

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

Systematic Theology Series

ECCLESIOLOGY

The Doctrine of the Church

One Body, One Lord, One Faith, One Baptism, One God and Father of All

UNIT 5: CHURCH GOVERNMENT

Elder-Led, Congregationally Accountable

Lesson 14

A PLURALITY OF ELDERS

Why One-Man Rule Is Insufficient and Unhealthy

The single pastor is everywhere in Baptist practice; the plural eldership is everywhere in the New Testament. The question is which pattern should govern the other.

“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.”

Acts 20:17, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:1–4; 2 Timothy 2:2

“I write so that you will know how one ought to conduct himself in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, the pillar and support of the truth.”

1 Timothy 3:15, NASB 1995

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Introduction

There is a sharp and uncomfortable gap between the New Testament's consistent pattern for local church leadership and the dominant practice of contemporary Baptist and evangelical churches. In the New Testament, every local assembly whose leadership structure is described was governed by a plurality of elders: not one man but a group of qualified, appointed, mutually accountable leaders who together exercised the teaching, governing, and shepherding functions of the pastoral office. In contemporary Baptist churches, the overwhelming norm is a single pastor who bears the full weight of the congregation's spiritual leadership, often with minimal accountability to fellow elders and limited institutional protection for the congregation if his leadership fails. The gap is real, significant, and worth examining with the same honest, text-grounded seriousness that this series has brought to every other ecclesiological question.

This lesson approaches elder plurality not as an abstract ideal, but as a genuine element of the New Testament's pattern for church leadership. It grounds this conviction in the biblical text, explains its theological and pastoral wisdom, addresses common objections, and offers practical guidance for churches that have not yet established a plurality of elders. The goal is not to create guilt over a congregation's present circumstances, but to provide clarity about the biblical pattern and encourage faithful, intentional progress toward it with patience and wisdom.

The lesson also addresses the distinction between plurality and equality of function. The New Testament's consistent pattern is plural eldership, but it does not require that all elders be functionally identical. First Timothy 5:17 explicitly distinguishes between elders who rule well in general and those who labor in preaching and teaching specifically, implying a recognized differentiation of function within the plurality. The model that has come to be called *primus inter pares*, first among equals, is both exegetically defensible and practically wise: one elder serves as the primary preacher and theological leader while the other elders share fully in the governing and pastoral care responsibilities. This model maintains the plurality's protective accountability while acknowledging the practical reality that the congregation's primary teaching ministry requires a specific kind of concentrated investment and gifting that not every elder will possess in equal measure.

Two pastoral concerns motivate the urgency of this lesson beyond the abstract exegetical argument. The first is the pastoral welfare of single pastors themselves. The man who bears alone the full weight of a congregation's preaching, pastoral care, governance, counseling, administration, and community representation is a man who is being asked to carry a burden that the New Testament never designed any single individual to bear. The burnout rates among solo pastors, the isolation that frequently accompanies single-pastor ministry, and the well-documented pattern of moral failure in leadership structures with inadequate accountability are not incidental to the governance model; they are, at least in part, the predictable consequences of asking one man to do what the New Testament distributes across a plurality. The second pastoral concern is the congregation's welfare. A congregation governed by a single pastor with minimal accountability is a congregation that is structurally vulnerable to the abuse of authority, the entrenchment of error, and the organizational paralysis that follows when a single leader departs or fails. The plurality is not primarily an institutional convenience; it is a structural safeguard for the health of the congregation and the faithfulness of its leadership.

I. THE NEW TESTAMENT PATTERN

Plural Elders in Every Described Local Church

A. The Exegetical Evidence for Plural Eldership

The New Testament's consistent pattern of plural eldership in the local church is established by a remarkable convergence of evidence across multiple authors, multiple contexts, and multiple stages of the apostolic mission. The evidence begins in Acts 14:23, where Luke reports that on the first missionary journey, Paul and Barnabas appointed elders, using the Greek *presbyterous*, a plural noun, in every church they had planted: '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 pattern is not one elder per church but elders, plural, in every church. This is not a casual grammatical choice; it is the consistent apostolic pattern for the governance of newly planted congregations.

Acts 20:17 provides the most direct evidence that the plural pattern applied to established and mature congregations as well as newly planted ones: 'From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church.' Ephesus was one of the most significant congregations in the apostolic world, the site of Paul's longest recorded stay and the recipient of one of his most theologically sophisticated letters. And when Paul wants to address the leadership of the Ephesian church, he calls for the elders, plural, of the single congregation. There is no suggestion that each of these men led a separate house church within the city; they are collectively the leadership of the one church at Ephesus, governed by a body of elders rather than by a single individual. Titus 1:5 confirms the same pattern as an apostolic directive: '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.' The instruction is to appoint elders, plural, in every city, a pattern of plural leadership that Titus is to replicate across the island of Crete.

James 5:14 adds a pastoral dimension to the evidence: 'Is anyone among you sick? Then he must call for the elders of the church and they are to pray over him.' James writes 'the elders of the church', the plural form used as the normal designation of the congregation's leadership, not 'the elder' or 'the pastor.' The same pattern appears in 1 Peter 5:1, where Peter addresses 'the elders among you,' using the plural address to the leadership of the churches scattered throughout the regions he names. Philippians 1:1 provides the clearest summary: 'Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons.' The single congregation at Philippi had multiple overseers, the same term Lesson 13 established as synonymous with elders, alongside a body of deacons. The convergence of evidence is striking: Acts 14:23 (new church plants), Acts 20:17 (established urban church), Titus 1:5 (apostolic directive), James 5:14 (pastoral care context), 1 Peter 5:1 (general instruction), and Philippians 1:1 (congregational address) all point to the same pattern: plural eldership as the normative New Testament governance structure for the local church.

B. The Significance of the Pattern's Consistency

The consistency of the plural eldership pattern across the New Testament is not merely a statistical observation; it is a theological claim. When the New Testament's evidence for any ecclesiological practice is as convergent and unbroken as it is for plural eldership, the reasonable conclusion is not that the pattern is culturally conditioned and therefore optional, but that the pattern reflects the apostolic intention for the governance of the local church.

The alternative, that the New Testament consistently describes plural eldership without intending it as a pattern to be followed, requires the implausible assumption that all the evidence is coincidental and that the New Testament's authors would have been indifferent to its replacement by solo pastoral leadership.

