



Pastors, Elders, Church Authority and REAL Leadership

Description



I absolutely believe leaders are a vital part of the church.

However, I have a very different opinion of their role and Church authority than most people do.

I've been directly persecuted by church leaders and am currently a leader in my church, so I've experienced both sides of the issue. But that doesn't really matter. What really matters is what the Bible has to say on the topic. Unfortunately, while the Bible is very clear in some areas, it's less clear in others.

Let's dive in.

Who are Church Leaders?

There are three words the New Testament typically uses for those in a leadership role. We'll look at them all in turn

“Overseer”

The first term we'll look at is the Greek word “?????????” ([episkopos](#)) which is almost always translated “overseer”. Here's at the meaning of the word:

1985 *epískopos* (a masculine noun, derived from 1909 /*epí*, “on/fitting contact,” which intensifies 4649 /*skopós*, “look intently,” like at an end-marker concluding a race) – properly, an overseer; a man called by God to literally “keep an eye on” His flock (the Church, the body of Christ), i.e. to provide personalized (first hand) care and protection (note the *epi*, “on”).

“Though in some contexts 1985 (*epískopos*) has been regarded traditionally as a position of authority, in reality the focus is upon the responsibility for caring for others”

Notice they specifically say the focus is NOT on authority, but rather on caring for others. The word literally mean “to look intently on”. These day we might say “keep a close eye on”. It's the same concept of nurturing and protecting by carefully watching for any problems.

The most well know place it's used is the “qualifications for leaders” passage in 1 Timothy.

1 Timothy 3:1-2

1 Here is a trustworthy saying: Whoever aspires to be an **overseer*** desires a noble task.

2 An **overseer**, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach,

(The next several verses list more requirements for overseers)

“Elder”

The second – and far more common – word used for leaders in the Church is “?????????????” ([presbuteros](#)), which basically means “Old(er) Man”.

4245 *presbýteros* – properly, a mature man having seasoned judgment (experience); an elder

In the Old Testament, we know it was the custom of the city elders to sit at the city gates. (*Ruth 4 among many other places confirms this.*) From my research, it seems they sat there because it was THE place to be.

Proverbs 31:23 “Her husband is known in the gates, When he sits among the elders of the land.”

Why did the elders sit at the city gates? Because that was the center of life in those times. Typically, there was a large square just inside the city gates and it often functioned as the social center of the city. Many of the “Old timers” would congregate there. If you had a problem or dispute, you could go to them for their wisdom and sage advice. Because they were experienced, it was often good advice.

Thus, the elders were leaders of the land because of their years of knowledge and experience. They didn't necessarily hold any governing authority (*because the Kings had their own court system*) but they were well respected. We know during Jesus time they weren't “ruling” anything though.

Acts 4:5 On the next day, **their rulers and elders and scribes** were gathered together in Jerusalem

Rulers are separated from Elders, so it's likely they had no authority besides the wisdom of experience. Please remember that because it will be important later.

“Shepherd” (sometimes translated “pastor”)

The last word(s) the bible typically uses are “?????????” ([poimainó](#)) and “?????????” ([poimén](#)), both of which mean “shepherd”. (*One is the noun form, the other is the verb form.*)

4165 /*poimaín?* (“shepherding, pastoring”) is distinct from “feeding” (1006 /*bósk?*). 4165 (*poimaín?*) **focuses on “tending”** (“shepherding”) (WS, 274), **which includes guarding, guiding, and folding the flock** and is only provided (ultimately) by Jesus Christ – *the Shepherd*, who calls under-shepherds (**such as elder-overseers**) **to guard and guide His people by His direction** (1 Pet 5:1-5). See 4166 (*poim?n*)

4166 *poim?n* – properly, a *shepherd* (“pastor” in *Latin*); (figuratively) **someone who the Lord raises up to care for the total well-being of His flock** (the people of the Lord).

I will use the word *poimén* from here on to refer to both of these words. It's worth noting that *poimén* is sometimes translated “Pastor” because they share the same meaning of “shepherd”. (*Pastor is a Latin root though, not Greek*)

All three words are sometimes used interchangeably. For example:

1 Peter 5:1-2

1 Therefore, I exhort the **elders (presbuteros)** among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,

2 **shepherd (poimén)** the flock of God among you, exercising **oversight (epískopos)** not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

And also:

Acts 20:17-18 & 28 (the "he" speaking is Paul)

17 From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him **the elders (presbuteros) of the church**.

18 And when they had come to him, he said to them...

28 "Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which **the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (epískopos), to shepherd (poimén) the church of God** which He purchased with His own blood.

