six lessons. These audio interviews are designed to provide additional pastoral instruction. Overall, we hope this guide serves congregations as they endeavor to implement biblical leadership.

Introduction

Audio link: <https://www.9marks.org/church-leadership-introduction/>

What does the local church mean to you?

Maybe you love your church. You love the people. You love the preaching, the singing. You can't wait to show up on Sunday, and you cherish fellowship with other church members throughout the week.

Maybe the church is just a place you show up to a couple times a month. You sneak in late, duck out early.

In the Bible, the local church is God's plan for displaying his glory to the nations. And we want to help you catch and live out that vision, together with your whole church.

This guide includes six lessons on biblical leadership. Each lesson takes a close look at one or more passages of Scripture and considers how it applies to the life of the whole church.

These studies are mainly driven by observation, interpretation, and application questions, so get ready to speak up! We also hope that these studies provide opportunities for believers to reflect together on their experiences in the church, whatever those experiences may be.

Leaders can make life much better or much worse, can't they? Think of loving parents who make countless sacrifices for their children's good, a gifted teacher who not only instructs but also inspires, a wise head of state who pursues justice and peace, or a pastor who faithfully teaches, preaches, counsels, and cares for his people. On the other hand, we are all too familiar with abusive or irresponsible parents, teachers who are lazy or uncaring, oppressive military dictators, and pastors who spout heresy and fleece their flocks.

In light of the good and the bad you've likely seen in the church, we need to go back to the Bible to understand what a church is and how God intends for it to be led. In the first lesson of this study, we'll consider what it means for Christ to be the head of the church and whether Scripture is sufficient to govern the church. The second lesson answers the question, Is authority bad? It also explores the nature of good authority and God's design for how it should function in the church. The remaining lessons in the study consider individuals who have special responsibilities within the church: elders, deacons, and members (like you!).

Because it can be abused, leadership is a risky business for those in it and those under it. But God has good plans for leadership within the church. Let's explore those plans together and ask him to bless our churches with leaders—shepherds, in fact—after his own heart.

An Important Mark of a Healthy Church: Biblical Church Leadership

By Mark Dever

Adapted from *What Is a Healthy Church?*

What kind of leadership does a healthy church have? Is it a congregation that strives to ensure that the gospel is faithfully preached? Yes (Gal. 1). Is it deacons who model service in the affairs of the church? Yes (Acts 6). Is it a pastor who is faithful in preaching the word of God? Yes (2 Tim. 4). But the Bible presents one more leadership gift to churches to help them become healthy: the position of elder.

Surely there are many useful things we could say about church leadership from the Bible; yet I want to focus primarily on this question of elders, since I fear a lot of churches don't know what they're missing. As a pastor, I pray that Christ will place within our fellowships men whose spiritual gifts and pastoral concern indicate that God has called them to be elders. May he prepare many such men! If God has so gifted a certain man in the church with exemplary character, pastoral wisdom, and gifts of teaching, and if, after prayer, the church recognizes these things, then he should be set apart as an elder.

WHAT IS AN ELDER?

In Acts 6, the young church in Jerusalem began to bicker over how food was being distributed to widows. The apostles therefore called upon the church to select several men who could better oversee this distribution. The apostles chose to delegate this particular task so that they could then “give [their] attention to prayer and the ministry of the word” (Acts 6:4 NIV).

That, in the briefest terms, appears to be the division of labor between elders and deacons that the rest of the New Testament develops. Elders are especially devoted to prayer and the ministry of the word for the church, while deacons help sustain the church’s physical operations.

Are you beginning to see what a gift this is to you, churches? God is essentially saying that he is going to take several men from among you and set them aside to pray for you and teach you about him.

ELDERS AND CONGREGATIONS

All churches have had individuals designated to perform the functions of elders, even if those individuals are called by other titles, such as “deacon” or “director.” The three New Testament titles for this office, which are used interchangeably, are *episkopos* (overseer or bishop), *presbuteros* (elder), and *poimain* (shepherd or pastor). All three are used for the same men, for instance, in Acts 20:17 and 20:28.

When evangelicals hear the word “elder,” however, many of them immediately think “Presbyterian.” Yet the first Congregationalists (capital C, pointing to a formal group of churches) back in the sixteenth century taught that eldership

was an office for New Testament churches. Elders could also be found in Baptist churches in America throughout the eighteenth and into the nineteenth centuries. In fact, the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention, W. B. Johnson, wrote a treatise in 1846 calling Baptist churches to use a plurality of elders, arguing that the practice was biblical.