The argument that the New Testament's plural eldership reflects the cultural context of first-century Jewish and Greco-Roman community organization, and therefore carries no normative weight for the contemporary church, is a form of the same hermeneutical move that has been used to dismiss other clearly New Testament practices. It is true that the Jewish synagogue was governed by a body of elders and that the Greco-Roman household also operated under plural leadership structures; these cultural antecedents may help explain why the apostolic churches adopted plural eldership as their governance norm. But the same argument could be used to relativize the church's practice of prayer, its commitment to the Lord's Supper, and its pattern of regular corporate gathering, all of which have cultural antecedents in the first-century context. The presence of a cultural precedent for a practice does not establish that the practice is merely culturally conditioned; it may equally well reflect God's providential preparation of the cultural soil for the church's governance pattern.

The pastoral wisdom embedded in the plural eldership pattern, a wisdom that is as urgently relevant in the twenty-first century as it was in the first, is sufficient reason to pursue plurality even if the exegetical case were less clear than it is. The protection against the abuse of authority that accountability to fellow elders provides; the breadth of perspective that multiple qualified leaders bring to the congregation's most difficult pastoral decisions; the distributed workload that prevents any single elder from carrying an unsustainable burden; the continuity of leadership that persists when one member of the plurality departs, all of these practical benefits are the pastoral wisdom behind the apostolic pattern. The New Testament's consistent practice of plural eldership is not an arbitrary institutional preference; it is the governance structure that best serves the congregation's health, the leaders' accountability, and the church's long-term faithfulness.

II. THE WISDOM OF PLURALITY

Five Benefits of Shared Eldership

A. *Accountability, Balanced Perspective, and Distributed Workload*

The first and most fundamental benefit of plural eldership is the mutual accountability that it creates among the elders themselves. The single pastor who is accountable to no fellow elder is a single pastor whose blind spots have no institutional check, whose errors have no immediate correction mechanism, and whose conduct, in the areas of doctrinal fidelity, financial integrity, and personal holiness, has no peer-level oversight. The history of pastoral failure in evangelical churches is not random; it clusters heavily in contexts where single pastors have exercised unchecked authority over congregations that had no structural means of holding them accountable to the qualifications the office requires. The plural eldership creates the mutual accountability that the single-pastor model systematically lacks: each elder is known by and accountable to the other elders, his conduct is observed by peers who have both the authority and the obligation to address what they observe, and the congregation has a body of leaders rather than a single individual whose failure would leave the community without governance.

The second benefit is the breadth of perspective that multiple qualified leaders bring to the congregation's pastoral and governance decisions. The single pastor who makes all significant decisions unilaterally is making

those decisions without the benefit of the corrective perspective that a plurality provides. His theological instincts, however sound, are not infallible; his pastoral judgments, however wise, are not omniscient; his reading of the congregation's condition and needs, however attentive, is inevitably partial. The plurality of elders brings multiple perspectives, multiple gifts, multiple spheres of pastoral knowledge, and multiple histories of engagement with the congregation's members to bear on the decisions that most significantly affect the community's life. The elder who has spent years counseling families in the congregation brings pastoral wisdom to governance decisions that the primary preacher, whose energy has been concentrated in the study, may not possess. The elder whose professional background is in finance brings stewardship wisdom to the congregation's resource management that neither the preacher nor the counselor has developed. The plurality is not merely an accountability structure; it is an intellectual and pastoral resource that enriches the quality of the congregation's leadership decisions.

The third benefit is the distributed workload that prevents any single elder from bearing an unsustainable burden. The New Testament's vision of pastoral ministry, preaching and teaching the whole counsel of God, shepherding the flock through the full range of pastoral needs, governing the congregation's life and direction, guarding the doctrinal integrity of the community, equipping the saints for ministry, and praying for the congregation's members, is a vision of a comprehensive, demanding, and genuinely full-time calling. The single pastor who attempts to fulfill this full vision of pastoral ministry for a congregation of any significant size is a pastor who is systematically overextended, whose investment in any one area necessarily comes at the cost of another, and whose long-term faithfulness in the calling is imperiled by the structural impossibility of doing alone what the New Testament distributes across a plurality. The plural eldership, even when the elders share responsibilities in different proportions, distributes the workload in a way that makes sustainable, faithful, long-term pastoral ministry possible for each member of the plurality and for the congregation as a whole.

B. Protection Against Authoritarianism and Continuity in Transition

The fourth benefit of plural eldership is its structural protection against the authoritarianism that the single-pastor model consistently facilitates. The history of spiritual abuse in evangelical churches is not primarily a history of theologically defective pastors imposing false doctrine on helpless congregations; it is primarily a history of structurally unchecked authority producing the classic dynamics of institutional power gone uncorrected. The pastor who is the sole elder of his congregation, who has no peer-level accountability, who controls all the significant decisions and relationships within the community, and who has the institutional power to marginalize or remove anyone who questions his leadership is a pastor in a structure that the New Testament never authorized and that consistently produces harm. The plural eldership is not a guarantee against authoritarianism, elders can conspire in the abuse of authority as surely as single pastors can exercise it, but it is a structural barrier against the most common form of pastoral abuse, which is the exploitation of unchecked individual authority.

The fifth benefit is the continuity of leadership that plural eldership provides when one member of the plurality departs, becomes incapacitated, or fails morally. The single-pastor congregation that loses its pastor to departure or failure faces an organizational crisis that can take years to resolve, during which the congregation is either without primary pastoral leadership or is dependent on interim arrangements that lack the personal knowledge of the congregation that effective pastoral ministry requires. The congregation governed by a plurality of elders is a congregation that retains functioning leadership when one elder departs: the remaining elders continue to preach, shepherd, govern, and guard the doctrine while the process of identifying and appointing a new elder proceeds. The congregation's ministry is not held hostage to the tenure of a single individual. The pattern of

apostolic church planting, appointing elders (plural) in every church (Acts 14:23), reflects precisely this practical wisdom: the newly planted congregation needs leadership that can survive the departure of any single individual, including the church planter himself.

These five benefits, mutual accountability, breadth of perspective, distributed workload, protection against authoritarianism, and continuity in transition, are not merely organizational advantages that prudent institutional design would recognize. They are the pastoral wisdom of the Holy Spirit, embedded in the apostolic pattern of governance that the Spirit inspired the New Testament to describe with such consistent clarity. The congregation that pursues plural eldership is not merely adopting a more efficient organizational model; it is pursuing the governance structure that the Spirit has designed for the health of the congregation, the protection of its leadership, and the long-term faithfulness of its ministry.