Notice he is talking to all the elders of a church, and calls them all overseers and shepherds. Therefore, we can draw two clear conclusions from these passages:

The bible makes ZERO distinction between elders, overseers, and pastors (shepherds). From a Biblical perspective, they are functionally IDENTICAL.

I cannot stress this point enough.

Biblically, Pastors are the same as Elders and both are the same as Overseers. You just saw in 1 Peter 5:1-2 how all three terms are used almost interchangeably. Further, in Acts Paul calls all of the elders overseers and shepherds (*pastors*).

You ask: "*But how can that be if the church is led by a single pastor?*"

I'll answer later in this article.

How Were Church Leaders Chosen in the Bible?

Without further adieu...

Acts 14:23

21 After they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch,

22 strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying, "Through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God."

23 When they had **appointed** elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

The word translated "Appointed" is the Greek word "?????????" (*cheirotoneó* or *xeirotoneó*). The definition is:

5500 xeirotoneó? – properly, stretch out the hands to commission (send forth).

5500 (xeirotoneó?) literally means, "I stretch out the hand,' thus expressing agreement with a motion, then, 'I elect by show of hands' [of popular vote]), 'I elect' " (Souter); properly, 'to vote by stretching out the hand' (practiced in the assembly, so Athenian, Lucian, Plutarch)

Hmm, it sounds like "appointed" isn't the right word... It seems like "voted" is a more accurate translation given the meaning of the word.

Moving on.

Titus 1:5 For this reason I left you in Crete, that you would set in order what remains and **appoint** elders in every city as I directed you

I'll spare you the Greek here and simply say that the word translated "appoint" does actually mean "appoint". One thing to mention here: the Church in Crete was new and "*unfinished*". We know this because Paul asked Titus to "*set in order what remains*". It's possible – even likely – that a part of

setting up a new church community involved picking the most mature of the converts and “appointing” them elders/overseers/pastors (*shepherds*).

That would make sense to me anyway.

We – sort of – have a procedure for a new church (*the planter(s) pick the original elders/overseers/pastors*). **However, the Bible is silent on how Elders were picked in a more mature/established church.** The only clue we have is the “voting” in of Elders.

That's it.

We simply don't know how they did it.

This is one place I think we need to leave to the direction of the Holy Spirit because the Bible is silent. One VERY important thing though.

Whenever elders are mentioned, it's always PLURAL.

Not singular (*one*); It's always plural (*multiple*). We'll talk more about this later in the article.

Now that we've covered who we're talking about, let's talk about their authority.

How Much Authority to Elders/Pastors/Overseers Have?

Lets start with the words of Jesus and put them into a proper (*Linguistic*) context. (*and if you've read my article on [Revelation](#) you'd know I'm a HUGE fan of getting the proper context.*)

This next verse is instigated because someone asked that two of the disciples would sit at Jesus' right and left hand. In Biblical times, that's equivalent to asking to be the first and second in command (*after Jesus*). Jesus rebukes them for the question, and the other disciples start grumbling because the two asked.

This is Jesus' response.

Matthew 20:25-28

25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “**You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great men exercise authority over them.**

26 **It is not this way among you**, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,

27 and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;

28 just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a

ransom for many.”

Let's take those words one at a time.

Matthew 20:25 But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles **lord it over** them, and their great men **exercise authority** over them.

The word translated “Lord it over” is the Greek word “????????????????” ([katakuriuo](#)). Strong's defines it like this:

I exercise authority over, overpower, master

2634 *kakuriuo*? (from 2596 /*katá*, “down, according to,” intensifying 2691 /*katastr?niá*?, “exercise lordship”) – **properly, exercise decisive control (downward) as an owner with full jurisdiction;**

I find the translation of this word curious because it doesn't quite mean to “lord it over” as we would think of it. (*something is always lost in translation*). It simply means having/exercising full authority, like a General over his troops. It says nothing about “lording it over” (*the next word is much closer to “lording it over”*)

In contrast, the word translated “exercise authority” is “????????????????” ([katexousiazó](#)), which is a different word than the one we just looked at. According to Strong's, it means:

I have (exercise) power (authority) over

2715 *kateksousiazó*? (from 2596 /*katá*, “down, according to,” intensifying 1850 /*eksousiazó*?, “to exercise authority”) – **properly, to exert authority downwards (oppressively); to strongly dominate** (bring down, note the force of the prefix *kata*).