Baptists and Presbyterians do disagree in two areas concerning elders (and I think the issues at play here are relevant to those who are not Baptist or Presbyterian). First and most fundamentally, we who are Baptists are congregationalists (lowercase *c*, referring to a practice). We believe that the Bible teaches that the final decision on matters rests with the congregation as a whole, not with a church's elders or anyone outside the church body. When Jesus was teaching his disciples about confronting a sinful brother, he said that the congregation was the final court of appeal—not the elders, not a bishop or pope, not a council or convention (Matt. 18:17). When the apostles sought out several men to act as deacons, as we just discussed, they gave the decision over to the congregation.

In Paul's letters, too, the congregation appears to assume final responsibility. In 1 Corinthians 5, he blames not the pastor, elders, or deacons for tolerating a man's sin but the congregation. In 2 Corinthians 2, Paul refers to what a majority of them had done in disciplining an erring member. In Galatians 1, he calls on the congregations themselves to judge the false teaching they had been hearing. In 2 Timothy 4, he reproves not just the false teachers but also those who paid them to teach what their itching ears wanted to hear. Thus, elders lead, but they do so, biblically and necessarily, within the bounds recognized by the congregation. In that sense, elders

and every other board or committee in a Baptist church act in what is finally an advisory capacity to the whole congregation.

Second, Baptists and Presbyterians have disagreed over the roles and responsibilities of elders, largely due to different understandings of the following words written by Paul for Timothy: “The elders who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor, especially those whose work is preaching and teaching” (1 Tim. 5:17 NIV). Presbyterians understand this verse as establishing two classes of elders—ruling elders and teaching elders. Baptists don’t recognize this formal division but understand the verse to suggest that certain individuals among a group of elders will simply be given more fully, as a practical matter, to preaching and teaching. After all, Paul clearly tells Timothy earlier in the letter that a basic qualification of every elder is that he is “able to teach” (1 Tim. 3:2; see Titus 1:9). Baptists, therefore, have often denied the appropriateness of appointing elders who are not capable of teaching Scripture.

A PLURALITY OF ELDERS

What Baptists and Presbyterians often agreed on in the eighteenth century was that there should be a plurality (or multiple number) of elders in each local church. The New Testament never suggests a specific number of elders for a particular congregation, but it clearly and consistently refers to the “elders” of a local church in the plural (e.g., Acts 14:23; 16:4; 20:17; 21:18; Titus 1:5; James 5:14). Today, not only are more and more Baptist churches rediscovering this but also churches from many other denominations as well as independent churches.

A plurality of elders does not mean that the pastor has no distinctive role. There are many references in the New Testament to preaching and preachers that would not apply to all the elders in a congregation. In Corinth, for instance, Paul gave himself exclusively to preaching in a way that lay elders in a church could not (Acts 18:5; 1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Tim. 4:13; 5:17). Also, preachers seemed to relocate to an area for the express purpose of preaching (Rom. 10:14–15), whereas elders seemed settled among the community (Titus 1:5).

As the regular voice that proclaims God’s word, a faithful preacher will probably find that a congregation and the other elders treat him as the first among equals and “especially” worthy of double honor (1 Tim. 5:17). Still, the preacher or pastor is, fundamentally, just one more elder, formally equal with every other man called by the congregation to act in this capacity.

THE BENEFITS OF ELDERS

My own experience as a pastor has confirmed the usefulness of following the New Testament practice of sharing, whenever possible, the responsibility for pastoring a local church with other men rooted in the congregation.

Decisions involving the church but not requiring the attention of all the members should fall not to the pastor alone but to the elders as a whole. This is sometimes cumbersome, but it has immense benefits. It rounds out the pastor’s gifts, making up for some of his defects and supplementing his judgment. It creates support in the congregation for decisions, helping unity and leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism. It makes leadership more rooted and permanent and

allows for more mature continuity. It encourages the church to take more responsibility for its spirituality and helps make the church less dependent on its employees.

This practice of a plurality of elders is unusual among Baptist churches today, but there is a growing trend toward it among Baptists and many others—and for good reason. It was needed in New Testament churches and it is needed now.

WHAT ABOUT DEACONS?

Unfortunately, many modern churches also tend to confuse elders with either the church staff or the deacons. Deacons also fill a New Testament office, one rooted in Acts 6, as we saw. While any absolute distinction between the two offices is difficult, deacons are generally concerned with the practical details of church life: administration, maintenance, and the care of church members with physical needs. In many churches today, the deacons have either taken over the role of spiritual oversight or they have left it entirely in the hands of one man, the pastor. But it would benefit churches to again distinguish the roles of elders and deacons. Do churches not need both types of servants?