III. PLURALITY WITHOUT EQUALITY OF FUNCTION

First Among Equals

A. First Timothy 5:17 and the Differentiation of Function

The New Testament's consistent pattern of plural eldership does not require the conclusion that all members of the plurality exercise identical functions or bear identical responsibilities within the body of elders. First Timothy 5:17 explicitly acknowledges a functional differentiation within the plurality: 'The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.' The verse distinguishes between elders who rule well (a general standard for all elders) and those who labor specifically in preaching and teaching (a specific and demanding investment that not all elders make in equal measure). The word 'especially' (*malista*) indicates that the elders who labor in preaching and teaching are a subset of the broader eldership, recognized for a particular form of service that merits particular honor.

This functional differentiation within the plurality has been described in the Reformed Baptist tradition as the *primus inter pares* model, first among equals. The language captures a genuine tension in the New Testament's own data: the elders are genuine peers, sharing equal dignity, equal authority in governance, and equal accountability before God; and yet among the peers there is a first, a primary preacher and theological leader whose investment in the congregation's teaching ministry is disproportionate to that of his fellow elders. The tension is not a contradiction; it is the same tension that appears in any human community that combines genuine equality of dignity with differentiation of function. The plurality of elders is constituted by peers; one of those peers has been recognized, by the community's discernment and by the evident gifting of the Spirit, as the primary bearer of the teaching function that 1 Timothy 5:17 identifies as the most demanding and most honored form of eldership.

The *primus inter pares* model should not be confused with the single-pastor model it resembles in certain respects. The single pastor who has no fellow elders has no peer accountability, no institutional check on his authority, no shared perspective on governance decisions, and no distributive relief from the full burden of pastoral ministry. The first-among-equals elder has all of these: he is accountable to his fellow elders, his decisions are subject to the governance authority of the plurality, his perspective is regularly challenged and enriched by the perspectives of peers who know the congregation as well as he does, and his burden of pastoral care is shared by co-elders

who are genuinely invested in the congregation's welfare. The functional primacy of the lead elder does not diminish the genuine eldership of the other members of the plurality; it simply acknowledges that the New Testament recognizes differentiation of function within the elder body as a legitimate and beneficial feature of healthy plural leadership.

B. The Role of the Lead Elder

In the elder-led congregationally accountable model that this series endorses, the lead or senior elder, the one who labors in preaching and teaching as the primary bearer of the congregation's teaching ministry, exercises a distinctive role that the congregation's governance should clearly recognize and appropriately support. He is typically the primary preacher on the Lord's Day, the primary theological voice in the congregation's doctrinal discernment, and the primary external representative of the congregation's identity and mission. He is, in many contexts, a full-time or near-full-time minister whose financial support is provided by the congregation in accordance with Paul's instruction in 1 Corinthians 9:14 ('those who proclaim the gospel should get their living from the gospel') and 1 Timothy 5:17-18 ('the laborer is worthy of his wages').

The lead elder's primacy in the teaching function does not translate into primacy in governance. Governance decisions, about the congregation's membership, its direction, its resource allocation, its response to doctrinal challenges, and its exercise of discipline, are the shared responsibility of the full eldership, in which the lead elder has one voice and one vote among peers. The model honors the New Testament's acknowledgment that different elders contribute different functions to the plurality's common work while preserving the structural accountability that the plurality provides. A lead elder who governs unilaterally, who makes significant decisions without the engagement of fellow elders, or who treats the other members of the plurality as advisors to be consulted at his discretion rather than co-governors with genuine authority has transgressed the boundary between the *primus inter pares* model and the single-pastor model it is designed to avoid.

The relationship between the lead elder and the other members of the plurality requires a specific culture of mutual respect, genuine peer-level engagement, and shared commitment to the congregation's welfare that is as important to the model's health as the institutional structure itself. The plurality that exists on paper but operates as a single pastor surrounded by deferential advisors has not achieved the New Testament's pattern; it has created the appearance of plurality without its substance. The effective plural eldership is one in which each elder genuinely knows the congregation, genuinely engages in governance decisions, genuinely speaks with a voice that the lead elder receives as a peer rather than a subordinate, and genuinely shares the burden of the congregation's pastoral care. Building that culture of genuine peer engagement requires deliberate investment in the relationships among the elders, intentional structures for shared discernment, and the lead elder's sustained commitment to the authority and dignity of his fellow elders.

IV. THE SINGLE-PASTOR REALITY

An Honest Pastoral Acknowledgment

A. *Why Most Baptist Churches Have One Pastor*

An honest engagement with the plurality question requires an honest acknowledgment of the gap between the New Testament's pattern and the current reality of most Baptist churches in the Western world. The overwhelming majority of Baptist congregations, including the vast majority of smaller and medium-sized congregations that constitute the numerical center of gravity of the Baptist tradition, are led by a single pastor who functions as the congregation's primary and often sole elder. This is not the pattern the New Testament describes; it is the pattern that the Baptist tradition inherited from the broader Protestant church's cultural accommodation to the prevailing European model of the parish priest and that has been reinforced by the practical circumstances of small congregations, limited financial resources, and the scarcity of men who meet the elder's qualifications.

The reasons for the single-pastor norm in Baptist churches are varied and not all of them are indefensible. Small congregations that cannot financially support more than one full-time minister have limited options for plurality; the alternative to a single pastor in such contexts is sometimes no pastor at all. Congregations in communities where the pool of qualified elder candidates is small may face genuine difficulty identifying multiple men who meet the qualifications that 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 require. Congregations that have been shaped by the single-pastor model for generations have developed governance cultures and leadership expectations that are genuinely difficult to reform without disruption to relationships and structures that have long histories in the community's life. These practical realities deserve acknowledgment and pastoral respect; they are not excuses for permanent accommodation to a sub-apostolic governance structure, but they are genuine constraints that deserve a realistic and patient response rather than an impatient demand for immediate structural change.

The practical challenge for congregations that currently operate under single-pastor leadership is not to immediately create the appearance of plural eldership by appointing additional elders who do not yet meet the qualifications or who have not been given the genuine governing authority that the elder's office requires. The creation of a nominal plurality that lacks the substance of genuine shared governance is worse than the honest acknowledgment of single-pastor reality; it creates the impression of accountability without the protection, and it dishonors the office by appointing to it men who have not been adequately formed, tested, or recognized as genuinely qualified for its responsibilities. The honest path is the patient path: to acknowledge where the congregation currently is, to commit to the process of elder development that 2 Timothy 2:2 describes, and to move toward genuine plurality with the deliberate, unhurried intentionality that the task requires.