It actually seems like this second word would be better translated “lord it over” because it implies oppressive authority, while the first word is better translated “exercise authority”...

But I digress.

Now let's look at Luke, which is slightly different in construction

Luke 22:25

25 And He said to them, “**The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’**”

The word translated “lord it over” is the Greek word “????????” ([kurieuó](#)). It literally means “I have authority, rule over”. The full definition is:

2961 kyrieú? (from 2962 /kýrios, “lord”) – properly, **to exercise rights over one’s own property as an owner with full dominion (lordship) over this jurisdiction.**

Notice there is *nothing* about this word that comes close to “lord it over”. (*Translator bias; it’s why I started learning Greek in the first place*). It simply means you have authority; nothing more, nothing less.

The word translated “*have authority over*” is the Greek word “?????????” ([exousiazó](#)). It means:

1850 eksousiáz? (from 1849 /eksousía, “**delegated power**,” see there) – **having authority to act; “empowered because authorized.”** See 1849 (eksousia).

So again, it means simply to have authority. (*in this case, some else’s authority which is delegated to you.*)

Jesus says – using four different Greek words – that the gentile rulers “have authority” and their great men exert authority – sometimes oppressive authority. Notice the theme? They all relate to using power in a top-down way. For example, “*I’m a General, you’re a Private, therefore you must obey my orders.*”

What Jesus says next is telling.

Matthew 20:26

It **will not** be so among you, but whoever desires to become great among you must be your servant,

So to summarize, Jesus says the Gentile rulers have authority (*and some are oppressive*) but among Christians *it won't be that way*.

Peter backs this up

1 Peter 5:1-3

1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,

2 *shepherd the flock of God among you*, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

3 nor yet as *lording* it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

The word translated “lording” is the Greek word “????????????????” ([katakurieuo](#)) which we just looked at. Again, the definition is: “*I exercise authority over*”. Peter and Jesus are on the same page that the elders are not to “exercise authority over” the Church.

But there's one more verse yet. The Apostle Paul himself says he has no authority over a Church he planted.

2 Corinthians 1:24

24 *Not that we lord it over have authority your faith*, but are workers with you for your joy; for in your faith you are standing firm.

I've lined through the phrase “lord it over” because we've already looked at the word and that's not what it means. It was used in Luke as is the Greek word “????????” ([kurieuó](#)). It literally means “I have authority, rule over”. There is *nothing* in the Greek word to suggest it's oppressive authority (*lording it over*).

While Paul doesn't explicitly say there's no authority in the Church, he does explicitly say he has no authority over the Christians in Corinth – a Church he planted – or over the believers in “[Achaia](#)” (See verse 1; *Achaia is an entire province of Greece*).

Paul is in agreement with Jesus and Peter that there's no (*top-down, hierarchical*) authority in the church.

Now, that's NOT the whole story.

But just because there isn't top-down authority in the Church doesn't mean there's no authority. There is more than one type of authority.

Verses That (*seem to*) Argue For Authority In The Church

Hebrews 13:17

Now let's go to the place EVERYONE goes to to talk about Church Authority. Fair warning: **this verse is one of the most egregious examples of miss-translation in the entire Bible.**

Hebrews 13;17

17 Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

The word translated "Obey", is the Greek word "?????" ([peithó](#)) and it definitely does **NOT** mean to obey. [The definition of peithó is:](#)

3982 peith? (the root of 4102 /pístis, "faith") – to persuade; **(passive) be persuaded** of what is trustworthy.

The word peithó is used 53 times in the New Testament. You can see all of them [here](#). Read through that list and tell the word means "obey". (*It doesn't*) It means to persuade or be persuaded (*trust*) someone or something. In fact, peithó is the root of the Greek word "?????" ([pistis](#)) which almost always translated "faith".

