

# Church Government: Jesus Style and Moses Style

by David Guzik

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*The sermon discusses the importance of having a biblical form of church government and argues that the Moses style and Jesus style of church government are the same, with an emphasis on the godliness of leaders.*

**Duration:** 1:02:09

**Scripture:** 1 Peter 5:1

**Topics:** "Church Government", "Pastoral Leadership"

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## Description

In this sermon, the speaker addresses the question of whether a senior pastor or a team of elders should lead the church. The speaker acknowledges that there are both wise and unwise pastors who may rule in a manner contrary to the Scriptures. The speaker then reads from 1 Peter 5:1-3, which exhorts the elders to shepherd the flock of God. The speaker also mentions the example of James as a special case and emphasizes the importance of not dismissing opposing arguments as special cases. Overall, the sermon explores different models of church government and highlights the presence of strong pastoral leadership in the New Testament.

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## Transcript

Tonight we are going to take a break from our normal through the Bible study on Wednesday night. We are going to take a look at something that is topical in nature. If I were to give a title for this message, which I usually don't feel I am very good at giving titles, I would call it the Moses style and the Jesus style.

The question I am seeking to answer is, should a senior pastor or should a team of elders lead the church? This may be a question that is of no interest to you at all. You may feel like you want to go to sleep tonight and take a nice nap. Well, I am glad that you have come anyway.

You can get some refreshment from your time of sleep. But for most of us, and I think for all of us, this should be a question of some importance. For no other reason than simply put, you want to know that the church you attend has a biblical form of church government.

Through the history of the church, there are classically three forms of church government. These are known as Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal. Congregational means that the leadership is entrusted to the majority vote of the congregation.

When it comes time to make decisions, when it comes time to exercise leadership, you take a majority vote, the 51% or the 60% or whatever it is prescribed in the bylaws, that is what carries the day. That is the Congregational form of church government. Secondly, you have what is known as the Presbyterian form of church government.

Now, that really does not have anything to do with the Presbyterian denomination, though of course, as you would expect, by and large, Presbyterian churches have this form of church government. But the Presbyterian form of church government comes from the ancient Greek word for elder, which is presbyteros. That means that leadership is entrusted to a group of men, or sometimes not men in today's culture, it can be women in today's culture, though I would not regard that biblically, but in today's culture, there are women elders in many churches.

In any way, it is this group of elders or presbyters that lead the church. They are the ones entrusted with leadership. So we have Congregational, we have Presbyterian or elder-led church government, then finally we have what is known as the Episcopal church government.

Now again, this does not have anything to do with the Episcopalian church, though you might expect that many Episcopalian churches might have this structure, at least in name. But the word Episcopal comes from the ancient Greek word that is translated in our Bibles as overseer or bishop. And that means that leadership is entrusted to an overseer, to a man who leads the church.

So basically, you have three different forms of church government, Congregational, Presbyterian and Episcopal. Leadership by the congregation as a whole, leadership by a group of elders from within the congregation, or finally leadership by one person, typically the pastor who leads the church. Now at different times and at different places, any one of these three forms have been more or less popular.

For example, in some countries, especially European countries, most all churches are Congregational. I found this very interesting in many of my travels, especially for example in Scandinavia. My particular knowledge is in Sweden.

Most every church there in Sweden comes from a Congregational form of church government. Now in America, I think that the predominant form of church government is Presbyterian. I would have to say that in my opinion, most churches in America are elder led, although I don't have any statistical data on that, really that's just a guess of mine.

But you could talk all day long, what's the European favorite, what's the American favorite, what's the Asian favorite, but we need to realize that this isn't a matter of American opinion or European opinion or Asian opinion. What really matters here is what does the Bible say. That is the most important question for any of us to ask, isn't it? What does the Bible teach on this very important question of how church leadership should be exercised and what sort of structure should it have within a body? Now I'll just cut to the chase and give you my bottom line opinion on what the Bible says.

The bottom line is simply this, there is no precise direction given on how churches should be governed in the New Testament. Now we're given many titles for leaders. We're told that there's elders, we're told that there's pastors, we're told that there's deacons, we're told that there's apostles, we're told that there's overseers.

But their relationship to each other and their relationship to the congregation is not really detailed. I mean, you're going to look high and low through the New Testament to find a place that says elders should be subordinate to pastors or pastors should be subordinate to elders or apostles or this or that. Now we certainly have the eminence of the apostolic office and Apostle if you would say with the capital A, that passed from the scene with the New Testament apostles.

But we do have to say that when you take a look, a careful, honest look at the New Testament, there is no specific form of church government laid down. Now Jesus and the apostles never told us about any kind of detailed structure or arrangement for church leadership to put in place. Instead, what Jesus and the apostles emphasized was the heart of leadership.

They told us what kind of men should be leading the church. We're told with the heart that they should exercise leadership, but we're really not told very much about structures at all. Now there have been many great scholars, biblical scholars and historical scholars who see this point very clearly and I'm going to quote to you just a few of them.

For example, the well-known church historian Philip Schaaf, writing in his History of the Christian Church, he says, At the same time, Jesus laid down no minute arrangements, but only the simple and necessary elements of an organization, wisely leaving the details to be shaped by the growing and changing wants of the Christian church in different ages and countries. Do you see what Schaaf is saying there? Jesus and the apostles, they laid down no minute arrangements. They just left sort of a flexible structure that could be adapted as the needs arise.

