

Calvary Protestant Evangelical Free Church

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The Precedent for Elders in the New Testament

By David E. Manuel, Ph.D.

During the past months, despite my confidence that the church membership felt informed enough to vote on the changes to our constitution, I've continued to field questions about Calvary's new structure. What follows are my views only. My understanding of the issue is the result of study and contemplation over many years, but your recent questions have prompted me to revisit the issue. The result has not been a change, but rather greater clarity in my understanding, which I believe reflects both the meaning and the intent of scripture. Some will disagree with me, but I hope they will see that sincere and prayerful inquiry may allow for an understanding different from their own.

The term "elder" is the English translation of the Greek word *πρεσβύτερος* (*presbuteros*), which becomes the Latin *presbyter* and our derivative "presbyterian," as well as the English word "priest." The Greek word, in itself, has no biblical, theological, or ecclesiastical significance. It denotes, first, simply an older man. Then, second, the elder is a leader or counselor or overseer, a role he assumes or is assigned because, through his age, he is presumed to have gained a modicum of wisdom and, with it, a degree of respect—having left the fickle volatility of youthful inexperience behind. In the Greek Old Testament (the Septuagint), the word *πρεσβύτερος* (*presbuteros*) was used by the rabbis to translate the Hebrew word *זָקֵן* (*zagen*), which has exactly the same two meanings. Men with that title and function were found in Jewish communities, both in the first century (for example, in the Sanhedrin) and back at least as far as Moses. But the church found precedent for elders not only in the Old Testament, but in the secular world, as well. "Elder" as a title occurs "as a technical term among the *ἔθνη* [*ethne*, the Gentile nations] . . . to designate *civic* as well as religious officials" (Bauer 700, emphasis mine). But, in addition to the term itself, the familiar rationale for elders was also found in the secular Gentile world: the young (generally men under thirty) "were not to be trusted with public affairs . . . they were easily 'corrupted' intellectually and morally and therefore a threat not only to themselves but to society at large" (Finley 162). While the specific roles of and attitudes toward the elder members of society were not consistent throughout the classical world (Finley 162), the similarity between secular, Jewish and, later, Christian attitudes is significant.

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This suggests that when the church chose elders to lead, it was adopting not an exclusively biblical model, but a common cultural and secular one that was familiar and sensible both to religious Jews and pagan Greeks.

But is there something in the New Testament passages that suggests that the role of elder was something more than simply the familiar and convenient designation of leaders? In other words, is elder rule specifically prescribed by the New Testament as a divine command? In our search for an answer, we might group the passages that refer specifically to “elders” into the following categories: 1) passages that state the eventual existence of elders in the Jerusalem church (Acts 11:30; 15:2-23; 16:4; 21:18); 2) passages that state the existence of elders in certain other churches (Acts 20:17; I Tim 4:14; I Tim. 5:17; James 5:14; I Pet 5:1); 3) one passage that states that elders were actually appointed in churches (Acts 14:23); and 4) one passage that actually directs that elders *should* be appointed in the church (Tit. 1:5). In all but two of those passages, elders are described as existing, not prescribed by divine command. Certainly, nowhere is there a suggestion that Paul means to replace some objectionable form of government with a divinely ordained, exclusively Christian form. He never says, “Eliminate that unbiblical congregational system and replace it with biblically ordained elder rule.” Rather, it seems that these newly formed churches need *some* form of government and must not be leaderless. And what more convenient form than the elder leadership that St. Paul and these Greek churches already know from civic (and perhaps even pagan religious) bodies? Was even the one directive to appoint elders (in Titus 1:5) less about the specific title of “elder” and more about overseeing the preservation, development, and orthodoxy of these specific infant churches—by some means, even by a familiar secular means? It is also worth noting that the word translated “rule” (προϊστημι, *proïstemi*) in Paul’s description of the elders’ role (I Tim. 5:17) has the sense of “lead” and “care for” (Bauer 707), which is consistent with the elders’ shepherding role in I Pet. 5:2—and with the phrase “elder led” in our new constitution—and certainly does not mean to reign over (ἄρχω, *arche*) or command (ἡγέομαι, *hegeomai*).