B. *The Pastor-Led Model as a Transitional Reality*

The single-pastor model, honestly acknowledged as a transitional reality rather than a permanent ecclesiological norm, is not without its own pastoral integrity. The man who serves faithfully as the single elder of a small congregation, who preaches the Word, shepherds the flock, guards the doctrine, and serves the community's needs without the structural support of fellow elders, is doing genuinely important and genuinely honorable work. His situation is not ideal by the New Testament's standard, but his faithfulness within it is real and is honored by

the Lord who sees all the circumstances of the congregations He is building. The pastoral call to such a man is not guilt for failing to achieve what the circumstances have not yet made possible, but commitment to the trajectory that the New Testament points toward and patience with the pace of a journey that may take years or decades to complete.

The congregation that is currently under single-pastor leadership but is committed to the goal of genuine plurality should be intentional about several things. First, the single pastor should seek informal accountability structures that approximate the protection of a genuine plurality even before formal plural eldership is achieved: a group of trusted, mature members who know him well and are willing to speak honestly about what they observe; a relationship with a trusted pastor in a sister congregation who can provide the kind of peer accountability that a fellow elder would provide; and a congregation culture in which the members feel free to raise concerns about the pastor's conduct and teaching without fear of marginalization. These informal structures are not substitutes for the genuine plurality that the New Testament describes, but they are not nothing: they provide some of the protective accountability that the plurality offers and demonstrate the pastor's genuine desire for accountability even before the structural means of achieving it are fully in place.

Second, the single-pastor congregation should be intentionally identifying, mentoring, and testing candidates for the elder's office from within its own membership, according to the pattern of 2 Timothy 2:2. The formation of future elders is not a project that can be deferred until the congregation reaches a size or a financial position that makes plurality seem practical; it is the ongoing responsibility of the single pastor whose faithfulness to the apostolic pattern requires him to invest in the development of the leadership that will eventually make genuine plurality possible. The congregation that is not currently developing future elders is a congregation that has, in practice, accepted the single-pastor model as a permanent arrangement, and the single pastor who is not investing in the formation of future co-elders has, in practice, chosen the convenience of unchecked authority over the faithfulness of the apostolic pattern.

V. DEVELOPING ELDERS

The Intentional Formation of Future Leaders

A. The Pattern of Second Timothy 2:2

The apostolic pattern for the development of the next generation of elders is described in Paul's instruction to Timothy in 2 Timothy 2:2: 'The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.' The verse describes a four-generation chain of theological transmission: Paul entrusts to Timothy, who entrusts to faithful men, who entrust to others. The pattern is intentional, relational, and multigenerational, the deliberate passing on of the apostolic deposit through a chain of qualified, faithful individuals who have been specifically formed for the teaching and governance responsibilities that the elder's office requires. This is not a description of a formal academic program, though theological education is an important element of elder formation; it is a description of the kind of sustained, personal, relationally intensive investment that produces the combination of theological knowledge, pastoral wisdom, and proven character that the elder's qualifications require.

The four dimensions of elder formation that Lesson 13 identified, theological instruction, pastoral experience, character assessment, and the congregation's recognition, are all implied in the 2 Timothy 2:2 pattern. The 'things which you have heard from me' are the theological content that Timothy has received through years of traveling with Paul and observing his ministry: not merely doctrinal propositions but the full-bodied theological wisdom of the apostolic deposit in its application to the real pastoral challenges of real congregations. The 'faithful men who will be able to teach others' are men whose character, commitment, and gifting have been observed and assessed over a sufficient period to establish their reliability and their fitness for the teaching function. The congregation's recognition is embedded in the public nature of the entrusting: the things Paul entrusted to Timothy were heard 'in the presence of many witnesses,' not in private, and the faithful men to whom Timothy entrusts them will be known by the community whose leadership they will eventually provide.

The practical shape of elder formation in the contemporary congregation will vary depending on the congregation's size, resources, and cultural context. In some contexts, a formal theological education through a seminary or theological college is both accessible and valuable; the congregation that can support its elder candidates through formal theological training should do so. In other contexts, the combination of a strong church-based theological education program, a rigorous reading curriculum supervised by the existing elders, and sustained mentorship in pastoral practice may achieve a comparable result. What is non-negotiable in all contexts is the relational, sustained, observation-based character of the formation: the elder candidate must be genuinely known by the congregation over a significant period, his character must be assessed against the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 in the actual conditions of the community's life rather than in a formal interview alone, and his teaching gifts must be tested in the congregation's actual ministry before they are publicly affirmed through the formal act of appointment.

B. Identifying Candidates for the Eldership

The first step in the deliberate development of future elders is the identification of candidates from within the congregation's existing membership. The elder candidate is the man who is already doing elder work before he has been formally appointed to the elder's office: who is already leading a small group with pastoral seriousness, who is already counseling members with theological depth and relational wisdom, who is already teaching the Word with evident gifting and evident love for the congregation's formation, who is already defending the congregation's doctrinal integrity against the pressures of cultural accommodation, and whose personal life is already a recognizable embodiment of the character qualifications that the office requires. The identification of such men is not difficult in a congregation that is paying attention to its members' gifts and callings; it is the congregation that has no mechanism for observing and recognizing the gifts and callings of its members that will consistently fail to identify its elder candidates until they have already been lost to other congregations or other ministry contexts.

The formation process for identified candidates should be intentional and sustained, not hurried or perfunctory. Paul's instruction in 1 Timothy 5:22, 'Do not lay hands on anyone too hastily', is a caution against premature appointment that applies with particular force to the elder's office. The elder who has been appointed too quickly, before his character has been adequately tested and his theological formation adequately completed, is an elder who is being set up for failure and whose premature appointment creates risks for both himself and the congregation. The congregation that is impatient for plurality and appoints underdeveloped candidates to the office has not achieved plurality; it has created the appearance of plurality with the substance of inadequately

prepared leadership. The patient, deliberate, years-long formation of elder candidates is not a luxury for congregations with the time and resources to pursue it; it is the due diligence that the weight of the office and the welfare of the congregation require.

The role of the existing elder, whether the lead elder of a plurality or the single pastor of a congregation moving toward plurality, in the formation of future elders is irreplaceable. Paul's relationship with Timothy is the model: years of shared ministry, sustained theological instruction, observed pastoral practice, honest assessment of strengths and weaknesses, and the gradual increase of Timothy's pastoral responsibility as his formation progresses. The man who will eventually serve as a fellow elder alongside the existing leadership needs to be genuinely known and genuinely formed by that leadership over a significant period. The seminary alone, however excellent its theological education, cannot provide the pastoral formation that comes from years of observed ministry in the specific congregation where the elder will serve. The congregation-based mentorship that the 2 Timothy 2:2 pattern describes is not supplementary to theological education; it is the primary context in which the full formation of the elder's character, wisdom, and pastoral instinct takes place.

