

DISCIPLESHIP. LESSON 47

1	PRAYER
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Group leader. Pray for God’s guidance through his Spirit, for awareness of his presence and for listening to his voice. Dedicate this lesson about disciple making to the Lord.

2	WORSHIP (20 minutes) <i>[ATTITUDE EXPRESSED]</i> DEDICATING ONESELF TO GOD AND HIS EXHORTATION
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Meditation

Worship is expressing your attitude towards God in dedication.

Theme: Dedication to God and his spiritual service.

Read the Bible passages. Read or explain the following in your own words.

1. Dedication.

Dedication means to give yourself to someone or something. It means to commit yourself completely to God, his kingship and to what pleases him. You serve God in a spiritual (reasonable) way, that is, in accordance with the Holy Spirit which is the opposite of serving God in accordance with the letter of the law (2 Corinthians 3:6).

2. Dedication of our bodies.

Read Romans 12:1; Romans 6:12-13,19.

(1) Bodies. Here our body is not only our physical body. It is also our spirit, our whole being and personality, because our body and its members give expression to our spirit, being and personality.

(2) Living sacrifice. While animal sacrifices are brought by killing them, we must bring our bodies as a sacrifice to God by living in our bodies to the glory of God. We no longer live in our bodies controlled by our old sinful nature, but controlled by our new born-again nature. “For none of us lives to himself alone, and none of us dies to himself alone. If we live, we live to the Lord; and if we die, we die to the Lord. So, whether we live or we die, we belong to the Lord” (Romans 14:7-8).

(3) Holy sacrifice. The word “holy” means to separate and to dedicate. On the one hand we separate ourselves from the evil in this world. On the other hand we dedicate ourselves to God and his cause within this sinful world.

(4) A sacrifice pleasing to God. We dedicate ourselves to everything that God welcomes and commends. We desire to give joy to God by the places we visit, by the activities we are engaged in, by the people we relate to and how we behave.

(5) A spiritual act of worship or a spiritual act of service. By dedicating our bodies in this way every day, we are engaged in a spiritual act of worship or a spiritual act of service! Worship does not only take place in the congregation! Worship also takes place in the midst of ordinary life! We worship God by dedicating our bodies on a daily basis in the service of God’s kingdom and righteousness (Matthew 6:33).

3. Dedication of our minds.

Read Romans 12:2.

(1) Not conform to this world. We do not allow ourselves to be moulded, shaped or fashioned after the pattern of this evil age. We do not allow this evil world, the cultures of sinful people or the religions of sinful people to squeeze us into its mould. A Christian avoids conformity to all evil influences: atheistic philosophies, false religions¹, sexual immorality, bad friends, degenerating discussions, dirty magazines, questionable activities (casino’s, lottery and gambling), sexy clothes, extremist politics, experiments with drugs or extreme sports, etc. A Christian resists every evil influence.

¹ For example by “adapting” biblical concepts in order not to offend particular religions (for example: adapting the Name “Son of God” for Jesus Christ). The non-Christian religions will not change their attitude towards Christians because Christians adapt the translations of the Bible or their convictions. People within these religions will only change when they are born-again and begin to understand who “the Son of God” is! (John 3:3-8; Matthew 16:13-18; John 5:16-30; John 10:24-39; John 20:24-29). (See manual 2, supplement 8 “The nature of God and the Son of God”) The translation “Son of God” in the Bible must not be adapted in order not to give offence, but such biblical concepts must be explained in the footnotes so that these people are able to change their minds! The argument in 1 Corinthians 9:20-23 – “to become a Jew for the Jew”, does not imply that essential concepts in the Bible must be changed in order not to offend Jews, but means that the behaviour of Christians must respect the Law of God (which is “love”) as Romans 14:1 – 15:12 also teaches.

Outward “conformity” to the lifestyle and behaviour of other people is a compromise with people who have not changed, with their unchanged way of thinking and unchanged way of behaviour. Such a lifestyle cannot please God.

(2) But transform to God’s will. We dedicate ourselves to the continual renewal of our minds that leads to a continual change of our religious convictions and change of our behaviour! While conformity begins by following the *outward* fashions of people, transformation begins with the *inward* change or transformation of thoughts, convictions, motives and attitudes according to God’s Word that eventually leads to a change in behaviour . This happens when we make no compromise with the world and its religions, but allow ourselves to be changed by God’s Word and by God’s Spirit. Inward transformation that eventually expresses itself in outward change is the best way to live a lifestyle that pleases God. Our goal is not to win people for our religious Book or Religion but that they are born-again and renewed (Titus 3:4-8) and in this way won to Christ and his kingship!

4. Dedication of our members.

(1) Eyes. **Read** Matthew 6:22-23. We dedicate our eyes to God, because our eyes are the doors through which we allow things to enter into our souls. For example, “I made a covenant with my eyes, not to look lustfully at a girl” (cf. Job 31:1).

(2) Ears. **Read** Isaiah 50:4-5. We dedicate our ears to God, because our ears connect us to God’s voice. “Do not listen to what the prophets are prophesying to you; they fill you with false hopes. They speak visions from their own minds, not from the mouth of the LORD” (Jeremiah 23:16).

(3) Tongue. **Read** Matthew 12:34-37. We dedicate our tongues to God, because our tongues reveal what is in our hearts “Do not let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:15,29).

Worship.

Take turns and worship God in one or two sentences and dedicate some part of our body to God as a spiritual act of worship.

3	SHARING (20 minutes)	[QUIET TIME] ECCLESIASTES 1 - 4
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Take turns and **share** (or **read** from your notes) in short what you have learned from one of your quiet times out of the assigned Bible passages (Ecclesiastes 1, 2, 3 and 4).

Listen to the person sharing, take him serious and accept him. Do not discuss what he shares.

4	TEACHING (70 minutes)	[LEADERSHIP] CHARACTERISTICS OF A CHRISTIAN LEADER
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The study is limited to leadership in the New Testament. Other studies about leadership in DOTA:

- Manual 3, lesson 34 a Bible study about the leadership of the Church (1 Peter 5:1-7)
- Manual 4, lesson 47. The characteristics of a Christian leader.
- Manual 4, supplement 19. The historical development of leadership in the Christian Church.
- Manual 4, supplement 20. Deacons in the New Testament.
- Manual 6, lesson 17. Church ceremony. The commissioning of church leaders.
- Manual 6, supplement 23. Women workers in the congregation.

A. CONCEPTS WITH REGARD TO LEADERSHIP

1. Definitions of leaders in the New Testament.

Because the original Greek words for leaders are not always translated correctly or consistently in some Bible translations in other languages, we will translate these words consistently with the same English words.