Here's another well-known historian named Williston Walker. His well-known work, A History of the Christian Church, has for many years been sort of a standard textbook. I think it's sort of passe in the minds of a lot of people now, but it's a good work.

And in A History of the Christian Church, Williston Walker writes, No question in church history has been more darkened by controversy than that of the origin and development of church offices, and none is more difficult owing to the scantiness of evidence that has survived. It is probable that the development was diverse in different localities. Not all early Christian congregations had identical institutions at the same time.

In other words, what's Williston Walker telling to us? Well, Professor Walker is letting us know that there was no universal form of church government, that there was an adaptability of structure and form from place to place. Let me quote to you one more scholar, a favorite of mine, a biblical commentator and theological writer known as Leon Morris. By the way, let me throw a little plug in for Leon Morris.

I think that he writes spectacular commentaries, and if you're interested in deeper Bible study and want to get your hands on a good Bible commentary, put your hands on anything written by Leon Morris. But this is a writing of his from a Baker's Dictionary of Theology under the heading of Church Government. Leon Morris writes, It is better to recognize that in the New Testament church there were elements that were capable of being developed into the Episcopal, Presbyterian, and Congregational systems, and which, in point of fact, have so developed.

But while there is no reason why any modern Christian should not hold fast to his particular church polity and rejoice in the values that it secures to him, that does not give him license to unchurch or disfellowship others whose reading of the evidence is different. In other words, Leon Morris is saying, listen, you can

find some scriptural support or some precedents for any one of these forms of church government, and if you want to choose to exercise it and if you want to enjoy the particular advantages of that form of church government, fine, God bless you. But Leon Morris would caution us, and I would echo his caution, against saying that your form of church government is unbiblical.

Your form of church government is heretical. Let me just sort of share with you my opinion here. I believe that God deliberately left the specifics flexible when it comes to church government and structure so that they could adapt to changing people and changing situations.

You may have a situation where a church is being planted among people where there is no leadership, and where there is nobody capable to take leadership of the church, then maybe a community of elders or a group of people, it is the best way to lead the church. But perhaps that would change over time as godly men would arise within that church family, men of vision, men of the word, men of prayer, who could rise up and lead the church effectively, and maybe it would be proper then for the church to transition into a place where a single pastor led that church family. Again, I think that God deliberately left the specifics flexible so that they could adapt to changing people and changing situations.

So therefore, if somebody wants to have a congregational, or an elder led, or a pastor led, or a form of church government, I won't dispute any of those biblically. Now at the same time, let me say this, I may have convinced many of you that I am sort of wishy-washy on this whole subject, and that I don't prefer any one form of church government, or think that any one form is any better than the other, and I don't want to give you that opinion at all, because I believe that definitely among the three forms of church government, people led, elder led, and pastor led, that one of them is clearly preferential. One of them is clearly best.

I believe that one of these forms is definitely to be preferred, and it is the form of government that we practice here at Calvary Chapel. Now let me read you a quote from Pastor Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel at Costa Mesa, of course. He says in his book, *The Philosophy of Ministry at Calvary Chapel*, he says, We feel that this is the form of government God desires for his church.

Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the church. He established the episkopos, or bishop, who we call the pastor, who is responsible to Jesus and who must recognize and bear the responsibility to guide and direct the ministry of the local church, guided directly by Jesus Christ. Under the pastor, in some cases, you have the assistant pastors, equivalent to the priests under Moses' rule.

So I would agree with Pastor Chuck on that, and by the way, I don't agree with it because Pastor Chuck said it. I agree with it because my own reading of the scriptures and my own understanding and experience in church life bears out exactly what he says to be true, that the preferential form of church government, the form of church government that we practice here at Calvary Chapel, has Jesus Christ as the head of the church. And then under Jesus is the pastor, who you might call the overseer, or the bishop in biblical terms, the episkopos, if you want to use the ancient Greek word.

He is responsible to Jesus, and he must recognize and bear the responsibility to guide and direct the ministry of the local church. He's helped by godly counselors and godly helpers around him, elders and their assistant pastors there to help him execute what needs to be done within the church. But there's no doubt that God calls one man to lead the church in our form of church government, and that man is the pastor.

Now, you should know that there are some people who say that the form of church government that we practice at Calvary Chapel is not biblical. Usually this comes from people who believe in elder-led churches. They will say that the Bible supports only their form of church government.

And what I want to do in this message is show two things. You may be wondering, when is he going to get to the Bible, and when is he going to stop giving the history lesson? Well, we'll talk about the New Testament passages that talk about these areas in just a few moments. But I want to do two things in this message.

First, I want to show you that the pastor-led church government is totally biblical and supported by the New Testament. Second, I'll spend just a few minutes speaking about why I think it is a better form of church government than the other two forms. However, I want to remind you again that my quarrel or my dispute isn't with those who want to practice congregational or elder-led church governments.

If that's the form of church government that you want to practice, God bless you, do your best with it. However, I think you can find some biblical precedent for those forms. Nevertheless, I believe that the predominant and most effective form of church government in the New Testament is pastor-led.

Now in teaching and writing about church government, Pastor Chuck shows how the leadership structure of Israel under Moses is one example of a biblical pattern for our form of church government. And because he uses the structure of Israel under Moses as an example, some people like to call this model of church government, Moses-style church government, or the Moses principle church government. You should know that I've never heard or read a place where Chuck Smith uses those titles.

Maybe he does, maybe he doesn't. I really don't know. But I know that he definitely uses the governmental structure of Israel under Moses, if you want to call it the theocratic kingdom, when God was the king and Moses was his representative and the overseer over the nation, Chuck definitely uses that as a model for church government or as an example of church government for Calvary Chapel.