VI. THE HEALTH OF THE PLURALITY

Maintaining Genuine Shared Governance

A. What Genuine Plurality Requires

The achievement of a nominal plurality, the appointment of multiple elders who do not genuinely share in the congregation's governance, is not the goal. The goal is genuine plural eldership: a body of qualified, mutually accountable leaders who together exercise the teaching, governing, and shepherding functions of the pastoral office in a way that genuinely distributes both the authority and the responsibility of the congregation's leadership. The criteria for genuine plurality are not primarily structural, it is not enough to have multiple men with the title of elder, but functional and relational: do the elders genuinely know the congregation together? Do they genuinely deliberate about significant governance decisions together? Do they genuinely hold one another accountable for the quality of their pastoral ministry? Do they genuinely share the burden of the congregation's pastoral care in a way that relieves each member of the plurality from the unsustainable solo burden that the single-pastor model creates?

Genuine plurality requires, first, that all the elders genuinely know the congregation. The elder who is known to the congregation primarily as a Sunday morning presence but who has no ongoing pastoral relationships with specific members, who is not involved in counseling conversations, who does not make pastoral visits, who is not engaged with the community's life beyond the gathered worship, is not genuinely exercising the shepherding function that the elder's office requires, however faithful he may be in his governance contributions. The plurality that has members who are functionally deacons serving in governance roles rather than genuine elders exercising pastoral oversight has confused the two offices and failed to achieve the kind of mutual engagement with the congregation's actual life that genuine shared eldership requires.

Genuine plurality also requires that the elders genuinely deliberate together about significant decisions. The plurality that rubber-stamps the lead elder's decisions without genuine engagement, honest disagreement, and the kind of mutual challenge that the New Testament's vision of peer accountability requires has not achieved

genuine shared governance; it has created the appearance of accountability without the substance. The culture of genuine peer engagement among elders, in which each member of the plurality feels genuinely free to challenge the lead elder's conclusions, to raise concerns about the congregation's direction, and to bring his own pastoral knowledge of the congregation to bear on the body's decisions, is cultivated deliberately over time, not produced automatically by the appointment of multiple men to the title of elder. It requires the lead elder's sustained commitment to the genuine authority and genuine voice of his fellow elders, and it requires the other elders' sustained willingness to exercise that authority and voice with the courage and the pastoral wisdom that genuine shared governance demands.

B. Common Failure Modes and Their Prevention

The most common failure mode of plural eldership in Baptist churches is the creation of a nominal plurality in which one elder, typically the lead pastor, effectively exercises singular governance authority while the other elders function as an advisory council whose input is sought but not genuinely determinative. This failure mode is produced by several dynamics that deserve explicit identification and deliberate resistance. The first dynamic is the differential investment of the elders in the congregation's life: when one elder is full-time and the others are part-time or bi-vocational, the full-time elder's knowledge of the congregation, his engagement with its pastoral challenges, and his institutional relationship with the congregation's members will inevitably be more extensive and more authoritative than the part-time elders'. The practical authority of the full-time pastor tends to expand naturally to fill the space that the part-time elders cannot occupy, and the plurality gradually becomes a single pastor with an advisory council.

The prevention of this failure mode requires deliberate structural commitments that resist the natural drift toward singular authority. Part-time or bi-vocational elders need genuine pastoral responsibilities within the congregation that are not contingent on the lead pastor's approval, specific families or life-stage groups that they shepherd with genuine pastoral authority, specific ministry areas for which they bear genuine governance responsibility, specific aspects of the congregation's doctrinal and disciplinary life in which their voice is not merely advisory but constitutive. The creation of defined portfolios of responsibility for each member of the plurality, not as a bureaucratic division of labor but as the institutional recognition of each elder's genuine authority in specific domains of the congregation's life, is one practical means of preventing the natural drift toward singular authority.

A second common failure mode is the eldership that achieves genuine plurality in governance but fails to translate that governance accountability into genuine pastoral care of the congregation's members. The elders who meet regularly to make governance decisions but who collectively know only a fraction of the congregation's membership have not achieved the shepherding dimension of the apostolic elder's office; they have created an effective governing board that happens to use the title of elder. The prevention of this failure mode requires the explicit allocation of pastoral responsibility to each member of the plurality, specific members or families for whom each elder has named, regular, relationship-specific pastoral responsibility, and the regular review of pastoral contact among the elders as a standard governance agenda item. The eldership that knows which members it has not had meaningful pastoral contact with in the past three months is an eldership that is taking the shepherding function of the office seriously; the eldership that has no mechanism for answering that question has allowed governance to crowd out the pastoral care that the New Testament consistently presents as the elder's primary relational responsibility.

VII. TOWARD A FAITHFUL PLURALITY

The Congregation's Role and the Pastor's Commitment

A. What the Congregation Owes the Plurality

The development and health of a genuine plural eldership is not solely the responsibility of the elders themselves. The congregation has specific obligations toward the plurality that directly affect the plurality's ability to function as the New Testament envisions. The first obligation is the recognition and support of all the members of the plurality, not only the lead elder. The congregation that relates to the lead elder as the pastor and to the other elders as adjunct helpers has not grasped the ecclesiological reality of plural eldership. Each member of the plurality is a genuine elder, a man recognized by the congregation as meeting the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1, formally appointed through the congregation's common suffrage, and bearing genuine governing and pastoral authority within the body. The congregation that treats the other elders as less significant than the lead elder undermines the very accountability structure that the plurality is designed to create.

The second obligation is the financial support of those members of the plurality whose investment in the congregation's ministry is sufficient to warrant it. First Timothy 5:17-18 establishes the principle that elders who labor in the congregation's ministry are worthy of material support: 'The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, you shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing, and the laborer is worthy of his wages.' The congregation that cannot financially support multiple full-time elders should prioritize the partial support of additional elders over the additional program expenditures that absorb so much of many congregations' budgets. The financial investment in the elder plurality is not a luxury; it is the material expression of the congregation's recognition that genuine shared eldership has real costs and that those costs are among the most important investments the congregation can make in its own health and faithfulness.