The Greek word “presbuteros” (single) and “presbuteroi” (plural) are consistently translated with the English words “elder (single)” and “elders” (plural). This Greek word represents the leadership office in the Church. This word is not translated as “priest (priests)” or “pastor/pastors”, because these words denote *positions of power* in traditional modern churches.

The Greek word “episkopos” (single) and “episkopoi” (plural) are consistently translated with the English words “overseer (overseers)”. This Greek word represents one of the functions or responsible tasks of the elder (elders) and does not represent another office (different to the elder) in the Church! This word is not translated as “bishop (bishops)”, because this word denotes *a position of power* in traditional modern churches.

The Greek word “poimén” (single) and “poimenes” (plural) are consistently translated with the English words “shepherd (shepherds)”. This Greek word represents a second responsible task of the elder (elders) and does not represent another office (different to the elder) in the Church! This word is not translated as “pastor” (pastors), because this word denotes a *position* of power in traditional modern churches.

The Greek verb “episkopeó” (1 Peter 5:2) is translated in English with “to oversee”. It is the function of an overseer (thus: elder, and not of a so-called modern “bishop”).

The Greek verb “poimainó” (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2) is translated in English with “to shepherd”. It is the function of a shepherd (thus: elder, and not of a so-called modern “pastor/minister”).

2. Three words for “an elder (elders)” in the congregation.

(1) In the New Testament the three words: “elder”, “shepherd” and “overseer” are interchangeable.

In the New Testament “elders” are also referred to by their responsible tasks. In this way the three words: elder, shepherd and overseer denote one and the same office in the Church.

- “Elder (elders)” in Greek is “presbuteros”. The English word “priest” has been derived from this (Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1), but is by its association NOT a good translation. It should be translated with “elder” (the office).
- “Shepherd” in Greek is “poimén” and in Latin “pastor”. The English word “pastor” has been derived from this (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), but is by its association NOT a good translation. It should be translated with “shepherd” (a function and not an office).
- “Overseer (overseers)” in Greek is “episkopos”. The English word “bishop” has been derived from this (Acts 20:28; Titus 1:7; 1 Peter 5:2), but is by its association NOT a good translation. It should be translated with “overseer” (a function and not an office).

During the first century (30-97 A.D.) the words: “elder”, “shepherd” and “overseer” refer to one and the same office without distinction! In Acts all the elders (Acts 20:17) functioned as shepherds and overseers in the congregation (Acts 28)! In Titus every elder (Titus 1:5) is called an overseer (Titus 1:7). And in 1 Peter all elders (1 Peter 5:1) functioned as shepherds and overseers (1 Peter 5:2) under the Chief Shepherd (1 Peter 5:4), Jesus Christ. This proves that with regard to terminology, Luke, Paul and Peter used the words “elder”, “shepherd” and “overseer” as synonyms! Regardless what these words mean today in certain church denominations, in the New Testament there is no differentiation between elders, shepherds and overseers!

(2) The meaning of the words “elder”, “shepherd” and “overseer”.

These three words do not describe three different offices or positions in the church, as some denominations teach. They refer to one and the same office, namely the office of elder. They describe this office from three points of view:

- The term “elder” refers to the office and the spiritual maturity, experience and respect accorded to this office.
- The terms “shepherd” and “overseer” refer to two important responsibilities or tasks belonging to this office. The New Testament teaches that the elders are the shepherds and overseers within the Church. They share with one another the official responsibilities or tasks of the elders: pastorate, supervision, leadership and teaching.

3. Offices in the New Testament.

(1) The office.

An office is:

- an *assigned or entrusted task*
- with *responsibilities*
- and a matching *authority*
- of which the office has to *give an account*.

(2) The leadership office.

According to the Bible the only office of leadership in the church that of the elder (Acts 11:30; Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1). The Bible does not recognize a leadership body (a Counsel or Synod) above the elders of the local church.

Leadership in de New Testament Church is:

- always shared leadership. The word “elder” is *always in the plural* and this office is thus always shared with other elders (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 4:14).
- and servant leadership! Both Jesus Christ and the apostle Peter teach that leadership in the Bible is always servant leadership (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:2-3)! Therefore no one in this office may lord it over other Christians!

The local congregation should never be led by a single leader (pastor, minister, priest), but by “a body or council of elders”.

It has been proved that a council of elders in closed countries can lead three to fifteen house fellowships (churches). A number of house fellowships (churches) could form a congregation with a leadership council of at least three elders.

(3) The age of elders.

Although the word “elder” in classical Greek (presbuteros) referred to “an older man” who was more competent and experienced, the word in the Old Testament as well as in the New Testament referred to a man in the office of leadership. The word “elders” referred in the Old Testament (Exodus 18:13-26; Numbers 11:16-17; Deuteronomy 1:9-18) above all to the office of leadership in God’s Old Testament people, Israel, and not to old men. And the word “elders” referred in the New Testament (Acts 11:30; Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5-6; 1 Peter 5:1-4) above all to the office of leadership in God’s New Testament people, the Church, and not to old men.

Nowhere in the Bible is there any reference to a minimum age as a prerequisite for elders. Both in the Old Testament and in the New Testament there were prerequisites for elders and they had to fulfil specific duties. If a young man fulfilled the prerequisites, there is nothing in the Bible that prohibits him to be appointed as an elder (Acts 14:21-23; 1 Timothy 3:6-7; 1 Timothy 4:12)! Thus, the word “elder” does not necessarily refer to an old man, but rather to a mature man that qualified for the office of leadership in the church.

(4) The serving offices.

The serving offices (in contrast to the leading office of elder) in the church are the following: missionaries, preachers, evangelists, shepherds, teachers (Ephesians 5:11-12), deacons (Acts 6:1-7), group leaders, youth leaders, etc. These serving offices are appointed by, serve under and are accountable to the council of elders.

Nevertheless, also the leading office in the Bible (the elder) is never a ruling office (like that of a king or lord) and never a position of power, but always a serving office or task! He serves by providing good leadership, but not by lording it over the people entrusted to him.

B. THE ABSOLUTE LEADER IN THE CHURCH: JESUS CHRIST

The highest and eternal Leader of the worldwide Church is Jesus Christ.

Read Matthew 16:18; Ephesians 1:22; 1 Peter 2:25; 1 Peter 5:4

In Matthew 16:18 Jesus says, “I tell you that you are Peter (Greek: petros) and on this petra (which means: rock) I will build my Church; and the gates of Hades (means: hell) will not overcome it.”