Now, some of those who use those titles want to twist the words of good men to make their own point. And some people just like to criticize the Moses style by saying that it's either unbiblical or just for the Old Testament. I've run across it from time to time, place to place.

The people will say, you have the Moses style of church government, or the Moses principle. Well, you should be in the New Testament, brother. You should follow Jesus' example for church government.

And to that I heartily say, Amen. Let me tell you something, and you'll see this clearly in the time and the word that we're about to spend in just a few moments. The pattern of church government exhibited and exemplified by Moses in the Old Testament is exactly the same pattern and example of church government modeled by Jesus, modeled by the apostles, and modeled by the successors of the apostles.

It's the same. So when I told you that the title of this message was the Moses style or the Jesus style, I want you to know that I believe they're the same. I believe that the scriptures tell us that they're the same.

Now there are some strong critics of this kind of church government. There are some very strong critics of the kind of church government that we practice at Calvary Chapel. There are some who believe that the modern concept of the pastor is unbiblical.

They would exhort every pastor to resign their post, and that they should adopt what they believe is to be a biblical church government. And usually what they mean by that is ruled by elders and without any pastors. Or if there are pastors, they say that none of them should be a senior pastor.

And all the pastors should just work together as a team, and none should have any authority or any responsibility or any accountability over the other, or be an overseer over the entire congregation. Well let me say this. I am the senior pastor of Calvary Chapel of Simi Valley.

You should know that I never really emphasize the senior aspect of my title and how do I refer to myself, or how I prefer others to refer to me. It's just fine with me if somebody calls me David. They don't really have to call me Pastor David, though it's a nice show of respect and honor when they do, but it's not like I'm around waiting for people, or it's not like I really notice if they don't.

But especially I don't feel like people need to go around calling me Senior Pastor David. You know, I just don't think that that's really necessary. But at the same time, I don't have any hesitation in saying that I am the senior pastor of this church.

I am the one with overseeing authority at our church, and all the other pastors, all the other staff, all the other ministries, whatever they may be, few or many, they answer to me. So it's my pleasure to you tonight to explain to you why I have no intention of resigning my post. And it's even more of a pleasure to explain why single pastor or senior pastor leadership is a biblical form of church government.

Now as I said before, when you look at leadership structures in the early church, you just don't find much at all to guide you. You won't find instructions on how many elders you should have, and what their specific responsibilities should be, and how they should relate to the pastor and so forth. You won't find the minutes of an elders meeting recorded in the New Testament.

What you will find is a lot of teaching on character. So here's a principle that I would really like you to grab a hold of, and that's simply this. The godliness of leaders is far more important than the structure of leadership.

I believe that very strongly, and I want to say it again. The godliness of leaders is far more important than the structure of leadership. Now sometimes when people have problems in churches, especially personal conflicts with those in leadership, they want to blame not only the leaders, but also the structure.

And the bottom line is that any church government can work, and work well, depending on the godliness of the people in the structure. What I'm trying to say is simply this. You can find plenty of horror stories from any side.

You can always find a pastor who rules like a dictator. And then you can always find the elders who run the godly pastor out of town. And then you can find the congregation that stands in the way of true vision and growth.

When you want to prove your point, sometimes people will do the very false assumption of comparing the best of one system against the worst in another system, and that's totally unfair and unwise. For example, they'll say, well I want to prove to you that the system of elder-led church government is superior. And so they'll take a church where the church is being run by a dozen godly, godly men.

Just wonderfully godly men. And then they'll compare it to a church where it's pastor-led, and the pastor is an ungodly man and a man of disreputable character. Now what you're doing is you're comparing the best of one environment to the worst of another.

And that's just no way to make a comparison. You could turn the tables very easily. A godly pastoral leadership, a church led by him is going to be far more effective and far more working under the Holy Spirit's direction than will be a church of elders, ruled by elders I should say, if they're not godly men.

And so I want you to understand that oftentimes people do this in discussing this issue. They'll want to compare the best of one system to the worst of another, and you just can't do that. Now we have to admit though, that there are unwise and occasionally ungodly pastors who rule in a manner contrary to the Scriptures.

Now finally we're going to open up our Bibles here tonight, and I want to read you from 1 Peter chapter 5 verses 1 through 3. Listen carefully as I read this to you. 1 Peter chapter 5 verses 1 through 3. The elders who are among you I exhort, who am a fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed, shepherd the flock of God. Now that word for shepherd is the same word as pastor.

Pastor the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion, but willingly, not for dishonest gain, but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And friends, let us admit that there are senior pastors in pastor-led systems of church government who don't follow these instructions from 1 Peter. They're not serving well as overseers, they serve for dishonest gain, they're lords over those entrusted to them, and they're not being good examples to the flock.

We should also recognize that there are foolish men in the pastorate sometimes, men who don't take counsel from elders, men who don't take counsel from other godly people in the congregation, and they're headstrong, and they simply plot their own destruction. Proverbs 11, verse 14 says, Where there is no counsel, the people fall. But in the multitude of counselors there is safety.

Proverbs 12, 15 says, The way of a fool is right in his own eyes, but he who heeds counsel is wise. And then Proverbs 13, verse 10 says, By pride comes nothing but strife, but with the well-advised man is wisdom. Well, there are some pastors who don't take this instruction from the word of God, and they reject the godly advice, they reject the counsel of people around them.