The third obligation is the congregation's active, earnest, sustained prayer for the plurality's wisdom, faithfulness, and mutual unity. The elder body that is not being prayed for by name by the congregation it serves is an elder body that is being deprived of the most fundamental resource that the congregation can offer its leadership. The pastoral office is a genuinely demanding, spiritually exposed, and relationally costly calling, and the men who bear it need the sustained, specific, theologically serious intercession of the community they serve. The congregation that prays for its elders with the same earnestness with which it prays for its missionaries, its community outreach, and its members' personal needs is a congregation that understands the spiritual significance of the plurality it has been given.

B. The Pastor's Commitment to Genuine Plurality

The most critical human factor in the development and health of a genuine plural eldership is the lead elder's own commitment to the plurality's genuine authority. The single-pastor congregation that moves toward plurality will succeed or fail in that transition primarily on the basis of whether the lead pastor genuinely wants, not merely tolerates or institutionally accommodates, the accountability and the governance authority that the plurality provides. The lead pastor who adds elders to his congregation's governance structure because the model is theologically correct but who continues to make significant decisions unilaterally, who resists the honest challenge

of fellow elders, and who manages the plurality as a tool for institutional legitimacy rather than as a genuine community of peer accountability has not achieved the New Testament's pattern. He has created the form of plurality without the substance, and the congregation is no better protected and the lead elder no better accountable than in the single-pastor model.

The genuine commitment to plural eldership requires the lead elder's willingness to be genuinely accountable to his fellow elders, to share with them the full range of his pastoral activity, to receive their honest assessments of his preaching, his counseling, his family life, and his doctrinal fidelity, and to submit to their governance authority in the areas of the congregation's life that belong to the full eldership's decision-making. This willingness is not natural; it runs against the grain of the leadership instincts that often accompany the gifts required for the teaching office. The man who is gifted to preach the Word and lead the congregation's theological vision is not always the man who finds it natural to be accountable to peers whose vision for the congregation may differ from his own. The deliberate cultivation of a genuine culture of peer accountability, in which the lead elder actively invites the honest engagement of his fellow elders, actively seeks their correction, and actively defers to the plurality's governance authority in the areas that belong to shared governance, is one of the most important investments any lead elder can make in his own long-term pastoral health and the congregation's long-term institutional integrity.

The congregation that succeeds in developing and maintaining a genuine plural eldership will find, over time, that the benefits Paul embedded in the apostolic pattern are exactly what the pattern promised: elders who are mutually accountable and therefore more protected from the failure that unchecked authority produces; a congregation that is better led because its leaders bring multiple perspectives to bear on its most significant decisions; a lead elder who is better sustained because his burden is genuinely shared; and a community that is better prepared for the inevitable transitions of pastoral leadership because its governance does not depend on the tenure of any single individual. The New Testament's pattern of plural eldership is not a counsel of institutional idealism; it is the practical wisdom of the Spirit, tested in the apostolic mission and confirmed in the history of every congregation that has had the courage and the patience to pursue it.

“The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”

2 Timothy 2:2, NASB 1995

Theological Terms and Definitions

Plural Eldership	The New Testament's consistent pattern of governance for the local church: a body of multiple qualified elders who together exercise the teaching, governing, and shepherding functions of the pastoral office. Attested in Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1; and Philippians 1:1. Distinguished from both the single-pastor model (one man bearing the full pastoral burden alone) and the episcopal hierarchy (a tiered structure of bishops over presbyters).
Single-Pastor Model	The governance structure in which one man serves as the congregation's primary and often sole elder, bearing the full weight of the congregation's preaching, pastoral care, governance, and administration without the structural accountability of fellow elders. The dominant norm in contemporary Baptist and evangelical churches, despite not reflecting the New Testament's consistent pattern. Acknowledged in this lesson as a transitional reality, not a permanent ecclesiological norm.
Primus Inter Pares	Latin for 'first among equals.' The model of elder leadership in which one elder serves as the primary preacher and theological leader while the other elders share fully in governing and pastoral care responsibilities. Grounded in 1 Timothy 5:17's distinction between elders who 'rule well' and those who 'labor in word and doctrine.' Maintains the plurality's protective accountability while acknowledging functional differentiation within the body of elders.
1 Timothy 5:17	Paul's instruction distinguishing between elders who 'rule well' and those who 'work hard at preaching and teaching.' The primary New Testament text for the functional differentiation within the elder plurality (primus inter pares). The 'especially' (malista) establishes that the teaching-focused elders are a recognized subset of the broader eldership, warranting particular honor because of their disproportionate investment in the congregation's teaching ministry.
Peer Accountability	The mutual accountability among the members of the elder plurality: each elder is known by and accountable to the other elders, his conduct is observed by peers who have both the authority and the obligation to address what they observe. One of the five primary benefits of plural eldership, addressing the structural accountability gap that the single-pastor model consistently produces.
2 Timothy 2:2	Paul's description of the multigenerational pattern of theological transmission and elder development: 'The things which you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses, entrust these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.' The primary New Testament text for the intentional, relational, sustained formation of future elders from within the congregation. The pattern is four-generational: Paul to Timothy to faithful men to others.
Bi-Vocational Elder	An elder who bears the full governing and pastoral responsibilities of the elder's office while supporting himself financially through secular employment rather than full congregational support. Common in smaller congregations that cannot financially sustain a fully supported elder plurality. Requires particular deliberate investment in the bi-vocational elder's genuine authority and genuine pastoral engagement to prevent the nominal plurality failure mode.
Nominal Plurality	The failure mode in which a congregation appoints multiple men to the title of elder without achieving the genuine shared governance, mutual accountability, and distributed pastoral care that the New Testament's plural eldership pattern requires. The most common failure mode of elder plurality in Baptist churches: one elder effectively exercises singular governance authority while the others function as an advisory council. Distinguished from genuine plurality by the lack of functional peer accountability and shared pastoral responsibility.

Acts 14:23	The primary Lukan text establishing plural eldership as the apostolic pattern for newly planted congregations: '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 plural 'elders' appointed 'in every church' demonstrates that plural leadership was the apostolic norm from the earliest stages of the church-planting mission, not a later development for mature congregations.
Elder Development	The intentional process of identifying, mentoring, forming, testing, and commissioning future elders from within the congregation's existing membership. Grounded in the 2 Timothy 2:2 pattern. Involves four dimensions: theological instruction, pastoral experience, character assessment, and the congregation's recognition. The ongoing responsibility of every local church, not a project to be deferred until plurality seems practically feasible.