1. Jesus Christ is the Owner of the Church.

He says, “This is my Church”. The worldwide Church and all local congregations (the Roman Catholics use the term: parishes) in the world do not belong to one or another denomination, or Christian organisation, or Christian leader (founder), or members of the Church, but only to the Lord Jesus Christ. He bought the Church with his own blood (the crucifixion) Acts 20:28). See the expression: “God’s flock” (1 Peter 5:2).

2. Jesus Christ is the Builder of the Church.

Jesus also says, “I build my Church” Missionaries or leaders of churches do not build the worldwide Church or a single local congregation. Jesus Christ (God) builds them by making use of his servants (1 Corinthians 3:5-11). Without Jesus Christ no-one can do anything that is permanent or has eternal value (John 15:5)!

3. Jesus Christ is the Head of the Church.

Ephesians 1:22 says, “God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be Head over everything (in the world) for the Church (thus Head of the Church). No man on earth may take this position! No one may be “a pope”², “a cardinal”³, “a patriarch”⁴, “a metropolitan”⁵ or “an archbishop”⁶, because only Jesus Christ may bear this title!

Only Jesus Christ is called “the Everlasting Father” (Isaiah 9:5; cf. John 10:30), “the only Shepherd of one flock” (John 10:16), “the Shepherd and Overseer (Greek: Bishop)⁷ of your souls” (1 Peter 2:25). Only Jesus Christ is “the Chief-shepherd”⁸ over all the elders (the Roman Catholic Church uses the term “priests”) in the Church. Only Jesus Christ is “the Apostle and High priest of the faith” we confess⁹ (Hebrews 3:1; Hebrews 7:22-8:2). Only Jesus Christ is “the Cornerstone”¹⁰ (1 Peter 2:6), “the Capstone”¹¹ (1 Peter 2:7; Matthew 21:42) and “the only Foundation”¹² (1 Corinthians 3:11) of his Church!

² Pope or “papa” (father) referred to “a bishop” in Byzantine Greek and is now the highest office in the Roman Catholic Church.

³ Cardinal means: “prominent or pre-eminent” and is the title for the highest officers in the Roman Catholic Church.

⁴ Patriarch means: “first/most prominent + father” and is the highest office in the Orthodox Churches. In the Roman Catholic hierarchy this office follows the pope and cardinal in rank.

⁵ Metropolitan means “mother + city” and is the archbishop or head of the most important church province.

⁶ Archbishop” means: “first/highest/most prominent + bishop” and is the bishop of the capital of a church province within the Roman Catholic Church. He manages a bishopric and has authority over all other bishops.

⁷ Greek: τον ποιμενα και επισκοπον των ψυχων υμων

⁸ Greek: αρχιποιμενος (1 Peter 5:4) + πρεσβυτεροι (1 Peter 5:1)

⁹ Greek: τον αποστολον και αρχιερεα της ομολογιας ημων Ιησου

¹⁰ The cornerstone of a building is the first stone and determines the position of all the other stones in the building. Or it is the foundation stone that supports the roof.

¹¹ The capstone in an arch is the last or final stone placed. If it would crash down, it would crush everything.

¹² θεμελιον γαρ αλλον ουδεις δυναται θειναι παρα τον κειμενον, ος εστιν Ιησους Χριστος

4. Jesus Christ and the exercise of his authority.

(1) Jesus Christ exercises his authority through the Bible.

Read John 8:31-32; (Acts 20:27,32; Ephesians 6:17; 1 Timothy 3:14-15; 2 Timothy 3:16-17; Titus 1:9; Hebrews 4:12-13).

Christ exercises his authority by teaching the Bible. The Bible is for every Christians and every Christian church the revealed and recorded will of Christ. Christ gave his constitution or fundamental teaching how his Church should be managed in the New Testament and not in later Church History!

Christians and churches may never go beyond what has been written in the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:6-7; see 1 Corinthians 1:19)! Christians and churches may never go beyond what has been written by the prophets of the Old Testament (Deuteronomy 4:2; Deuteronomy 5:32; Joshua 1:7; Isaiah 29:13; Jeremiah 8:8) and the apostles in the New Testament (Matthew 4:4-7; Acts 26:22; 1 Peter 1:9-12; 2 Peter 3:1-2; Revelation 22:18-19). Christians may not stay bogged down in church traditions that nullify the Word of God and rob it of its power (Matthew 15:3,6; Mark 7:7-8)!

(2) Jesus Christ exercises his authority through the Holy Spirit.

The Holy Spirit is the Spirit of Jesus Christ and the Advocate or Representative of Jesus Christ here on earth. He represents Christ completely and effectively in the worldwide¹³ Church and in the local churches.

Read John 16:13-15; (John 14:26; John 15:26; John 20:21-23; Luke 24:49; Acts 1:5-8). Christ equipped his apostles for their special task to be the foundational leaders of the historic Church through the Holy Spirit. Through his Holy Spirit he lead them into all the truth, reminded them of the words he taught and the deeds he performed on earth, and taught them everything they had to know. In this way the apostles became the trustworthy and authoritative witnesses of Jesus Christ as they proclaimed the gospel, made people into disciples of Jesus Christ, and recorded the truth of Jesus Christ in the New Testament.

Read Acts 15:28. Through the Holy Spirit Jesus Christ led the meeting and the decisions the representatives of the congregation of Antioch made with the apostles and the elders of the congregation of Jerusalem.

There is no proof that there existed any umbrella organisation above the council of elders during the New Testament period! The modern view that a Council or Synod or Conference should stand above all the local congregations and even above the worldwide Church, is NOT derived from the Bible!

Read John 16:8; (Romans 8:5-10; Galatians 5:16,18,25; Ephesians 6:17). The Holy Spirit continues to guide and remind Christians, but never in contradiction to what has already been written in the Bible!

(3) Jesus Christ exercises his authority through the council of elders within the local congregation.

Read Acts 20:17,28. Jesus Christ exercises his authority through the council of elders of the local congregation, but only when the elders submit themselves to the authority of the Bible. It is a great comfort and encouragement to know that Jesus Christ is always present when a congregation meets to worship or to speak and act in the Name of Jesus Christ (Matthew 18:20; Matthew 28:20).

(4) Examples of the reign of Jesus Christ.

Read John 16:7-10,13-15. Christ continues to speak to people through his Holy Spirit.

Read John 3:3-8; 2 Thessalonians 2:13-14; 1 Peter 1:2. Christ calls people effectively through the preaching of the gospel, causes them to be born-again, saves, delivers and sanctifies them.