Now, in the context of Hebrews 13;17 (*Obey be persuaded by your leaders and submit to them*), it makes sense. As we've already covered, Elders are supposed to have "been there, done that". They have wisdom and experience so it's wise to listen to them.

That makes sense to me.

(Note: There is a Greek word that means to "obey". It's the word "???????" [[hupakouó](#)] and it literally means obey. It's used in Ephesians 6:1 for children obeying their parents and Ephesians 6:5 for slaves obeying their masters. It's used 21 times in the New Testament, but this verse isn't one of them.

)

Now let's look at the word for submit.

It's the Greek word "?????????" ([hupeikó](#)), and this is the only time it's used in the entire Bible. [Here is Strong's definition:](#)

1. to resist no longer, but to give way, **yield (of combatants)**
2. metaph. to yield to authority and **admonition**, to submit

Now, the idea of submitting is *technically* there but not in the typical sense it's used. **The word typically used for submission is "?????????" ([hupotassó](#)).** [Strong full list of definitions is:](#)

1. to arrange under, to subordinate
2. to subject, put in subjection
3. to subject one's self, obey
4. to submit to one's control
5. to yield to one's admonition or advice
6. to obey, be subject

A Greek military term meaning "to arrange [troop divisions] in a military fashion under the command of a leader". In non-military use, it was "a voluntary attitude of giving in, cooperating, assuming responsibility, and carrying a burden"

Again, hupotassó is the word typically used for submission to God or governing authorities. Hupotassó means to voluntarily rank ourselves under someone else and (*essentially*) obey them willingly. I hope you can see that hupotassó is quite different in meaning from hupeikó.

Hupotassó means to obey someone willingly; hupeikó means to stop fighting/resisting someone. (*To yield, as in a contest*) They are different words with different meanings.

Let's look at Hebrews 13:17 again with this understanding:

Hebrews 13:17

17 ~~Obey~~ **Be persuaded by** your leaders and ~~submit~~ **yield to/stop resisting** them, for they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with grief, for this would be unprofitable for you.

That doesn't sound like authority (*in the hierarchical sense*) to me. It sounds to me like the author of Hebrews is saying to let the Elders persuade you and don't be obstinate about resisting their council.

That's strikingly similar to the "elders at the gate" example from the Old Testament culture.

The writer doesn't say to obey elders/overseers/pastors (*shepherds*) like a Private obeys a General; he says listen to them as a student listens to a teacher.

If you take a course in college, you'd listen to the teacher because the teacher has knowledge and experience that you want. You don't need to obey the teacher but it's in your best interest to do so. You want to follow the teacher's example because you want to learn what they know.



*** listen to Mr. Miyagi.**

In fact, Mr. Miyagi had ZERO authority over Daniel at all.

None whatsoever. Daniel could've walked away at any time with no repercussions. Yet Daniel listened and was persuaded to follow Mr. Miyagi and did well because he did so.

So it should be in the Church.

But I digress.

Now, let's look at some of the other verses about authority in the Church

1 Peter 5:1-5

1 Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as your fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed,

2 shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness;

3 nor yet as **lording** it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

5 You **younger men**, likewise, be **subject to your elders**; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE.

(EDIT: a previous version of this article incorrectly stated that “younger men” referred to “new believers”. I have actually learned some Greek since then and thus corrected the article after a commenter pointed out the mistake. I apologize for making the mistake in the first place.)

The word for “subject” there is *Hupotassó*, which as we’ve already covered does actually mean “submit”, as in “voluntarily obey/listen to.” But pay attention to who the command was given.

Notice: the command isn’t addressed to all men; only “younger men”. This is important, and here a little knowledge of the culture is highly illuminating.

Roman boys had a ceremony to remove the *toga praetexta* with a broad purple border, and their protective *bullae praetextae* amulets, and **assume the pure white *toga virilis*, the toga of manhood, at 14**, considered to be the age of male puberty in ancient Rome. Roman boys would have their first military service sometime in their late teens. And I believe the end of adolescence and the age of complete adulthood was 25.

Similarly in Jewish culture, a boy becomes legally responsible for his actions and thus becomes man at age 13 (*at his bar mitzvah*).

Depending if it was the Jewish or Roman culture, the age of manhood was 13 or 14.