And those do not make, I should say, and I want to emphasize this point strongly, these ungodly or headstrong or stubborn or pastors of low character. Their foolish actions do not make their form of church government unbiblical. It only shows that they apply it in an unbiblical and foolish manner.

And I would say that the same thing is true for other forms of church government. The renegade, dictatorial elder who wants to pull strings behind the scenes, the elder who comes to the pastor when the pastor comes and takes the church for the first time, and he says to the pastor, Well, pastor, let me tell you something, I've outlasted many guys before you, and I'm going to be here when you're gone, I want you to know that I'm running things around here and not you. That dictatorial, headstrong elder, he doesn't discredit the elder form of church government, he just shows his own heart to be wrong, not his form of church government necessarily.

Now I do believe that the pastor-led leadership structure is a biblical form of church government, and I'm going to carefully explain why in just a few moments. But I also believe that the New Testament, and I'm emphasizing this point again and again, you might be tired of me repeating it, but I want to really get it through our minds, that the New Testament doesn't tell us enough about church government to say that this is the only biblical form. I really have no disagreement with those who favor elder-ruled congregations, or those who favor congregational-ruled congregations.

My only disagreement is with those who insist that elder-ruled or congregational forms of church government are the only New Testament forms. You see, those who hold a dogmatic, elder-rule-only view of church government, they beg the question. They rightly point out that elders were appointed in many New Testament churches, and they assume that they know what that means.

They know that they're prominent in leadership passage of the New Testament. But in no place does the New Testament explain just what the relationship between the offices of elder, deacon, overseer, bishop, and pastor are. The people in the elder-rule camp assume that they know, and their faulty conclusions are based on those faulty assumptions.

Now I think that the biggest problem with the elder-rule-only group is that they neglect the clear models of leadership presented in the New Testament. Now there isn't much teaching on specific leadership structures, but there is abundant modeling of leadership, and most of these models point towards a pastor-leadership structure. So let's take a look at some New Testament examples consistent with senior pastor leadership.

The first example I'd like to challenge you with is the example of Jesus. Consider just for a moment, what was the Jesus structure of leadership? When a destination had to be chosen, when a decision had to be made, how do you think Jesus decided it? Did he leave it up to a majority vote of the disciples? Maybe of the entire multitude of disciples, the 100, 120 that followed him around. Do you think he took a vote of the congregation, so to speak? No.

Do you think Jesus took a vote of the elders? Let's say those were the apostles with him, or even the inner circle of the apostles. Many people say that Peter, James, and John were sort of an inner circle of the disciples. Did Jesus take a vote of them? No.

Jesus led. Now certainly he led with love. Certainly he led with humility.

Certainly he led of sensitivity, and there was no doubt that the leader of the group was Jesus and no one else. Now I know what some people might be saying in their mind right now. They might be saying, well listen, pastors aren't Jesus.

And you're absolutely correct. But let's just admit something right up front. If there is a system of church government modeled in the ministry of Jesus, it's not congregational rule.

It's not elder-led rule. It's pastor-led forms of church government. And I want you to remember what Jesus said in John chapter 20, verse 21.

John chapter 20, verse 21, Jesus said, So Jesus said to them again, Peace to you. As the Father has sent me, I also send you. No, not for a moment do I think that I'm Jesus.

And any pastor who goes around thinking that he has the same authority that Jesus has is mistaken. But friends, I want you to get the point here. Jesus said, just as the Father sent me, so I'm sending you.

Would it surprise us that Jesus had ordained for the church the same form, the same basic system of government that he exercised in his own ministry? First and foremost, Jesus is the example of a pastor-led form of church government. Secondly, you have the apostles. Consider the apostles for just a moment.

How did Paul lead in Ephesus when he was there for three years? Do you realize that Paul stayed at the city of Ephesus and taught there for three years? Acts chapter 20, verse 31, Paul says this to the Ephesian elders. He says, Therefore watch and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everybody night and day with tears. Now I'm asking a question that can really be only answered if you're familiar with the New Testament, and if you're familiar with this man, Saul of Tarsus, who we came to know as the Apostle Paul.

What kind of man was he? What kind of leader was he? Do you think that when Paul served for three years at the church of Ephesus that he just left things up to a congregational vote? Do you think that Paul stepped back from leadership and said to the elders, well, you know, guys, I'm no more important or no more than any of you. You just decide what you want, or we'll decide it together, and my voice doesn't have any more meaning than you. No.

Everything we know, the entire tenor of Paul's ministry as described in the book of Acts and as described in his letters makes it tough to believe that he was only one among a group of elders with no greater voice than any other elder had. Paul was a leader, and Paul led. Again, I know what some of you might be saying.

You're saying, well, pastor, do you think that you're Paul? Do you think that you're an apostle? And the answer is no. I don't think that I'm the Apostle Paul, and I don't think that I'm an apostle in the same way that Paul was. Yet at the same time, I believe that I am simply doing what Paul told me to do.

1 Corinthians chapter 4 verse 16 says, Therefore I urge you, imitate me. Paul said to every believer that they should follow him as he follows Jesus Christ. And so should it surprise us that the form of church government that God has ordained and blessed for the church today, the senior pastor or the pastor-led form of church government, that it was exemplified in the ministry of Paul and the other apostles.

So far we have two examples. The ministry of Jesus, the ministry of the apostles. Let's look at a third example.

These two men, Timothy and Titus. Now you sort of see a progression. First, of course, you have Jesus, the Lord of glory, the head of the church, in fact.