Read Ephesians 4:7. Christ equips Christians by giving them spiritual gifts just as he determines.

Read Mark 13:34; 1 Corinthians 3:6; 1 Corinthians 12:5-7. Christ assigns a specific task to every Christians in the church in the world.

Read Ephesians 1:20-22 Christ is the Head of the Church and fulfils everything in everyone. But Christians also have a personal and a mutual responsibility in all these areas. If they neglect their responsibility, they will not experience the rule of Christ through his Spirit in their personal lives or in the congregation!

Summary. Jesus Christ is the Builder, Owner, and Head of the worldwide Church and of every local congregation in the world, now and forever! Only he is the absolute and eternal Leader of the worldwide Church and of every local congregation. He exercises his authority through the Bible, the Spirit and the council of elders.

C. THE FOUNDERS OF THE CHURCH: THE APOSTLES.

1. The apostles of Jesus Christ received a unique calling from Jesus Christ.

Read Mark 3:13-19. The apostles of Jesus Christ were not chosen, called and appointed by a denomination, council of cardinals, a synod of representative church leaders, but personally by Jesus Christ (Mark 3:13-15; John 17:18; John 20:21). They were a unique group of men, because Jesus had personally chosen, called, equipped and sent them out to be his witnesses while he was still on the earth.

¹³ "Greek: *katholikos* (worldwide), not Roman Catholic (which is a church denomination) Note. The pope is NOT the representative of Christ on earth and the Roman Catholic Church is NOT the WORLDWIDE CHURCH – it is only a denomination like all the other denominations!

Paul is the only apostle of Jesus Christ in biblical history whom Jesus Christ called after his ascension (Acts 9:1-19; Acts 22:1-21; Acts 26:1-29; 1 Corinthians 9:1-2; Romans 1:1). People, who falsely claim that they are today “apostles” of Jesus Christ, must be unmasked as liars (2 Corinthians 11:1-15; Revelation 2:3).

2. The apostles of Jesus Christ received a unique task within the Historical Church.

While “an invitation” may be declined, “a calling” cannot be refused without being disobedient. The calling by Jesus Christ must personally be obeyed (Acts 9:15; Acts 22:14-15; Acts 26:16-18; Romans 1:14; 1 Corinthians 9:1; Galatians 2:7-9). “Woe to me if I do not preach the gospel” (1 Corinthians 9:16)! The apostles of Jesus Christ were personally called to this unique task within the Historical Church.

(1) The apostles of Jesus Christ were unique witnesses of Jesus Christ.

The apostles of Jesus Christ were the eye-witnesses and ear-witnesses of Jesus Christ and his death and resurrection (Luke 24:45-48; Acts 1:21-22; Acts 26:16,23).

(2) The apostles of Jesus Christ were unique writers of the Bible.

Jesus Christ had promised that the Holy Spirit would remind his disciples (later: apostles) of the words he spoke to them on earth (John 14:26) and that lead them into all the truth (John 16:12-15). The Gospel of Matthew and the Gospel of John were written by the apostles of Jesus Christ. The Gospel of Mark and the Gospel of Luke were written by the fellow workers of the apostles Peter and Paul. Eighteen of the twenty-one letters were written by the apostles Paul, Peter, and John. And the Book of Revelation was recorded by the apostle John. No one may add or take away from the Bible (Revelation 22:18-19)!

(3) The apostles of Jesus Christ were unique planters of churches.

The apostles of Jesus Christ proclaimed the gospel to the Jews and planted the first churches among the Jews (Acts 2:14,37-42). They were indispensable at planting the first church among the Samaritans (half-Jews) (Acts 8:14-17; cf. Acts 9:31). Finally, they proclaimed the gospel to the Gentiles (non-Jews) and planted the first church among them in Caesarea (Acts 10:24-25; Acts 11:14-18), Cyprus and Turkey (Acts chapters 13-14). Thus, the eleven disciples of Jesus Christ and Paul had planted the first local churches in history among the three main groups of people in the Bible:

- among the Jews (the descendants of the southern kingdom of Judah)
- among the half-Jews or Samaritans (the mixed descendants of the northern kingdom of Israel)
- among the non-Jews or Gentiles (the nations beyond Gods Old Testament people)(Acts 1:8; Acts 9:31).

They were the founders of the Historical Church – they were the Foundation of the Historical Church which Jesus Christ built (Matthew 16:18-19; Matthew 18:18; Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14).

(4) The apostles of Jesus Christ were unique appointers of church leaders.

The apostles of Jesus Christ appointed the first deacons (Acts 6:1-7) in the in the congregations. Together with the “prophets” they also appointed the first elders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). “The prophets or preachers” as Barnabas, Timothy, Titus and Silas helped the apostles in their tasks (Acts 15:32).

3. The apostles of Jesus Christ had a unique authority and power within the Historical Church.

Read Matthew 16:18-19; Matthew 18:18; John 20:19-23; Acts 1:8. The apostles of Jesus Christ received a special power of the Holy Spirit to carry out their task, symbolised by blowing upon them. Their task consisted of:

- to be witnesses of the resurrected Lord Jesus Christ of what they had seen and heard
- to proclaim the truth at the beginning of the Christian Church History
- to record the truth in the New Testament
- to plant the first local churches among the Jews, half-Jews and non-Jews (the three main groups of people in the Bible)
- and to appoint the first leaders in the local churches (the elders).

That is why “the apostles of Jesus Christ” were also called: “the Foundation of the worldwide Church” (Ephesians 2:20; Revelation 21:14).

They also received special authority:

- to determine the doctrine of the Christian Church through their preaching and teaching (Acts 15:28-29; 2 Timothy 1:13-14)
- to command Christians to obey their teachings (Acts 16:4; Romans 6:17; 2 Corinthians 10:4-6; 2 Thessalonians 3:14)
- to include people into the kingdom of God or exclude them from it (Acts 8:14-17; Acts 5:1-11; 1 Corinthians 5:13)
- and to perform “the extraordinary signs of an apostle” (Mark 16:20; 2 Corinthians 12:12; Hebrews 2:3-4).

4. The apostles of Jesus Christ functioned as elders in the churches during their lives.

In 1 Peter 5:1 the apostle Peter calls himself “a fellow elder” of the churches in the provinces of Asia Minor (Turkey). When Peter preached the gospel to non-Christians, planted the first churches among the Jews, the half-Jews and the non-Jews and wrote letters in the New Testament, he functioned as “an apostle of Jesus Christ” (one sent out by Jesus Christ to be his eye-witness and ear-witness) (Matthew 16:18; John 16:13-15). But when Peter lived and worked in a

local church, he functioned just as one of the local elders (1 Peter 5:1). The other apostles also functioned as elders (Acts 6:4; 2 John 1; 3 John 1). But because their main task was to make disciples of Jesus Christ in all the nations and to plant more local churches, they appointed local men to be “elders” in their churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). After that they never lorded it over these local councils of elders!