Furthermore, in the young New Testament churches no one system or title seems to have been firmly established. In Acts 6, the Greek men chosen to serve at tables were given no official title. In the Jerusalem church, elders are not mentioned until Chapter 11. In Acts 15, the Jerusalem elders send their momentous letter not to elders, but to “the brothers who are of the Gentiles in Antioch and Syria and Cilicia.” Church historian Kenneth Latourette explains that church “uniformity of structure was far from coming into being at once. In the earliest mention of what appear to be officers or leaders in the great Gentile church in Antioch, we hear of prophets and teachers, but not of deacons, elders, or bishops. In one of his letters to the church in Corinth, where he appears to be naming the offices in the church, Paul says nothing expressly of deacons, elders, or bishops, although some of his words can be so interpreted, but he speaks of apostles, prophets, and teachers. In his *Letter to the Romans* prophets, ministers, teachers, exhorters, givers (perhaps deacons), and rulers are named as what appears to be the order with which Paul is familiar. In another letter the list is apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers” (Latourette 116). What is more, when titles were used, they seem not to have been used as precisely as modern readers might wish. Philip Schaff, for example, accounts for the occasional absence of the title “elder” by observing that “elder” (πρεσβύτερος, *presbuteros*) and “bishop” (ἐπίσκοπος, *episkopos*, literally “over-seer”)

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refer to the same office, the first term “signifies the dignity, the other the duty” (Schaff 492). Thus, in many cases, where St. Paul mentions overseers (bishops) he seems to have elder men in mind—though, as Latourette observes, even overseers were not always present. It is also possible that some had the duty of overseers without the dignity of being an elder, there perhaps being none available or thought necessary. We just don’t know for sure. But the lack of a definite practice and the imprecise use of titles, to say nothing of the absence of a clear biblical command, cast grave doubt on the notion that the office of elder is directly mandated by scripture at all.

When scripture makes a command, there is no such doubt, ambiguity, or reliance on supposition. Scripture makes abundantly and overwhelmingly clear what is actually mandated for the church: evangelism, baptism, unity, order, and love. But there are no such imperatives when it comes to the organization of the church. Instead, to my mind, the lesson of the seven Greek men (may we call them “deacons”?) in Acts 6 is not that we should petrify the title of deacon or elder in the structure of the church, but that we should adapt in love to the needs of the members—in whatever form and with whatever titles best demonstrate that love. That is why we have chosen the model of elder leadership, because we feel it will help us better to minister. If the titles “elder” and “deacon,” in their strangeness to the modern world and with their biblical associations, have the advantage of distinguishing church offices from secular and of evoking the loving service that is the actual and unique mandate of all Christians, all the better.

Works Cited

- Bauer, Walter, et al. *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Christian Literature*. 2nd ed., U of Chicago P, 1979.
- Finley, M. I. "The Elderly in Classical Antiquity." *Greece & Rome*, 2nd series, vol. 28, no. 2, Oct. 1981, pp. 156-71. *JSTOR*, www.jstor.org/stable/642863. Accessed 11 Feb. 2023.
- Latourette, Kenneth Scott. *Beginnings to A. D. 1500*. 1953. Rev. ed., Peabody, MA, Prince, 1997. Vol. 1 of *A History of Christianity*. 2 vols.
- Schaff, Philip. *Apostolic Christianity: A.D. 1–100*. 1910. 5th rev. ed., Grand Rapids, MI, Eerdmans, 1994. Vol. 1 of *History of the Christian Church*. 8 vols.

Join us as we celebrate the Easter season!



Palm Sunday - April 2nd

Good Friday - April 7th service is at 7:30 p.m.



Easter/Resurrection Sunday - April 9th

CALVARY'S FEBRUARY ACTIVITIES:

CCC'S FAMILY GAME TIME

A Family Game Time was held Sunday, February 5th with a little over 20 adults and children attending for a time of fellowship, enjoying a meal, playing cards, dominos, and various board games. Everyone had a great time. It's really nice to see the multi-generations spending time together. We hope to have more family game time in the near future.