It doesn't surprise us. And then we have the apostles. But then there is another third critical step in this progression when we come to Timothy and Titus.

They weren't apostles. And of course they weren't Jesus. But yet they still exercised the same kind of authority coming forth from a single man the same way that Jesus exemplified and the apostles exemplified.

You see, Timothy was stationed in the city of Ephesus. Titus was stationed on the island of Crete. And how did Timothy function in Ephesus and how did Titus function on Crete? Did they really serve as just

one elder who was equal among others? Or did they assume a role more like the model of senior pastor leadership? Of course they did.

Now why else would Paul leave them with the authority to appoint elders themselves? That's what it says in Titus chapter 1 verse 5. He says, For this reason I left you in Crete that you should set in order the things that are lacking and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you. Get that point. Paul says to Titus, I left you in Crete.

I want you to set in order the things that are lacking. I want you to appoint elders in every city as I commanded you. Paul left them with the authority to appoint elders.

They were given this authority to evaluate and to choose elders. And some people might call Timothy and Titus today dictatorial senior pastors. But clearly they followed what God directed them to do through the inspired apostle Paul.

So you see, Timothy and Titus, we have no evidence at all that they worked just as one leader among a group of leaders in a church. Not at all. These were men of bold leadership.

And they were in charge of putting the church in order. They were in charge of leading the church. And they were in charge of appointing elders.

That's three examples so far. Jesus, the apostles, and Timothy and Titus. And next we come to the example of James in Jerusalem.

Now, James in Acts chapter 15 is a clear example of single pastor leadership. Now, among the elders of Jerusalem and the others gathered in Acts chapter 15, James is clearly the one who takes the lead. And maybe you remember the whole situation there in the book of Acts chapter 15.

The situation is simply this. There had risen a huge dispute in the church over this matter of how is a person saved. Must a Gentile first become a Jew before he can become a Christian? And there were some who were from the sect of the Pharisees, Christians who came forth from the Pharisees, who said that a man can't become a Christian until he first becomes a Jew and is circumcised and comes under the law of Moses.

Well, what about this whole issue? How would it be decided? And what they decided to do was to call a council in Jerusalem. And so you had apostles, you had elders, you had great dignitaries and leaders from all over the Christian world at that time gathering together in Jerusalem for a council. Now, if there was any time where they just would have decided something on a congregational level, that would have been it in Acts chapter 15.

But in Acts chapter 15, James is clearly the one taking the lead. He even states the decision of the case in the emphatic words, Therefore I judge. Let me read that to you from Acts chapter 15 verse 19.

James stood up and he said, Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God. You see, the words there are very strong. James is standing up and saying, Okay guys, I'm ready to make a decision.

Now, if James had no more leadership than any of the other ones there, if this was just sort of a college of elders or a congress of elders and apostles together, they would have had every right to say, James, who

do you think you are for deciding this? No one man is going to decide this. We're all going to agree on this together. But instead, James stood up and he said, Therefore I judge.

And indeed, the ancient Greek grammar there presents it even more strongly. One of the wonderful commentaries I have is the Expositor's Greek New Testament. It's a commentary not on the English text of the Bible, but on the ancient Greek text.

And in the Expositor's Greek New Testament, on Acts chapter 15 verse 19, they explain how the ancient Greek presents it very strongly as, I determine or I resolve. This was a very strong statement from the apostle here, James, and he made the opinion. Commentator Adam Clark rightly says about this, he says that the rest either argued on the subject or gave their opinion.

James alone pronounced the definitive sentence. And friends, this was James' leadership at work in the context of reliance on the wisdom and the counsel of others present. Now in addition, when the decision of James was published, it was presented as the mutual decision of everybody present.

In Acts chapter 15 verse 25, when they wrote a letter to the congregations explaining their decision, they said, not that it seemed good to James, they said it seemed good to us. James led. And everybody else acknowledged and supported his leadership.

And they said, James, you're a wise, godly leader. Your decision is our decision. And James' leadership was supported by all present.

This is one of the striking examples of pastor-led forms of church government in action in the New Testament. So far we have four. Jesus, the apostles, Timothy and Titus, and James.

Now for our fifth one, I'm going to take you to sort of an unusual place. Unusual. Because if you're familiar with this issue at all, and if you've ever heard somebody try to explain the case for elder-led church government, they'll always take you to Acts chapter 20.

So let me take you to Acts chapter 20, and let's take a look at what they say there in Acts chapter 20. In Acts chapter 20, Paul is on his way back to Jerusalem. And he had spent three years in the city of Ephesus, and then traveled away, and now was passing somewhat nearby as he was coming back through on his way to Jerusalem.

And because he was somewhat near the city of Ephesus, he wanted to meet with the elders of the city of Ephesus. Now, in the minds of many people, the elders of the city of Ephesus are the prime example of an elder-led form of church government in action, because Paul is speaking to the elders, and he's addressing them essentially as pastors. As a matter of fact, in Acts chapter 20, verse 17, it says, For Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called for the elders of the church.

And so you have this very dramatic, this very wonderful scene in Acts chapter 20, where Paul is speaking to the elders of the church at Ephesus. And because the word elder is present, many people assume that it speaks of what they envision of as an elder rule structure. But to say that elder rule structure was the form at the church of Ephesus makes huge and erroneous assumptions about structure in the early church.

Now again, this is a critical point that many elder rule advocates missed. When Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20, they assumed that these elders were a group that presided over a

single Ephesian congregation. But what they're doing is they're sort of thinking that, OK, well the church at Ephesus met in one place.