That’s likely what Peter meant by “young men”.

Notice too that the Romans had an age of “complete” adulthood. This is likely the dividing line between “younger men” and just “men”. Am I sure? No; but that would make a lot of sense. It also makes a lot of sense to tell 13-25 year old boys to listen to their elders.

(A little trivia as a side note. The male brain doesn’t finish fully maturing until age 25. Before then, the chemical makeup of the brain makes the boy more susceptible to peer pressure. Also, until 25 the prefrontal cortex hasn’t finished developing, and “That’s the part of the brain that helps you to

inhibit impulses and to plan and organize your behavior to reach a goal.” [Source](#).)

Again, Peter didn't address this command to all men; only the “younger men”. Knowing the cultural context, that probably meant men between the ages of 13 and 25.

Moving on.

1 Thessalonians 5:12-14

12 But we **request** of you, brethren, that **you appreciate those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you** in the Lord and give you instruction,

13 and that you esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Live in peace with one another.

14 We **urge** you, brethren, admonish the unruly, encourage the fainthearted, help the weak, be patient with everyone.

The word that's translated “Have charge over” is the Greek word “?????????????” ([proistemi](#)). Here's what it means:

4291 *proíst?mi* (from 4253 /*pró*, “before” and 2476 /*híst?mi*, “to stand”) – properly, “pre-standing,” **referring to a pre-set (well-established) character which provides the needed model to direct others, i.e. to positively impact them by example.**

4291 /*proíst?mi* (“*diligent to take the lead*”) underlines the effectiveness of influencing people **by having a respected reputation**, i.e. one built on a solid “track-record.” This happens by **setting the example of excellence by living in faith**

I don't quite see authority there do you?

I see “leading by example”. It's also worth noting that Paul specifically says they were working “among” the people; not over them. Also notice Paul uses words like “request” and “urge” to influence their behavior. He doesn't command them to. Instead, he urges them to follow good examples.

(Like Daniel followed Mr. Miyagi's example in the Karate Kid.)

While we're on the topic, let's hit another place.

1 Timothy 5:17 **The elders who rule well** are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

The word translated “Rule” in the verse above is *also* the word “proistemi”, and we just looked at it’s definition. It doesn’t mean “rule”; it means to lead by example. Again, This sounds a lot like what Peter and Jesus said. No authority, but lead by serving as an example.

Let’s try another verse people use to support (*hierarchical*) authority in the Church.

Titus 2:11-15

11 **For the grace of God has appeared**, bringing salvation to all men,

12 **instructing us to deny ungodliness and worldly desires and to live sensibly, righteously and godly in the present age**,

13 looking for the blessed hope and the appearing of the glory of our great God and Savior, Christ Jesus,

14 who gave Himself for us to redeem us from every lawless deed, and to purify for Himself a people for His own possession, zealous for good deeds.

15 **These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority**. Let no one disregard you.

Notice that Paul does NOT give Titus any authority or even assume he has any authority. (*Read it again if you disagree.*) Paul tells Titus to “**speak and exhort and reprove**” “**these things**” with “all authority”. Notice where this teaching comes from. If you look at verses 11 and 12, the teaching comes straight from the Big Man Himself.

Paul is telling Titus to teach “these things” with “all authority” because they are commands from God Himself.

That doesn’t exactly sound like Paul was acknowledging Titus’ authority as a leader in the church.

Another place.

1 Corinthians 16:15-16

15 Now I **urge** you, brethren (you know the household of Stephanas, that they were the first fruits of Achaia, and **that they have devoted themselves for ministry to the saints**),

16 that you also **be in subjection** to such men and to **everyone** who helps in the work and labors.

Oi Vey. That some people use this verse to “prove” Church Authority is astounding.

First, Paul “urges” them to do this, not commands.

Second, the entire household of Stephanas is mentioned, and held up as an example to follow. (*like the other places we’ve seen.*)

Third, Yes it does say to “be in subjection” (*Hypotassó*), but it says to be in subjection to **everyone** who helps in the work and labors. That sounds a LOT like “*Submit yourselves on to another*” in Ephesians 5:21. It certainly doesn’t establish an authority structure.

(Also, if everyone is supposed to submit to everyone else, where does that leave the supposed authority structure?)