Practical Application

A. For the Mind: What Must We Believe?

We must believe that the New Testament's consistent pattern of plural eldership is not an incidental feature of the apostolic church's cultural context but a genuine expression of the apostolic intention for the governance of the local church in every age and cultural context. The convergence of evidence across Acts, the Pauline epistles, James, and 1 Peter, in new church plants, in established urban congregations, as apostolic directive, and as general pastoral instruction, is too consistent and too deliberate to be dismissed as cultural accident. The congregation that pursues plural eldership is not adopting an organizational preference; it is pursuing the governance pattern that the Spirit has embedded in the apostolic record.

We must believe that the single-pastor model, however widespread in contemporary Baptist practice, is not the New Testament's norm and should not be accepted as a permanent institutional arrangement for any congregation that has the capacity to pursue genuine plurality. The honest acknowledgment that most Baptist churches currently operate under single-pastor leadership is not an argument for the model's legitimacy; it is a description of the gap between apostolic pattern and contemporary practice that the series calls every congregation to close with deliberate intentionality and patient faithfulness.

We must believe that genuine plurality, not nominal plurality, not the appointment of additional elders who lack genuine governing authority or genuine pastoral engagement, but the real, functional, mutually accountable shared leadership of the New Testament's pattern, is worth the cost of achieving it. The cost is real: the lead elder's willingness to share authority and accountability; the congregation's investment in the financial support and pastoral development of additional elders; the time required for the deliberate formation of qualified candidates. But the benefits, mutual accountability, breadth of perspective, distributed workload, protection against authoritarianism, and leadership continuity, are the pastoral wisdom of the Spirit, and they are worth pursuing with patience, intentionality, and faith in the Builder who has appointed the pattern.

B. For the Heart: What Must We Feel and Desire?

We should feel a genuine gratitude for every congregation that has achieved and maintains a genuine plural eldership, and a pastoral compassion for the single pastor who bears alone a burden the New Testament never designed for one man. The isolation of solo pastoral ministry, the burnout that an unsustainable workload produces, and the spiritual exposure of a leader without peer accountability are genuine pastoral tragedies that the plural eldership pattern is specifically designed to prevent. The desire for genuine plurality is, in part, a form of pastoral love for the men who serve the church's congregations, love that wants for them the accountability, the support, and the shared burden that the apostolic pattern provides.

We should feel a holy impatience with the contemporary Baptist tradition's comfortable accommodation to the single-pastor model as the permanent norm. The gap between the New Testament's pattern and the current practice is not a minor deviation to be acknowledged and set aside; it is a genuine ecclesiological failure that has real pastoral consequences for real men and real congregations. The desire for genuine plural eldership is a desire for the church's governance to correspond to the apostolic pattern, not as an end in itself, but because the apostolic pattern is the pattern of the Spirit's wisdom, and the congregation that follows it is the congregation that is best positioned for the faithful, healthy, long-term ministry that Christ calls his church to pursue.

We should desire for this congregation to be intentionally moving in the direction of genuine plural eldership, whether it currently has a plurality or not: developing future elder candidates from within its membership, building the culture of peer accountability and shared pastoral care that genuine plurality requires, investing the financial and relational resources that the formation of additional elders demands, and doing all of this with the patience and the faith of a congregation that believes the Builder is at work in its governance structure as surely as He is at work in its preaching and its mission.

C. For the Hands: What Must We Do?

- If this congregation has a plurality of elders, evaluate honestly whether the plurality is genuine or nominal by asking the following questions: Do all the elders know the congregation's membership with genuine pastoral depth? Do all the elders exercise genuine governing authority, or does one elder effectively make most significant decisions? Do the elders meet regularly to deliberate together about the congregation's direction, and does the lead elder genuinely receive the other elders' challenges and corrections? Is the burden of pastoral care genuinely distributed, or is it concentrated primarily on one man?
- If this congregation is currently under single-pastor leadership, identify the one or two men in the congregation who most clearly exhibit the characteristics of a developing elder: theological seriousness, pastoral instinct, genuine engagement with the community's life, and the moral character that 1 Timothy 3 describes. Bring their names to the pastor in a conversation about the congregation's trajectory toward plural eldership and what specific investment in their formation would be most helpful in the next twelve months.
- Read Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; and 1 Peter 5:1 together this week as a study of the New Testament's plural eldership pattern. For each text, identify: (a) the context in which plural elders are mentioned; (b) what the plurality is doing; and (c) what the text implies about the normative governance structure for the local church. Bring your observations to the next study session.
- Pray specifically for the elders of this congregation by name, with particular attention to the aspects of their ministry that are most demanding: the lead elder's preaching preparation and theological leadership; the other elders' pastoral engagement with specific members of the congregation; the body of elders' mutual accountability and governance deliberation. Pray that the Spirit would sustain each member of the plurality in the specific dimension of his calling that most requires divine support at this moment.
- If you are the lead elder of a single-pastor congregation, identify one specific, concrete step you can take in the next six months toward the development of a future fellow elder: a weekly theological reading conversation with a promising candidate; a structured mentorship arrangement that includes regular observation of your pastoral ministry; a formal assessment of the candidate's qualifications against the list of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. The journey toward genuine plurality begins with the first deliberate step, and the faithfulness required is not heroic but patient: one conversation, one investment, one formation relationship at a time.

Key Texts: Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:1–4; 2 Timothy 2:2

Study and Discussion Questions

Opening Question

- What is your congregation's current leadership structure? Does it currently have a plurality of elders, a single pastor with a board of deacons, or some other arrangement? Before this lesson, how much did you know about the theological rationale for plural eldership, and how did you think about the relationship between the New Testament's pattern and your congregation's current practice?

Observation Questions (What Do the Texts Say?)

- Read Acts 14:21-23. What is the context in which Paul and Barnabas appoint elders? What does the phrase 'in every church' indicate about the scope of the pattern? What does the plural 'elders' indicate about the intended governance structure of each new congregation? What did Paul and Barnabas do after appointing the elders?
- Read Acts 20:17-32. What title does Paul use for the Ephesian leaders in verse 17? What titles does he use in verse 28? What responsibilities does he assign them in verse 28? What does the 'be on guard' instruction of verse 28 and the warning of verses 29-30 suggest about the specific threats that the plurality is designed to address?
- Read 1 Timothy 5:17-18. What distinction does Paul draw between elders in verse 17? What does the word 'especially' (malista) indicate about the relationship between the two groups? What is the theological ground (verses 17b-18) for the honor that the teaching-focused elders are to receive? How does this passage support the primus inter pares model?
- Read Titus 1:5. What is Titus's assignment? What does the phrase 'in every city' indicate about the intended scope of the plural eldership pattern? What does the phrase 'as I directed you' indicate about the authority behind the instruction? How does this verse function as a direct apostolic command for plural eldership?
- Read 2 Timothy 2:1-2. What is Paul's instruction in verse 2? How many generations of transmission does the verse describe? What qualifications does Paul specify for the faithful men to whom Timothy is to entrust the apostolic deposit? What does the phrase 'who will be able to teach others also' specify about the teaching function that distinguishes elder candidates from other faithful men?