No, there they are. They met at one big place. Maybe a few hundred, maybe a thousand believers in the city of Ephesus.

We know that there was at least some kind of sizeable Christian family there. And so you have one large congregation in the city of Ephesus, and there the elders presided over that single large congregation. Friends, that is a totally erroneous assumption.

When Paul called and spoke to the Ephesian elders in Acts chapter 20, he wasn't speaking to elders who presided over a single large congregation. He spoke to elders who most almost certainly presided over individual home churches as sort of pastors in their own right. You see, Acts chapter 20, verses 17 through 32, addresses these overseers, these bishops who were called to pastor the church in Ephesus.

Now not all elders were bishops or overseers who functioned as senior pastors, but certainly these particular ones were. And Paul addresses these elders, who were not collectively elders of a single large Ephesian congregation, but they were individual pastors over small Ephesian home churches. As a matter of fact, if you want a reference to this, 1 Corinthians chapter 16, verse 19 tells us that there was specifically a house church in Ephesus that met at the home of Aquila and Prisca.

And in Romans chapter 16, verses 3 through 5, it mentions another house church in the home of Aquila. These house church structures were the normal way of arrangements in the early church. Friends, the early church simply didn't have buildings where even 70 people could gather together.

If you take a look at ancient architecture, you had to be very wealthy to have a home where either 40 or 50 people could gather together. And so if we want to estimate, or maybe I should say guesstimate, that the church in the city of Ephesus was anywhere from 500 to 1,000 people strong, what you're talking about is dozens of house congregations, anywhere from 20 to 30 in size. And this is what made up the church.

And the Ephesian elders that Paul addressed were the individual leaders over those separate congregations. Now the organization of these early church congregations into house churches made it necessary to have elders serving effectively as what we would call senior pastors over these small congregations. And perhaps there would be several elders functioning as these roles of overseers and bishops in any given city.

It wasn't so much later that most Christians even had the capability of meeting together in large congregations. Now certainly some of the elders would not be qualified as overseers or bishops of home churches, and some would be and some wouldn't be, but they would assist those who were. The elders of Ephesus in Acts 20 were pastors of house churches.

I want you to notice something else, and very significantly. In Philippians 1, verse 1, Paul makes no mention at all of elders when he writes to the church of Philippi. He says, I'm writing to the overseers and to the deacons.

Undoubtedly, he means those who were in leadership over the different individual home churches of Philippi. All right, let me go on to another idea here, and that's the sixth one. It's the idea of assembly leadership in Greek and Hebrew culture.

Now for this, we'll have to take a look at some ancient history. You see, leadership in the early church is described in both Hebrew and Greek cultural contexts. The word and the idea behind elder is essentially Jewish.

That's a word and a concept that comes from Jewish culture. While the idea of overseer or bishop essentially comes from Greek culture. The term shepherd had a legacy in both cultures.

Now how do these terms and their cultural understanding help us to understand the structure of leadership in the early church? Well, if you want to talk about elders among Jewish congregations, synagogues if you will, synagogues were led by a person known as the head of the assembly. He was the presiding officer. He maintained order.

He removed disturbances. He distributed ministry positions. He selected scripture passages.

He fixed the topics for sermons and was in many cases the caretaker of the building itself. Usually there was only one head of the assembly in each synagogue, and in each synagogue there would also be elders, presbyters, who functioned as an advisory council to the head of the assembly. They assisted him in his leadership in the synagogue.

The synagogue elders were helpers there to help the head of the assembly do the leadership. So what I want you to see is the idea of a head of the assembly being counseled and supported by a council of elders was familiar to synagogue structure. You find this pattern in ancient Jewish structure in the synagogue.

So when they brought the same structure over to the church, it wasn't anything unusual. You also have examples in Greek culture. The words deacon and overseer have a clear Greek cultural root.

There was an office of overseer in Greek culture, and in some ways the Christian office was patterned after this example. Basically, the overseer was the one who had protective care over those he watched over. And when the New Testament speaks of an overseer in the singular, it's entirely consistent with the pastor-led form of church government.

So what I want you to see is we're clicking off of quite a few examples here. First of all, we have the example of Jesus. Secondly, we have the example of the apostles.

Third, we have the example of Timothy in 1 Timothy. Fourth, we have the example of Titus in Titus 1. Fifth, we have the example of James in Acts 15. Sixth, we have the example of Jewish synagogue structure.

Now I want you to see that we also have the example, number seven, of the use of overseer in the singular in the pastoral letters. Now, in the three pastoral letters, these were letters written to pastors, written to young ministers. You're talking about 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, Titus, and sometimes people throw Philemon in as one of the pastoral epistles.

It really isn't a letter written to a pastor, but it's sort of off in its own category, if you will. I want you to notice that whenever Paul speaks of the overseer or of the bishop in 1 and 2 Timothy or in Titus, he always speaks of them in the singular. For example, 1 Timothy chapter 3 says, an overseer must be blameless.

He doesn't say overseers must be blameless. Titus chapter 1 verse 7, he says, for a bishop or an overseer must be blameless. Again, there's another emphasis right there, very clearly, how overseers are

presented in the singular.

In contrast, deacons are presented in the plural. 1 Timothy chapter 3 verse 8 says, likewise deacons must be reverent. So Paul was fully capable of referring to overseers in the plural if he wanted to, but he didn't want to.