This last one is stretching to the extreme, but I’ll cover it here.

1 Corinthians 12:28

27 Now you are Christ’s body, and individually members of it.

28 And God has **appointed** in the church, **first** apostles, **second** prophets, **third** teachers, then miracles, then **gifts** of healings, helps, administrations, various kinds of tongues.

29 All are not apostles, are they? All are not prophets, are they? All are not teachers, are they? All are not workers of miracles, are they?

30 All do not have **gifts** of healings, do they? All do not speak with tongues, do they? All do not interpret, do they?

31 But earnestly desire the greater **gifts**.

The argument goes that because God appointed Apostles “First”, they have some authority over the rest. Apparently prophets are second on the totem pole and teachers 3rd in authority with everyone else coming afterward.

This is ridiculous for several reasons.

First, the Greek word translated as “first” in the passage above has no hint of authority to it. It’s the Greek word “??????” ([próton](#)) which means: “*first, in the first place, before, formerly*“. Strong’s short definition is “*before, at the beginning*“. It is used 58 times in the New Testament and every single time it’s used to indicate chronological sequence. You can see all 58 uses [here](#), and feel free to double check me.

(The words translated “[second](#)” and “[third](#)” are almost exclusively used to indicate chronological sequence too. and BTW, the apostles did come first chronologically. Jesus’ disciples were referred to as apostles numerous times in the Gospels.)

There is a Greek word that means “first” but also conveys the idea of authority. In fact, it’s translated as “ruler” half a dozen times. That word is “????” ([arché](#)). However, Paul doesn’t use it here (*even though he uses it often throughout his epistles..*

Second. Context! Context, context, context. This passage is NOT about church authority, it’s about Spiritual gifts. You can tell because the word “gift” is used 3 times in 4 verses. In fact, the chapter open with these words:

1 Corinthians 12:1 **Now concerning spiritual gifts**, brethren, I do not want you to be unaware.

Making this passage about Church authority requires twisting the scriptures to fit.

...

...

... And that’s it.

That’s all the verses people typically use to support hierarchical (*top-down*) authority in the church. Funny, you’d think there would be more verses if it was such an important topic. For example, I can easily round up several VERY clear verses about obeying human authority (*governments*).

Romans 13:1 Every person is to be in subjection to the governing authorities. For there is no authority except from God, and those which exist are established by God.

Titus 3:1 Remind them to be subject to rulers, to authorities, to be obedient, to be ready for every good deed,

1 Peter 2:13 Submit yourselves for the Lord's sake to every human institution, whether to a king as the one in authority,

Oh, and the word used for "submit" there is the word "hupotassó" which we've already covered. It means to voluntarily obey someone. **Yet there are no such verses like this for "hupotassó-ing" to church leaders.** We are everywhere admonished to listen to elders, but seemingly nowhere told to obey them.

(The only exception is "young men" being told to submit to elders.)

By contrast, Matthew 20:24-28 *(and the parallel passages in Mark 10 and Luke 22)* plus 1 Peter 5:1-3 and 2 Corinthians 1:24 are quite clear.

Yet one more (dumb) Argument for Authority

This one is so silly I almost hate to dignify it with a response. However, some people use it so...

Some people say authority must exist because Paul "sent" people. In their minds, you can send someone unless you have authority over them. This is silly, and a simple example will prove so.

Every husband I've ever known has been "sent" to the store to get something for his wife. Biblically, the husband has the authority, yet the wife does the sending. You can send someone of higher authority. If you've ever had co-workers, I'm sure they "sent" you on an errand at some point.

Sending doesn't necessarily indicate authority.

So What Are "Elders" And What is Their Function (Biblically)

If you haven't noticed by now, I'm a bit of a word junkie. I like to dig deep into the meaning behind words to draw out the full meaning of the text. *(something is always lost in translation)* I think the purpose and function of church leaders is written directly into the words used to describe them.

Poimén (and it's verb form) both mean Shepherd.

The Church is often described as sheep and the leaders of the Church are often described as Shepherds. Shepherds guide and care for the sheep, it's the same way in the Church. And if "Shepherding" is our example of how it should be done, then that example bears closer inspection.

So lets talk about 1st century Shepherding.