5. The apostles of Jesus Christ must be distinguished from the apostles of the churches.

“The apostles of the churches” were the representatives or messengers of the congregations (2 Corinthians 8:23; Philippians 2:25) or in a wider sense, “missionaries”, sent out to represent Jesus and his ministry as they planted new churches Acts 14:1-4; 1 Thessalonians 2:6-7).

Men who received the spiritual gift of being “apostles” (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-16) were clearly not appointed to lead the church, but *to serve the church by equipping Christians for their works of service in the Church*. All these apostles, prophets, evangelists, shepherds and teachers present in a congregation ought to function under the council of elders of the congregation (1 Timothy 5:17). Even the apostle Peter functioned as an “elder” in the church where he served (1 Peter 5:1-2).

6. The apostles of Jesus Christ must be distinguished from the false apostles.

The apostles of Jesus Christ warned the Christians to watch out for false apostles, men who claimed that they were equal to the apostles of Jesus Christ. False apostles have to be unmasked and they must be resisted (2 Corinthians 11:1-15; Revelation 2:2; cf. 3 John 9-10)!

7. The apostles of Jesus Christ had no successors.

Read Acts 1:21-26; (Ephesians 2:19-20; Ephesians 3:4-5; Revelation 21:14). The apostles of Jesus Christ consisted of the eleven disciples of Jesus Christ (Luke 24:9,33) and the apostle Paul (Acts 22:14; Acts 26:15-18; 1 Corinthians 1:1; 1 Corinthians 9:1). “The apostles of Jesus Christ” had no successors like the later bishops, patriarchs and popes in the Historical Church, because Acts 1:21-22 shows that no one in subsequent history would qualify. The number of apostles of Jesus Christ will always be limited to these twelve (Revelation 21:14)!

The Bible does not teach the so-called “APOSTOLIC succession”, that is, that Peter was the first bishop and pope and that he had to be succeeded by other bishops and popes in Church History! The authority given to the apostle Peter in Matthew 16:18-19 was also given to the other apostles of Jesus Christ in John 20:21-23. “The apostles of Jesus Christ” remain limited to the eleven disciples of Jesus Christ and the apostle Paul. No one in history succeeds Jesus Christ as “the High priest”, or “the Apostle” (Hebrews 3:1-6), or “the Bishop” (1 Peter 2:25), or “the Head” (Ephesians 1:22) of the worldwide Church!

D. THE APPOINTED (ORDAINED) LEADERS OF THE CHURCH.

During the Old Testament period God had appointed the prophets, the high priest, the priests and Levites, and the kings NOT to form a hierarchy (a pyramid structure of ruling leaders) in Israel, but *to serve* the people in various tasks that were pre-eminently spiritual.

- The prophets represented God to his people through preaching God’s words to them.
- The priests represented the people of God to God through their sacrifices and prayers.
- The kings represented God to his people through their righteous acts. When the Israelites desired to have a king like all the other nations, they in fact rejected God as their only King (1 Samuel chapter 8).

1. The elders in the Israelite period of the Old Testament.

Read Exodus 3:16; Exodus 18:17-26; Deuteronomy 1:9-18; Deuteronomy 31:28; Psalm 107:32.

God’s Old Testament Church (the people of Israel) already existed in 1447 B.C. (Exodus 3:18; Exodus 4:29). “The elders” were the appointed leaders of God’s Old Testament Church and consisted of the heads of the twelve tribes (Deuteronomy 31:28; 1 Samuel 4:3; Ezra 6:7; Jeremiah 19:1) and the heads of the families in the tribes (2 Samuel 12:17). Later when Israel lived in Palestine, every city and town had their own elders (Deuteronomy 21:3; Ruth 4:2; Proverbs 31:23).

These elders were “chosen” (Deuteronomy 1:13) by the people themselves (Exodus 3:16; Exodus 18:13-26; Numbers 11:16-17; Deuteronomy 1:9-18). They were selected and appointed on the basis of their abilities, faith in God, trustworthiness, honesty, leadership abilities, wisdom, understanding and experience. Their tasks were to lead groups of thousand, hundred, fifty or ten people, thus, in accordance with their capacity and experience. They especially had to function as judges in administering justice.

2. The elders in the Medo-Persian, Greek and Roman periods of the Old Testament.

The system of “elders” during the period that Israel was ruled by foreign political powers (since 597 B.C.) led to a hierarchical leadership structure with leaders that lorded it over their subjects. This historical context is not normative!

(1) The period of the Medo-Persian Empire (from 559 B.C.)

Only after the Babylonian exile (538 B.C.) during the Medo-Persian Empire, an administrative body was erected under leadership of Ezra (458 B.C.) that consisted of a number of magistrates and judges (Ezra 7:25-26; Ezra 10:14).

(2) The period of the Greek-Seleucid Empire (from 312 B.C.).

During this period another administrative body was erected, “the council of elders” (Greek: gerousia) that consisted of elders, the high priest and priests. It represented the people (1 Maccabees 12:6). There was thus one body that ruled over the whole Jewish nation.

(3) The period of the Roman Empire (from 1st century B.C.).

During this period every local district had its own “council of elders”. Thus, there were very many councils of elders. But during the period of the Roman governors the council of elders in Jerusalem became most powerful and was called “the Sanhedrin”. It consisted of the elders, the present and previous high priests and the teachers of the Law (Matthew 16:21). “The elders” were the lay leaders in the Sanhedrin and consisted of the privileged aristocratic families in Jerusalem. The Roman government gave the Jewish Sanhedrin authority over all internal matters, except taxes, political and military matters. The Sanhedrin was acknowledged even by Jews living in the Diaspora (Acts 22:5).

3. The elders in the Jewish churches during the New Testament period.

In the New Testament we read about the appointment of apostles (Mark 3:13-19) and the appointment of deacons (Acts 6:1-7), but not about the appointment of elders in the congregations among the Jews. The elders in the church of Jerusalem are first mentioned in Acts 11:30 and Acts 15:2, but their appointment is nowhere mentioned. This was the situation, because “the elders” were already “the existing leadership office” in Israel.

