

Who should direct the church when there are no elders?

by Bob Young

I received this question from a brother in Latin America. It is a biblical question; it is a good question. It is a practical question since many mission churches do not have elders.

In the New Testament, it may be safe to say that every church began without elders to guide it. In Jerusalem, the church began under the leadership of the apostles. Servants, possibly deacons, were appointed in Acts 6 but we do not read about elders in the Jerusalem church until Acts 11, almost 10 years later.

On the first missionary journey, churches were established, and after a time the missionary team returned to those churches and participated in naming elders.

The church was established in Thessalonica on the second missionary journey. When Paul wrote to the church a short time later, he refers to “those who preside over you.” This may be a reference to elders but it is interesting that Paul did not simply say “elders.” Whether the reference is to a group of elders is uncertain and much debated.

We note the presence of elders in a church like Philippi (Phil. 1:1), but in most of Paul’s New Testament letters, Paul writes to the churches without mentioning the presence of elders – the letters to Ephesus, Rome, Corinth, the churches of Galatia, Colossae.

In Corinth, the church struggled with numerous problems, but Paul never mentions elders as those responsible for solving the problems. In 1 Cor. 16:15-18, it appears that some brothers who were more experienced and mature in faith helped direct the church. Paul speaks of submitting to such persons and that they deserve recognition. He does not call them elders.

In Ephesus, we know there were elders as early as AD 57, based on Luke’s account in Acts 20. (Acts 20 makes clear that there was only one group of leaders, referred to as elders, bishops, or pastors.) Paul wanted to meet with the elders as he passed by on his trip to Jerusalem. About five years later (AD 62?), Paul writes to Timothy during Timothy’s evangelistic ministry in Ephesus. The letter of 1 Timothy includes instructions to Timothy (and by extension, to the church) about the characteristics of men chosen as bishops. The letter of 1 Timothy does not indicate whether there were still elders-bishops in the Ephesian church. Acts 20 tells of Paul’s prediction that difficulties would arise from within the eldership. It could be that the church at Ephesus was needing to begin again in naming leaders, or it could be that the leaders selected were to join a group of already-existing leaders. Regardless, we see that Timothy was to take the lead in the process of naming bishops-elders.

To say that Timothy was charged with overseeing the selection process is different than saying that he was in charge of the church, although 1 Timothy makes clear that he had numerous responsibilities related to guiding the church.

In the book of Titus, an evangelist is given the responsibility for correcting what is lacking and for appointing leaders.

Later letters suggest the possibility that both Peter and John served as elders in local churches. The book of Hebrews mentions leaders, refers to the responsibilities of the leaders, and counsels Christians to honor and follow them. The book of James is to be dated relatively early and speaks of the presence of elders in the churches.

This brief survey is designed to make clear that there is no clear Bible answer to the question raised. Nowhere does the Bible say, “This is how the church should be organized before there are elders.” But we can draw some helpful conclusions.

The early churches were usually established through apostolic authority. This is reflected in Jerusalem, perhaps in Antioch, and in the churches established on the first missionary journey. In the

case of Timothy and Titus, we see apostolic authority delegated to ministry workers who were not apostles. Both Timothy and Titus were charged with helping local churches name elders. In Thessalonica and Corinth, there were apparently more mature men who presided, giving direction and guidance to the local church. The experience in Ephesus suggests the problem of naming immature men when leaders are selected too early in the history of the church.

Here is my counsel for churches today.

The influence of the spiritually mature missionaries who established the church should be maintained until some early converts can be matured in Christ. The missionaries, even if absent, can be a source of spiritual counsel and wisdom in difficult matters. This is reflected in Paul's letters to the churches he established, also in Acts 14:21-23.

The first Christians in a location will naturally be leaders in many cases, even when they are not selected as elders (1 Cor. 16:15-18; 1 Thess. 5:11-12). These will not be official leaders but natural leaders. Remember that a person is not a leader if no one is following!

Biblically, the local churches were self-directing. That is, they were not controlled by a "mother church" or some other church. There is no model for elders in one church having authority in another church. There is some biblical evidence for "congregational leadership" with the entire congregation involved. (Acts 15 may suggest that a decision was reached by the church, even in a church with elders.) This would be a "business meeting" model.

There is scant evidence for ministerial authority in daily church affairs. Timothy and Titus were charged with helping the churches name elders. The letters to Timothy suggest leadership responsibilities, but these are closely tied to Timothy's role as Paul's helper.

Here is the sequence—

Missionaries or church planters direct the church

These can be a good source of wisdom and counsel, even after they finish their work

Mature converts become involved in directing the church, but are not named elders-bishops

As the church matures, the congregation is involved in making decisions related to directing the church

The goal of a maturing church will be to appoint qualified elders-bishops-pastors

Evangelists can help with many details in a church, including naming elders

Evangelists are not a primary authority, Timothy's authority depended on Paul

Dangers—

The evangelist or "minister" (servant) is not the pastor

The evangelist or minister is not an apostle

Informal leaders are not "mini-elders" or "elders in training"

Elders in one church have no authority in any other church, although they deserve respect