SENIORS LUNCHEON

It was a nice size group that attended the luncheon on February 7th. We even had some new comers. These are the ladies from Harbor Cove - they all sat together.

Dr. Brian Leander stopped by and met the seniors, and blessed the food. Big thank you to Chef Ralph! As always, the food was delicious.

A guest speaker from family and children's association was very informative. FCALI is a non-profit faith based support group for caregivers of loved ones with Dementia and Alzheimer's. For more details you can visit their website: fcali.org



Our **next luncheon** is scheduled for **Tuesday, March 28th** starting at 12:00 noon. Please feel free to invite others as we would love to have you all. No matter the menu, it is always delicious and a great time! Please let us know you are attending by either signing the sign-up sheet at the church, or call the church office and leave a message (516-223-4070).

IT'S A BOY!!!!

Congratulations to the Nembhard Family on the new addition to their beautiful growing family.

Noah Alexander Nembhard was born Monday, January 23rd at 10:17 p.m. He weighed 6 pounds 2 ounces and was 19 inches long.

May God bless and watch over little Noah!



BIRTHDAYS

MARCH

4th Susan Deedy Mahoney
7th Natalie Heneghan
8th Gisele Sandoval
14th Danny Forbes Breen
15th Christina Mandato
16th Patti Senita
17th David Fazzino
18th Lucas Nehring
18th Laura Nicolich
18th Emilyn Porter
19th Evelyn Sangster-Barnes
21st Lois Smith
22nd Melinda Jones
22nd Karen Senita
23rd Elijah Toussaint
23rd Brant Waldvogel
24th Bill Chalavoutis
24th Michael Nicolich Jr.
25th Larry Kulla
29th Tom Corcoran
30th Carmine Dapice
30th Bonnie Rose

APRIL

3rd Abbie Wong
5th Samantha Seymour
7th Debbie Porter
13th Howard Brockway
14th Leah Nicolich
15th Barbara Johnson
16th Barbara Grant
20th Rose Nembhard
21st Mary Jo Dapice
21st Joe Fazzino
22nd Maryann Brockway
22nd Sotar Lloyd
24th Carter Miller
24th Rosemary Rotolo
27th Karen Linhart



ANNIVERSARY

MARCH

17th Joe & Thalia Waldvogel
27th Cecil & Debbie Porter
30th Paul & Rose Nembhard



APRIL

12th Greg & Sue (Deedy) Mahoney
26th Charles & Evelyn Barnes

Change Your Clocks

Daylight Saving Time officially begins Sunday, **March 12th**, at 2:00 a.m.

Don't forget to move your clocks forward one hour before going to bed Saturday evening, or first thing Sunday morning. We wouldn't want you to miss Sunday School or church.

Calvary Chronicle

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CHURCH UPDATES

Adult Sunday School Class meets Sunday @ 9:45 a.m. The class will be having discussions based on, “*The Chosen*” videos. For parents with children who would like to attend the class, there will be a story time and activities available for your children.

The Sunday worship service is @ 11:00 a.m. The message will be recorded and posted on the church’s website www.cpcbaldwin.com (click on YouTube), and also on “YouTube” at www.youtube.com (search for Calvary Church, Baldwin).

Children’s Church is held on Sundays during the service. The children are dismissed before the sermon and meet in the fellowship room. On the first Sunday of each month (when Holy Communion is scheduled), Children’s Church will not be in session.

Choir Practice every Monday @ 8:00 p.m. unless it falls on a holiday.

Bible Study/Prayer Meeting is held Wednesdays @ 7:00 p.m. at the church. There is prayer time followed by Bible Study. The men and women are studying the Book of Luke.

Ladies Bible Study is the 1st & 3rd Thursday of every month @ Patti Senita’s home from 7-9 p.m.

UPCOMING EVENTS

Seniors Luncheon - On Tuesday, March 28th, starting @ 12:00 noon. Please let us know if you are attending by calling the church office and speaking to Paty or leave a message (516-223-4070).

PUBLICATIONS

The March/April/May issue of *Our Daily Bread*, March issues of *Daily Walk* and *Today’s Christian Living* are available at the church. Additional literature and devotional books are located in the hymnal rack at the back of the sanctuary.