In the period after Pentecost the small group of disciples of Jesus Christ grew into the Church of God (Acts 2:41-42). When the apostles of Jesus Christ established the first churches among the Jews, the Old Testament institution of elders was maintained in the Jewish churches. Therefore we do not read in the book of Acts about the formal appointment of elders in the church of Jerusalem or the other Jewish churches. “The elders” were therefore also the office of leadership in God’s New Testament Church. These elders were probably chosen out of the same kind of men as in the Old Testament, namely, from the family heads and other men of influence. They were probably chosen in the same way as the elders in the Old Testament and deacons in the New Testament, namely, by the people (Deuteronomy 1:13; Acts 6:1-7).

Luke (Acts 6:4), Peter (1 Peter 5:1) and John (3 John 1) clearly show that the apostles of Jesus Christ functioned as elders in the local churches. The most important tasks of the elders were “prayer and the ministry of the Word” (Acts 6:4). Deacons were also chosen, not to lead the congregation, but rather to lead certain necessary tasks (services) within the congregation.

The worldwide Body of Christ consisted of very many local congregations out of the whole world. These congregations met in houses (1 Corinthians 16:19) and were independent: “The church of Jerusalem” (Acts 11:22), “the church of Antioch” (Acts 11:25), “the churches of Syria and Cilicia” (Acts 15:41), “the church in Caesarea” (Acts 18:22), “the church in Ephesus” (Acts 20:17) and “the church that meets at the house of Prisca and Aquila” (Romans 16:5). These independent churches only had a council of elders, but no umbrella organisation above the elders! Only Jesus Christ was the Head above the local church and the worldwide Church.

4. The elders in the Gentile churches in the New Testament.

Read Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5. The institution of elders in the non-Jewish (Gentile) churches is clearly related in the Book of Acts, because the Gentiles did not know the institution of elders as it was known among the Jews. That is why the apostles of Jesus Christ and their co-workers who founded churches among the Gentile nations “appointed elders for them in each church” (Acts 14:23) and “in every town” (Titus 1:5). Elders were appointed to lead the local church (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 5:17). They never appointed just one man as the leader as is done in modern days: “the priest” or “the minister” or “the pastor”. They always appointed more than one elder to lead the church (Acts 14:23; 1 Timothy 5:17; 1 Peter 5:2-3). The group of elders were called “the body or council of elders” (Greek: presbuterion) (1 Timothy 4:14).

Leadership in the church is never a hierarchy, but always shared leadership.

Leadership in the Church is never lording it over people, but always servant leadership!

The word “appoint” literally means: “choosing with raised hands” (Greek: cheirotoneó), but it cannot have the meaning of “voting” here, because Paul and Barnabas (and not the members of the congregation) are its subject. The word simply means “to choose”, “to appoint” or “to induct” without reference to the method or form of the appointment. We may therefore assume that the method of selecting elders was the same as the method of selecting deacons, namely:

- the ordinary Christians (the members of the congregation) *chose* the elders on the basis of the biblical requirements
- and the apostles (who functioned as the existing elders at that time) *appointed* them (Acts 6:5-6).

Leadership in the New Testament Church is never democratic (by voting),
but always on the basis of the biblical requirements!

“The elders” (Greek: presbuteroi) are therefore the appointed leaders of the Church (Titus 1:5) and “the council of elders” (Greek: presbuterion) is the official appointed leadership body of every the local church (1 Timothy 4:14).

5. The elders in the teachings of the New Testament.

The apostles of Jesus Christ and their co-workers appointed elders as the leaders in the independent churches (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5). Elders should also today be the appointed leaders of independent local churches! While the apostles of Jesus Christ cannot have successors (Acts 1:21-22), the independent churches chose their own elders in accordance with the written instructions of the apostles of Jesus Christ concerning the requirements and appointment of elders (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 3:1-7,14-15; 1 Timothy 5:17-22; Titus 1:5-9; 1 Peter 5:1-4).

God appoints elders by means of the Holy Spirit (his written instructions in the Bible about their requirements and job description and his actual equipping them in preparation for their task) (2 Corinthians 10:18). The apostle Paul summoned the elders (Greek: presbuteroi)¹⁴ of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:17) and said to them. “Keep *continually* watch (Greek: prosechó) (present continuous tense) over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has *once for all* made (aorist tense) you overseers (Greek: episkopoi). Be *continually* shepherds (Greek: poimainó) (present continuous tense) of the church of God, which he *once for all* bought (obtained, acquired) (Greek: peripoieó)(aorist tense) with his own blood (Acts 20:28).

And the apostle Peter wrote to the elders (Greek: presbuteroi) in the churches in Asia Minor (Turkey), “You *must* be shepherds (Greek: poimainó) (a command in the aorist tense) of God’s flock that is under your care (Greek: en humin), serving *continually* as overseers (Greek: episkopeó) (a participle as a command in the present tense), not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be.” (1 Peter 5:2).

Thus, both the apostle Paul and the apostle Peter teach that “the elders” of the local church are the leaders of the church (Acts 11:1; Acts 15:2,4,6,22; Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 4:14; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1) with the job description to be “overseers” (in Greek: bishops) and “shepherds” (in Greek: pastors) of the church (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 3:11; 1 Peter 5:2). This also clearly shows that the words: “elder”, “overseer” and “shepherd” are interchangeable in the New Testament!

The words: “priest” “bishop” and “pastor” are not good translations from the Greek original, because these translated words indicate hierarchical positions of power today! In the New Testament these words do not indicate hierarchical positions of power, but rather the office of being an elder. Only in the second and third century after Christ these words began to express without justice hierarchical positions of power, thus a hierarchy! See manual 4, supplement 19: “Development of leadership in Church History”.

In the New Testament Church there was no hierarchy of leaders! There was only a group of elders who together formed a council of elders that had the shared responsibility to lead the church. The word “elder” expresses his spiritual maturity, experience and respect he inspired. The words “overseer” and “shepherd” indicate his responsibilities or tasks. All the elders in the local church ought to be overseers and shepherds in the church. All the elders shared the pastoral, managerial and teaching responsibilities in the church.

E. THE BIBLICAL QUALIFICATIONS FOR ELDERS

Read 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:6-9.

Men may only be chosen and appointed as elders when they fulfil the biblical requirements. These may be divided into three parts:

1. Behaviour.

He must be self-controlled. He must be honest, especially with respect to money. His goal must not be to enrich himself.

2. Family life.

He must be an example of modesty and purity especially in relationship to all women. If he is married he must be faithful to his wife. He must lead his children to faith and obedience to Christ and to respect parents.

3. Ministry skills.

He must be spiritually mature, thus not a young Christian. He must hold on to sound doctrine and able to use the Bible to preach, teach and lead people.