Whenever he referred to leaders, these single pastor leaders, so to speak, in the early church he referred to them in the singular because they probably operated as individual leaders over house churches. As a matter of fact, you should know, and this might be sort of an uninteresting idea to some of you, but I think it's a little bit interesting. This idea is used by liberal scholars to late-date the pastoral epistles because they can't bring themselves to believe that there would be this emphasis on single pastor leadership in the early church.

But it was there. You can't use this to late-date. This was how the New Testament church was run.

Now what I want you to see is that it's extremely significant that in the pastoral epistles Paul makes reference to the office of pastor or overseer in the singular. It's kind of funny because I read books on this subject, of course, and one of the books I read on this subject is a work called Biblical Eldership by a man named Alexander Strach. It's a good book, and I'll talk about it a little bit more later, but I don't agree with his conclusions at all.

Alexander Strach, in his book Biblical Eldership, it just sort of cracks me up how he makes a great deal of the fact that most often when the term elders is used in the New Testament, it's used in the plural. You know, to refer to a group, and he really wants to emphasize it. You're talking about a group.

You're talking about a group. Not one man. Not one man.

He finds it very significant that elders is referred to in the plural. However, he finds no significance in the fact that overseer is mentioned in the singular. Now, in my mind, you can't have it both ways.

If it's important that elders is always mentioned in the plural, then it has to be significant that overseer is mentioned in the singular. And I think it is important. Now, next, as another evidence in the New Testament of the pattern and the example of a senior pastor or pastor-led forms of church government, I would point you to 1 Peter 5, verse 2, where Peter says, Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion, but willingly, not for dishonest gain, but eagerly, nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.

See, what I want you to notice is in 1 Peter 5, verses 2 and 3, Peter looks at overseers and he says, Don't lord it over the people that are entrusted to you. Now, there's two things in there that I think give two separate evidences that senior pastor leadership was practiced in the early church. First of all, it's Peter's exhortation that they not lord over.

This really isn't an instruction that you have to give to a group of elders because you just expect that the others will keep the one in check. But Peter addresses overseers and he says, Listen, you don't lord over. You have the potential to do that in your office.

You have been given significant authority, significant responsibility, and you have to wield it in a godly way as a servant, not lording it over people. Friends, if the senior pastor office had no potential of that kind of abuse, Peter would have never given the instruction. And for a final reason, I want you to notice a simple

word in 1 Peter 5, verses 3, where he says, Nor as being lords over those entrusted to you.

1 Peter 5, verses 3 speaks of those entrusted to you. More literally, in the ancient Greek, what Peter wrote was this, The portion allotted to each individual overseer. He was signifying that each pastor mentioned in 1 Peter 5 had a portion of God's flock allotted to them by God.

A portion that they were called by God to lead and to oversee. You see, that's completely consistent. One man is allotted, so to speak, a place of leadership in God's community and God will hold him responsible for how he leads within that place.

Well, I want you to see that there are even a few other examples from church history and from the scriptures that I could bring up, but I think that this suffices it for this evening. You know, I am troubled every time I hear of a pastor who acts in an unwise, dictatorial way, of a senior pastor who refuses to make himself accountable to others, who refuses to listen to godly counsel and leadership, who ignores the clear instruction of 1 Peter 5, verses 1-3. But that shouldn't make us write off the idea that senior pastor leadership is used of God in a powerful way.

Because, friends, as we've seen tonight, the New Testament precedent is there. Now, I know that the elder rule only crowd is frustrated because the New Testament doesn't use the word pastor enough for their liking. They sort of wait around and wonder, well, why doesn't it say that pastor so-and-so should lead this and that? But, friends, what I want you to see is that the model of pastor-led churches is throughout the New Testament.

It appears far more frequently than some envision as elder rule. You ask yourself, very carefully now, when in the New Testament do you see a committee or a group of elders leading anything? Anything! From beginning to end! Even in what you might have thought was the prime example, the prime example of the Council of Jerusalem, the Apostle James stands up and takes leadership in that situation. Friends, what I'm saying is, at the very least, we have far more definitive and far more frequent examples of pastor-led leadership structures in the New Testament than we have for elder-led or than we have for congregationally led.

Let me remind you what they are again that we've spoken about tonight. We have the example of Jesus. We have the example of Paul and the Apostles.

We have the example of Timothy in 1 Timothy. He had the power to appoint elders and deacons himself. We have the example of Titus in Titus chapter 1. He had the power to appoint elders and deacons himself.

We have the example of James in Acts chapter 15. He made the decision at the Council of Jerusalem, which the rest supported. We have the example of the Jewish synagogue structure.

We have the use of overseer only in the singular, in the pastoral letters. And we have the idea that pastors have the potential for lording it over in 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 3, and that pastors have congregations allotted to them in 1 Peter chapter 5 verse 3. Now in the books that I've read advocating elder rule, again such as this book known as Biblical Eldership by Alexander Strach. I find it fascinating how they deal with each one of these cases.

And you know how they do it? I know that I'm not doing justice. If you really want to know what the man says, you should read the book yourself. Although let me say this.

I think that that book *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strach is both a good and a bad book. It's a good book in the way that he does a marvelous job of telling men, men, step up to the plate in your church and take leadership. And that's something that men need to hear today.

Men are shirking leadership that God would have them take in their churches. And God would have them take in his kingdom to move forward his work. That's a needed message in the church today.

And I think Strach does a good job of developing that message in that book *Biblical Eldership*. However, I think he does a very poor job of advancing and defending the idea of elder-led church government. And in each one of the examples that I've given you right here, you know what Strach would say? He'd bring up the example of Jesus and he'd say, Well, you can't take Jesus.