I'm going to lean on the wisdom of someone with a lot more experience with shepherding in that culture: Ray Vander Laan. I was first introduced to Ray Vander Laan through Focus on the Family. He spent many, many years in the Middle East learning about their culture. He also spent time with a modern-day Bedouin family who (*among other things*) were shepherds.

The shepherd and the sheep knew each other well. Sheep followed only the shepherd they recognized, ignoring all strangers. **A simple call from their shepherd was sufficient for an entire flock to follow his lead.** The shepherd scouted for new green pastures, quiet water, and danger. These shepherd images helped the Israelites understand their relationship to God and their dependence on him.

(*Emphasis mine, [source here](#)*)

I spent most of my twenties and late teens on a farm. I can tell you from personal experience that getting animals where you want them can be quite a chore. The animals almost universally needed to be “driven” where we wanted them to go. Typically, that meant walking and waving your arms to make the animals go away from you. With several people working in tandem, you could “drive” the animals where you needed them to go.

Sheep aren't like that.

Sheep don't need to be driven.



The sheep only need to hear their shepherd's voice and

they'll come running.

No driving is needed.

I can't stress that point enough. It's CRUCIAL to understand that if you want to understand true leadership, especially in the church. Jesus Himself made this point in John.

John 10:27

27 “My sheep hear My voice, and I know them, and they follow Me;

That’s true leadership, and I don’t mean just inside the church. I mean anywhere.

Authority does NOT make a good leader.

(If it did, there wouldn’t be so many terrible bosses/managers out there.)

Good leaders do **NOT** need to drive anyone anywhere. Good leaders are like shepherds. Good leaders rally people to their cause and the people follow because they WANT to follow.

Martin Luther King Jr. had no authority of any kind... yet he motivated great change and directed thousands of people.

That’s what TRUE leaders do.

They call and people follow.

Pick your favorite Christian teacher/pastor/evangelist. If you suddenly found yourself in a position where they were your mentor, would you listen to them? Would you follow their leading and do the things they asked of you?

That’s real leadership.

Let me speak plainly for a moment. Christians today know very little about true leadership. They seem to think that getting a “P” (*for pastor*) on their pajamas makes them a leader. They’re dead wrong. If people don’t like the way a pastor leads, they’ll just find another Church. A bad pastor can order people to stay all he wants and it won’t make a hill-of-beans difference... because he’s not a leader.

The Church CANNOT have those kinds of top-down structures because they simply don’t work without a compulsory method of making people submit.

It works in your job because they’ll fire you if you don’t listen. It works with the government because if you break the laws the police will catch you and punish you. They have compulsory methods of enforcing obedience. (*or as Romans says “It’s not for nothing they bear the sword”*)

The Church doesn’t have that.

The “sheep” (*the church*) will run away from a shepherd to drives them, but run toward a shepherd who leads them.

It’s really hard to teach someone who you’re driving (*away*); it’s really easy to teach someone who has come to you because they want to learn.

Elders are to lead by example.

1 Timothy 5:17 The elders who ~~rule~~ **lead by example** well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.

(Remember, we've already talked about the word translated "rule" there, and it means to lead by example.)

Biblically, church leaders are supposed to be shepherds. Shepherds call sheep and the sheep come willingly. Shepherds don't drive sheep.

We've already talked about Elders, and the word "overseer" simply mean to examine intently so you can provide care. That's what shepherds do for their sheep. They keep a close eye on the flock of God to keep it safe. I was doing that long before I ever became an official part of my church's leadership.

The Other BIG Problem with Authority in the Church

I cannot stress this enough, and yet I doubt I'll be able to truly convey how important the following question is:

"How far should Church authority extend?" *(Assuming it exists at all)*

Think about it for a moment.

Really think about it.

If elders have authority in the church, what does that authority allow them to do? More importantly, how far does it extend? We've already covered the Bible verses about Church authority. All of them. None talk about limits on church authority *(assuming it exists)*. How far should it extend?

IF the Bible says elders have authority, then how much authority does it give them?

Can they tell other Christians what to do? If you say no, then that's not authority. But if you say yes, then *what* can they tell Christians to do? Can they tell them they must come to Church? *(which is Biblically supported)* But if they can tell a Christian to come to Church, can they tell that Christian they **MUST** come *(and can't leave)*? That veers into cult territory pretty quickly.