Interpretation Questions (What Does It Mean?)

- The lesson argues that the New Testament's consistent pattern of plural eldership is too convergent and deliberate to be dismissed as cultural accident, and that it reflects the apostolic intention for the governance of the local church in every age. Do you find this argument persuasive? What is the strongest counter-argument, the argument that the plural eldership pattern is culturally conditioned and therefore optional, and how would you respond to it?
- The lesson identifies five benefits of plural eldership: mutual accountability, breadth of perspective, distributed workload, protection against authoritarianism, and continuity in transition. Which of these five benefits do you think is most urgently needed in the contemporary Baptist church? Which do you think is most frequently underappreciated? Are there benefits of plural eldership that the lesson has not named?
- The lesson distinguishes between genuine plurality and nominal plurality. What are the criteria it uses to make this distinction? Is this distinction helpful and practically workable? Can you think of examples from

your experience of congregations that had the form of plural eldership without the substance, and what were the practical consequences?

- The lesson makes a pastoral case for acknowledging the single-pastor model as a transitional reality rather than a permanent norm, while being honest that it falls short of the New Testament's pattern. Is this the right pastoral posture? Is there a risk that calling the single-pastor model a 'transitional reality' gives congregations permission to defer the transition indefinitely? How would you help a congregation move from the honest acknowledgment of its current position to genuine commitment to the trajectory toward plurality?
- The lesson argues that the lead elder's willingness to share genuine governance authority with fellow elders is the most critical human factor in the development of genuine plural eldership. What are the specific leadership instincts and institutional dynamics that work against this willingness? What practices, structures, or cultural habits most effectively support a lead elder's genuine commitment to peer accountability?

Application Questions (What Does It Demand of Us?)

- If this congregation has a plurality of elders, which of the common failure modes identified in Section VI is most relevant to its current situation: the natural drift toward singular authority due to differential investment, or the governance accountability without genuine pastoral care? What is one specific structural or cultural change that would most directly address the failure mode that is most relevant?
- If this congregation is currently under single-pastor leadership, what is the most honest assessment of why that is the case: is it a genuine lack of qualified candidates, financial constraints, governance culture inertia, or the lead pastor's unacknowledged preference for unchecked authority? Based on that honest assessment, what is the first specific step toward genuine plurality that is both feasible and faithful?
- The lesson emphasizes that elder development requires years of sustained, relational investment that cannot be compressed or hurried. Is this congregation currently making that investment in any specific individuals? If yes, what is the current state of those development relationships and what would most strengthen them? If no, what is preventing the congregation from beginning?
- What would need to change in this congregation's financial priorities to support genuine plural eldership? Is the congregation currently investing proportionally in elder development and in the support of multiple elders compared to its investment in facilities, programs, and other institutional expenses? What does a faithful stewarding of the congregation's resources look like when plural eldership is understood as a primary institutional priority?

Prayer Focus

Begin by reading Acts 20:28 aloud as the charge that grounds every dimension of this lesson: 'Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.' The plural 'you' in this charge is the plural of a body of elders who are jointly charged with the oversight of the flock. The Holy Spirit made them overseers, not one overseer, but overseers, plural. The church is the blood-purchased possession of God, and the oversight of that possession has been entrusted to a body of men who are mutually accountable for the quality of their stewardship. Let that corporate accountability shape the prayers that follow: we pray for the elders not as isolated individuals but as a body, a body that is stronger for its plurality, more accountable because of its mutual oversight, and better able to bear the weight of the flock's care because the burden is genuinely shared.

Pray for the existing elders of this congregation with the specific awareness that plural eldership is a daily, relational commitment as much as an institutional arrangement. Pray for the quality of the peer relationships among the elders: that they would know each other deeply enough to speak honestly, trust each other sufficiently to receive correction, and love the congregation enough to subordinate their individual preferences to the shared discernment of the plurality. Pray that the protective accountability of the plurality would be genuine and not merely formal, that the elders would genuinely watch over one another's souls as well as the congregation's souls, bearing one another's burdens and speaking truth to one another in love.

Pray for the men in this congregation who may be called to the elder's office in the future, men whose gifts, character, and spiritual maturity are already beginning to suggest the pattern of the elder's calling. Pray for their formation: for the theological instruction that will equip them to hold fast the faithful word, for the pastoral experiences that will develop their shepherding instinct and relational wisdom, for the character formation that will deepen the fruit of the Spirit in their lives to the level that the elder's qualifications require, and for the congregation's growing recognition of their gifts and calling. Pray specifically that the men being developed would be formed in the fullness of the elder's character before they are prematurely appointed to the office.

Pray for the single pastors in this broader community and in the Baptist tradition more broadly who are bearing alone the burden that the New Testament distributes across a plurality. Pray for their physical and spiritual health: that the Lord would sustain them in the demands of solo pastoral ministry and that the congregations they serve would surround them with the prayer, support, and accountability that partially compensates for the structural isolation of their situation. Pray that each of these congregations would be moving, however slowly and however patiently, in the direction of genuine plural eldership, that the Lord would raise up from within their membership the qualified men who will eventually share the burden and the blessing of the pastoral office with their lead pastors.

Close by giving thanks for the pattern of governance that the Spirit has given to the church in the apostolic record, a pattern that reflects not merely institutional pragmatism but the Spirit's own wisdom about the human needs of the men who lead and the congregations they serve. The plural eldership is a gift of grace, both to the men who serve in it and to the communities they shepherd. Give thanks for every congregation that has pursued it faithfully, for every elder who has genuinely shared the burden and the accountability of the office with his peers, and for the Builder whose pattern for His church is as trustworthy in its governance design as it is in every other dimension of the life He has appointed for the community He purchased with His own blood.

“Now to Him who is able to do far more abundantly beyond all that we ask or think, according to the power that works within us, to Him be the glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations forever and ever. Amen.”

Ephesians 3:20–21, NASB 1995

Key Texts: Acts 14:23; 20:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Peter 5:1–4; 2 Timothy 2:2

Soli Deo Gloria
To God Alone Be the Glory

FAITHFUL TO THE WORD

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