He's a special case. Then you bring up the apostles and Paul and Peter. Well, you can't take them.

They're a special case. And then you bring up the example of Titus and Timothy. Well, you can't take them.

They're special cases. Well, what about James? Well, he's a special case too. You see, it's pretty easy just to go along and say, Well, everything that goes against my argument and everything that supports the ideas of the other guy, they're special cases and don't apply in our situation.

And obviously, I think that's the wrong way to do it. I think that Strach's book is an interesting example of a book with both good and bad, but in that book I find a lot of special pleading and begging the question. But the models remain, and they demonstrate while there isn't enough in the New Testament to say that one form of church government is biblical to the exclusion of others, certainly the models for strong pastoral leadership are clear and present.

And as I did at the beginning, let me do so again at the end. I have no disagreement with those who prefer an elder rule structure instead of a senior pastor structure. My only disagreement is with those who claim that the senior pastor structure is unbiblical.

However, let me say that I am absolutely persuaded that the preferred and the most effective form of church government is pastor-led. I think that there is a dynamism and there is an effectiveness and there is an energy and a boldness in pastor-led forms of church government that excel over other forms. Now, please, I am not trying to say that an elder-led form of church government is doomed or cursed or destined to fail.

Not at all. There are many marvelous, wonderfully working churches that operate with an elder-led form of church government. But I think that either they are just kidding themselves about their form of church government, or they are rising above the challenge of having an elder-led form of church government.

You see, and this is why I am talking with you now in this last brief portion about why I think senior pastor-led church government is preferred. I mean, you might say, well, David, you just presented a case that it is one among many. Why is it any better? You see, I believe that it is the best because, well, for no other reason.

How about just this? It is the most honest. Do you want to know the David Guzik theory of leadership? And this is just one, and I am sure it is not unique to me, but I have never heard anybody else say it in exactly these terms, but I am sure many other people have. I believe that when you get right down to it, leadership

is always about one man.

Always. Now, you can say, well, you see, we have a congregational form of church government, so it is not about one man. It is all about the congregation.

But listen, you know that within that congregational form of church government, there is one leading man in that congregation. There is Brother Jones off to the side, and when Brother Jones stands up and makes his opinion known, he is so respected among the other people in the congregation that he is going to carry the majority vote his way. Now, you can tell me that that is a congregational form of church government, but you know and I know that Brother Jones is leading that church.

Now, you can say, well, that is not how it is on paper. That is not how we have it structured. But you know, according to human nature, that is just how it operates.

Then again, you can have another form of church government. You can have elder-led church government. And there you are.

You can say, well, nobody has more than one vote than another, and they are all equals at the table, the elders and that. But listen, you have Elder Jones at that meeting. Please, I hope nobody thinks I am picking on anybody named Jones or anything.

But you have Elder Jones there at that church elders meeting. And when Elder Jones makes his opinion known, he is so respected and so admired by enough of the other elders that a majority goes his way. And so you can talk all day long about it being an elder-led form of church government, but Elder Jones is the one leading that church.

Now, I think, why not make it just be Pastor Jones? Why shouldn't you be up front about it? And let the man who is out there teaching the word and leading and feeding the flock, let him be the one to lead. Is he a pastor or is he not? Let me tell you for a moment that I could not bear to pastor a church where they said, Pastor, just feed us, don't lead us. If I wanted to do that, I'd go and teach at a Bible college somewhere.

I mean, that's not out of the question, but if I'm going to teach in a church, I'm going to lead there as well. If I'm going to be the pastor and teach the church, then I'm going to be the pastor and lead the church as well, and I won't be a hireling who is hired or fired at the whim of a group of men. So friends, it's really that simple.

Those who teach should also be the ones who lead. You see, the senior pastor form of church government simply recognizes the dynamic that one man steps up to leadership, and ideally, it gives it the kind of accountability that it deserves. Now let me say this in conclusion.

I'm sorry for every believer who has ever had a bad experience with church government, whether their bad experience was with a pastor or an elder or someone else in the church. But the idea that senior pastor-led churches are unbiblical or inherently dangerous, that's simply false. I know that as a pastor, I work in cooperative submission with our elders, and I would never be foolish enough to disregard their counsel.

I may not agree with it on every point, but I never disregard it. Now perhaps not all pastors at all times work this way, but when they fail to do it, it's a reflection of their own wisdom or lack of it, not a reflection of

the structure itself. God has used the pastoral leadership model to accomplish great things for his kingdom in a godly way, and he's going to continue to do so until the Lord Jesus returns.

So friends, I recommend to you the system of church government, the example of church government practiced by Moses, yes, but also by Jesus, also by all the apostles, also by Timothy, also by Titus, and also by numerous other examples in the New Testament. Let's go forward together to advance God's kingdom in these things. Father, we pray that you would put a blessing on our church leadership.

Father, it feels a little funny delivering this message because in a way, it might be taken that I'm advertising or that I'm promoting my own position. So Lord, with this message tonight, I humbly ask you, God, that you give me a unique protection and a unique enabling, a unique empowering, an unction, if you will, Lord, to fulfill the ministry that you've given me. Father, that is the passion, I pray, that you would raise up many, many hundreds, if not thousands, of praying Christians to support me in fulfilling the ministry that you've given to me.

Not for my good, Lord, though I would want good for me to come out of it. Lord, do it for the glory of Jesus Christ and for the good of his people. We pray this in Jesus' name.

Amen.

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