SHOULDERING THE BURDEN AND PRIVILEGE

Eldership is the biblical office that I hold as a pastor—I am the main preaching elder. But I work together with a group of elders for the edification of the church. Some are on staff, but the majority are not. We meet regularly to pray, to talk, and to form recommendations for the deacons or the whole church. It's difficult to put into words how much these men have loved both me and our entire congregation by sharing

the burden—and privilege—of pastoring. I thank God regularly for these fellow workers.

Clearly, eldership is a biblical idea that has practical value. If implemented in our churches, it could help pastors immensely by removing weight from their shoulders and even removing their own petty tyrannies from their churches. Furthermore, the character qualities listed by Paul for eldership, aside from the ability to teach, are qualities every Christian should work toward (1 Tim. 3; Titus 1). Publicly affirming certain individuals as exemplary, then, helps to present a model for other Christians, especially Christian men. Indeed, the practice of recognizing godly, discerning, trusted laymen as elders is another mark of a healthy church.

2. Do you think the Bible gives instructions about how to structure church leadership? If so, what are they? What are some ways you think your local church could do a better job of obeying the Bible's instructions on this issue?

Visit a dozen churches and you might find a dozen different ways that they organize their leadership. So who's right? Even more, how would we know who's right? This lesson explores answers to these questions by reminding us that the church doesn't belong to us but to Jesus. And his word is sufficient to govern the life and structure of the church.

MAIN IDEA

Christ is king over the church so his word must govern the church, including its leadership structures.

DIGGING IN

In Ephesians 5, the apostle Paul teaches the Ephesian church about marriage and the obligations God has for husbands and wives. But all of Paul's teaching on marriage is rooted in his understanding of how Christ relates to the church. Verses 22–27 say,

²²Wives, submit to your own husbands, as to the Lord. ²³For the husband is the head of the wife even as Christ is the head of the church, his body, and is himself its Savior. ²⁴Now as the church submits to Christ, so also wives should submit in everything to their husbands. ²⁵Husbands, love your wives, as Christ loved the church and gave himself up for her, ²⁶that he might sanctify her, having cleansed her by the washing of water with the word, ²⁷so that he might present the church to himself in splendor, without spot or wrinkle or any such thing, that she might be holy and without blemish.

1. How does Ephesians describe Christ's relationship to the church?

2. What does it mean for Christ to be the "head" of the church?

3. How is the church supposed to respond to Christ's headship?

Christ is the head of the church, and we therefore submit everything in the church to his wise and gracious reign. He orders the church. That means Scripture, the word of King Jesus, must govern the church's life and structure. Yet Scripture is not only the *authoritative* word of King Jesus but also a *sufficient* word: "All Scripture is breathed out by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, and for training in righteousness, that the man of God may be complete, equipped for every good work" (2 Tim. 3:16).

4. What does it mean that Scripture is "breathed out by God"?
What implication does this have for the authority of Scripture?

5. Scripture equips us for “every good work” (2 Tim. 3:17). What does this phrase tell us about the sufficiency of Scripture?

6. What are the implications of the sufficiency of Scripture for how a church organizes its leadership?

Paul was a church planter. And he cared about how those churches were ordered and the leadership structures they used. He wanted them to follow the commands of King Jesus—the head of the church. One place in Scripture that makes this point is Titus 1:5. Here, Paul said to his protégé Titus, “This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.”

7. What do you think Paul means by commanding Timothy to put the church “into order”? What are some implications of the fact that Paul uses the word “order” in this passage?

8. What is the first thing Paul tells Timothy to do to start getting the church “in order”?

In Titus 1:5, Paul shows that biblical church order requires biblical church leadership when he commands Titus to “appoint elders.” The rest of this study guide will examine biblical leadership in detail. For now, let’s focus on the big picture. Read these passages on leadership in the church: Acts 6:1–7, Acts 20:17–38, 1 Timothy 3, and 1 Peter 5:1–5.

9. According to these scriptures, how many leadership offices exist in the church and what are they?

10. According to these scriptures, what are the differences between elders and deacons?

11. In your opinion, why are some churches not willing to follow the Bible's blueprint for church leadership?

12. What are some ramifications of not following the Bible's teaching on church leadership?

13. What are some experiences you've had with churches that followed Scripture's teachings on biblical leadership? What are some experiences you've had with churches that didn't follow these instructions? How did that positively or negatively affect that church?