¹⁴ “Elders” and NOT “priests”, “pastors” or “leaders” as this word is translated in some Bible translations!

F. THE BIBLICAL TASKS OF ELDERS

1. The first task of the council of elders: to be shepherds¹⁵ and overseers¹⁶ of God's flock.

Read Acts 6:4; Acts 20:17,28-30; 1 Peter 5:1-2.

The first task of elders is to be shepherds (pastors) and overseers of God's flock.

- They have been appointed to be the overseers of the church of God (Acts 20:28)
- They are the shepherds of the flock of God (1 Peter 5:2)

There should not be just one single leader (for example, a priest, pastor, shepherd or leader) in the local church, but "a council of elders" who together are the leadership team! Every elder ought to be a pastor and have pastoral responsibilities.

As shepherds the elders must keep watch over the church as Jesus Christ, the Good Shepherd and Overseer of the worldwide Church does (Psalm 23; John 10:16; John chapter 17; 1 Peter 2:25; 1 Peter 5:4). The elders must feed the members of the church, protect them, care for them and lead them with a view to their spiritual growth and wellbeing. The elders must execute their task willingly, not as men who lord it over people, but as examples (1 Peter 5:3-4). This would hopefully prevent authoritarian behaviour with the church leaders. The elders must view their task, not as occupying a position of power, but rather as rendering a service.

Every elder must also watch over the other elders as well as the members of the church (Acts 20:28). In this way, not only the members, but also the elders are accountable for their behaviour (Hebrews 13:17). The elders must protect the members against false teachers – that is, people who twist the truth of the Bible and try to win members for their own party (Acts 20:29-31). The elders ought to care for the weak and needy members, as orphans and widows, strangers (refugees) and new converts (1 Thessalonians 5:12-14). Elders need to visit the sick and pray for them (James 5:14).

2. The second task of the council of elders: to be leaders¹⁷ and managers¹⁸ of the household of God.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13; 1 Timothy 3:4-5; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:7.

The second task of the elders is to be the leaders and managers of God's household.

- They must lead their own family and the congregation by walking in front (Greek: *prohistémi*) (1 Timothy 3:5; 1 Timothy 5:17)
- They must manage the household of God like an economist, steward (Greek: *oikonomos*) (Titus 1:7)

In 1 Thessalonians and 1 Timothy the task of elders is described as "leading by walking in the front", giving direction and the example. His leadership style is not that of lording it over others entrusted to him, but being the example (1 Peter 5:2-3). When an elder can no longer lead his own family (1 Timothy 3:4-5), or his wife or children need more of his attention, he needs to resign, so that he may give them the necessary attention. There must be a balance between his responsibilities at home and in the church.

In Titus the task of elders is described as "being an economist, steward, manager or administrator of the household of God" (Greek: *oikos*). The style of managing is serving! The elders have the responsibility to manage the possessions and activities of the local church. Not the deacons, but the elders are put in charge of leading and managing the church.

The following functions with regard to people and activities fall under the responsibility of the elders. Of course, elders will have to delegate some responsibilities to members in the church, but the elders remain responsible for these tasks and are accountable to the Lord and to the council of elders!

(1) The elders lead the meetings of the church.

They promote and lead the weekly meetings as the worship service and the smaller meetings for Bible study, prayer and fellowship (Acts 2:42). They also lead the special services as baptism and the Lord's Supper, the church festivals, marriages, funerals, visitations and meetings that equip and train members.

(2) The elders lead the missionary task of the church.

They stimulate the members to pray for people in the world (1 Timothy 2:1-2), to have good influence in the community and its institutions as schools, clubs and government (Matthew 5:14-16) and to do evangelism, within families and beyond (Matthew 10:32-37; Acts 5:42). They promote missions to other provinces and countries. They support churches that are oppressed and persecuted and also other Christian organisations (Romans 15:23-24; Philippians 1:5; Philippians 4:15-16; 3 John 5-8) (*Read* 2 Corinthians 8).

¹⁵ Greek: *poimén*; Latin: pastor

¹⁶ Greek: *episkopos*

¹⁷ Greek: *prohistamenos*

¹⁸ Greek: *oikonomos*

(3) The elders lead the training programmes of the church.

They lead the group of people who are prepared for confession and baptism. They take care that all new believers receive follow-up, that all members in the church are made disciples of Jesus Christ and equipped for different works of service in the Body of Christ (Ephesians 4:11-14). They see to it that the elders are getting trained and also that training is conducted for evangelism, discipleship, missions, teenagers, youth and other groups.

(4) The elders see to it that the members function well.

They spur the members on love in their relationships, good works in their activities and faithfulness in their meetings (Hebrews 10:24-25).

They spur the members on to have at least one task within the Church that is in accord with their talents and spiritual gifts or which God assigns to them. They help the members to discover their talents and spiritual gifts and see to it that there are possible activities in which they can participate. They are responsible for the conduct of the members and for order in the exercise of the spiritual gifts (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:4-7; 1 Corinthians 14:26-40; 1 Thessalonians 5:19-21; 1 Timothy 4:14; 2 Timothy 1:6; 1 John 4:1).

They stimulate personal help among the members and give personal help to members. (Acts 18:24-28). They admonish, correct and encourage members patiently and through teaching (2 Timothy 4:1-5; Titus 2:15). They organise pastoral help in the congregation (1 Thessalonians 5:12-15). And they maintain Christian discipline (Matthew 18:15-17; cf. 1 Corinthians 5:9-13).

3. The third task of the council of elders: to be teachers of the Word of God.

Read 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:9.

The third task of the elders is to be teachers of the Word of God.

- They must be able to teach (Greek: *didaktikos*) (1 Timothy 3:2)
- They must labour in preaching and teaching (Greek: *hoi kopióntes en logó kai didaskalia*) (1 Timothy 5:17).
- And they must hold firmly to the trustworthy message as it has been taught (by Christ and his apostles) so that they can encourage others by sound doctrine and refute those who oppose it (Titus 1:9)¹⁹.

The responsibilities of elders with regard to the Bible are the following:

(1) Preaching.

Elders preach the Word of God to unbelievers, non-Christians and Christians (1 Timothy 5:17).

(2) Bible study.

They use the Bible in group discussions with unbelievers and believers in order to discover the truth (Acts 17:1-4,11)²⁰.

(3) Teaching.

They teach the members the whole will of God as is recorded in the Bible (Acts 20:20,27)²¹. They may not go beyond what is written in the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:6).

(4) Applications.

They teach members to obey the commands of Jesus Christ (Matthew 28:20a)²²

(5) Pastoral care.