It's the same with any other topic.

For example, the Bible clearly says Christians should give. Can elders order Christians to give? Can they choose how much they give? If they can order a Christian to Tithe, why not order them to give 23.33% like they did in the Old Testament?

Any topic you can name can easily be taken that far without Biblical constraints.

If you assume Church authority exists, then realize there are literally NO biblical constraints except the “*don’t lord it over*” passage. But what actions step over the line and become “*lording it over*”? (*Literally, exerting oppressive authority*). I think requiring Tithes is oppressive, not to mention heresy. (*check out [my article on Tithing](#) for more details*). What if the elders don’t think it’ oppressive?

What if the elders require something that I think is heresy? (*Like tithing or submitting to Church authority for example*)

Should I do something I believe is wrong because “the elders told me to”?

It’s pretty sticky once you start thinking about it.

The (one) Pastor... Give Us a King?

If a church only has one pastor (*shepherd*), then something is **SERIOUSLY** wrong.

Ephesians 4:11 And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as **pastors** and teachers,

I would like to point out that the word “Pastor” there (*poimén, meaning Shepherd*) is **PLURAL**. Not singular, but plural. Again, having one “pastor” (*shepherd*) who has authority over the whole Church is decidedly unscriptural. Nowhere in the entire New Testament can you find an example of one single person being given authority over an entire church.

It’s simply not in The Book.

The modern idea that a single pastor/elder/overseer is “in charge” cannot be found in the bible anywhere.

You could make a case that the elders/overseers/pastors (*plural*) are in charge *together*. However, there is no place in the New Testament you can use to scripturally defend a single man (*the pastor*) being “in charge”.

You can’t do it.

It’s simply not in The Book.

Please don’t take my word for it. Please read the New Testament cover-to-cover or Google it. You won’t find it because it’s just not there.

But if it’s not in The Book (*and it’s not*) then where did it come from?

There's one obvious answer.

In 1 Samuel 8, Israel gathers together and asks for a king. They had elders and God supplied Judges and Prophets to guide them. They were doing just fine, but they wanted a king. So God gave it to them. (*and they were worse off after the kings came, except the few good ones*)

I don't think mankind's desires have changed one bit.

As a fallen race, some will always desire control and some will always desire someone to follow. In 107 AD, Ignatius of Antioch (*an early church father*) wrote several letters on his way to be martyred. He said things like "*do nothing without the overseer*" and "*Plainly therefore we ought to regard the overseer as the Lord Himself*". I'll spare you the rest, but much is in that vein.

There's nothing new under the sun.

God's original plan for Israel was no king, only the Prophets and judges. (*and the only authority they had was because they were relaying God's words*). Given Jesus and Peter's words on the topic, I don't think this has changed.

Conclusion

When I was young, I attended a leadership training day by the regional leader of the denomination I (*then*) belonged to. During one of the teachings, One of the speakers said the following:

He said "If God tells you to do one thing and your pastor/elders tells you not to do it, you should listen to your pastor."

Pardon my language, but what the hell?!

His reasoning was that the elders of the church are God's authority and you must obey them. He continued that God would never tell you to disobey your church leaders because He put them in authority. Apparently, He hadn't read Acts in a while..

Acts 5:29 But Peter and the apostles answered, "We must obey God rather than men."

In my (*limited*) experience, Churches that emphasize authority trend in the opposite direction.

Whether intentionally or not – usually not – the Pastor often takes the place of God in the minds of the laity. "Pastor worship" is a real thing, and while it's not as obvious as singing praise songs to him, it's no less damaging. I've seen it in the church I currently attend, even though the pastor actively discourages it.

Biblically, we want Elders/overseers (*plural*) to disciple, guide and care for the church. They lead by example and wisdom/experience, not because they have been given authority. You might say it's

impossible to run a modern church that way. If that's true, then maybe we need to rethink how we run a church so it's more in line with the commands of God.

One thing is certain: I can come up with five places that clearly teach against authority in the church: (*Matthew 20, Mark 10, Luke 22, 1 Peter 5, and 2 Corinthians 1:24.*) I can't come up with any a single place that teaches authority in the church.

Until that changes, I don't believe church leaders have the authority that most people think they do.