They use the Bible to engrave the Word of God in the minds of believers, to reprove believers, to encourage fearful people, to warn lazy people, and to rebuke people who oppose the truth (Colossians 3:16; 1 Thessalonians 5:12-15; 2 Timothy 2:23-26).

(6) Doctrines.

They use the Bible as the pattern of sound teaching (2 Timothy 1:13) and discuss and make decisions about doctrinal issues (Acts chapter 15) and refute false doctrines (Titus 1:9).

4. The fourth task of the council of elders: to be servants of God and of people.

Read Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:2-3.

The fourth task of the elders is to serve God and people.

- They must never lord it over people entrusted to them, but serve them.
- This task describes *the leadership style* of the elders.

Jesus called his disciples together and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you *must* be your servant, and whoever wants to be first *must* be your slave – just as the son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” (Matthew 20:25-28). The elders must therefore execute their responsibilities to benefit people and at the same time the way in which they execute their leadership. The word “serve” summarises the leadership style in just one word.

¹⁹ Greek: *αντεχομενον του κατα την διδαχην πιστου λογου, ινα δυνατος η και παρακαλειν εν τη διδασκαλια τη υγιαινουση και τους αντιλεγοντας ελεγχειν.*

²⁰ See evangelisation, www.deltacourse.org

²¹ See www.deltacourse.org fifteen lessons on the Old Testament and fifteen lessons on the New Testament.

²² See applying the Bible, www.deltacourse.org.

“Leadership in the Bible is always the opposite to leadership in the world! The elders must serve willingly, with unselfish commitment and as an example. They may never lord it over church members (1 Peter 5:2-3)! They must lead by walking in the front and by giving the example. In stead of being served by church members, the elders must serve the members (Luke 22:25-27)! Christian leadership is always shared leadership and servant leadership.

G. EQUIPPING ELDERS

Elders are not necessarily specially educated or fulltime officers. During the New Testament period only some elders were supported fulltime, but no one was appointed to be the only priest, pastor, minister, leader or teacher.

The elders must have a good grip on the sound Christian doctrines (Titus 1:9) and must be able to teach the Word of God (the Bible) to others (1 Timothy 3:2).

The apostles received “on the job training” from Jesus himself. In the same way, elders often received on the job training for their tasks. For example, Timothy and Titus received their on the job training from the apostle Paul.

The Bible does not teach that elders need a formal education at a Bible School or Theological Seminary before they are allowed to preach, teach, baptise, conduct the Lord’s Supper, pronounce the blessing and ordain the men in new offices.²³

Some elders are pre-eminently preachers and teachers (1 Timothy 5:17), but the Bible does not say whether they did this fulltime or whether only they may do that! All mature Christians (disciples) are commanded by Jesus Christ to teach the Word of God to other people.

- “And teach them to obey everything I have commanded you” (Matthew 28:19)
- “Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly as you teach and admonish one another with all wisdom” (Colossians 3:16).

Although some Christians regard men as Timothy and Titus as modern pastors or leaders, they were actually more than that. They travelled together with the apostle Paul on his missionary journeys or travelled alone to carry out a special task (e.g. church planting). They were therefore missionaries! But also Timothy and Titus received their training directly from Paul and not from a Theological Institution.

H. THE AUTHORITY OF ELDERS

1. God delegates authority.

God delegates authority (Romans 13:1-2), and the authority of all people in authority is limited (Acts 4:19-20; Acts 5:29). All elders are subject to the authority of the Lord Jesus Christ, which means:

- under the authority of the Bible (correctly interpreted) (1 Corinthians 4:6)
- under the authority of the Spirit of Christ who would never say anything against the Bible (Matthew 28:19; John 16:13-5)
- under the authority of the council of elders (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:5) who may never go beyond what is written in the Bible (1 Corinthians 4:6).

2. The elders have limited authority in the following areas:

The elders have authority in the areas of their assigned biblical tasks. The church members must submit themselves to the elders in the exercise of their authority (1 Thessalonians 5:12). “Obey your leaders (Greek: hégoumenoi) and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of no advantage to you” (Hebrews 13:17).

But someone in a leadership position that does not bring the Word of God to you and who is also not an example to you in the faith, cannot be regarded as your leader! “Remember your leaders (Greek: hégoumenoi), who spoke the Word of God to you. Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith” (Hebrews 13:7)!

3. The elders have no authority in the following areas.

Nevertheless, elders²⁴ do not have authority in the following areas: they have no authority (or power) to save people; to baptise people with the Spirit; to guide people with the Spirit; to give spiritual gifts; to transform people with the fruit of the Spirit; to call people to a particular ministry; to command them to do a particular task; or to use people. These tasks belong exclusively to the Lord Jesus Christ and his Spirit and not to the elders! The members are not the possession or the subjects of the elders. The elders have no authority over the daily lives, possessions and money of the members. They have no authority over the families and jobs of the members or the way they spend their time. That is why Jesus Christ commands the elders “not to lord it over” the lives of people that have been entrusted to their care (Matthew 20:25-28; 1 Peter 5:2-3).

²³ This practise is a remnant from the Middle Ages when a differentiation was made between “clericus” (church offices) and “laicus” (church lay people).

²⁴ Elders and other church institutions or Christian organisations do not have authority in these areas.

4. The elders in the council of elders have equal authority, but different tasks.

Some elders provide leadership in the church, while other elders labour in preaching and teaching (1 Timothy 5:17). Although their tasks in the church are different, they form a council or team of elders together (1 Timothy 4:14). One elder is not more important than another elder.

The modern distinction between:

- elders that have received a theological education in a Seminary or Bible School
- and other lay elders that did not receive such an education

did not exist in the New Testament period!

All elders were Christians that were made into disciples of Jesus Christ and then received on the job training. Finally, they were “appointed” (Greek: cheirotoneó) (Acts 14:23) or (Greek: kathistémi) (Titus 1:5) to a particular office to do a particular task in the Church.

5. Young elders have the same authority as older elders.

Although God expects a humble attitude with both younger believers and older believers (1 Peter 5:5-6), God also gives to younger elders responsibility and authority to teach, admonish and if necessary, correct believers who are older than themselves (1 Timothy 1:3-5; 1 Timothy 4:11-13; 1 Timothy 5:20; 2 Timothy 2:22-26). Nevertheless, all elders must treat one another with respect (1 Timothy 3:2; 1 Timothy 5:1-2 Titus 1:7).

I. HISTORIC UMBRELLA LEADERSHIP STRUCTURES: COUNCILS AND SYNODS.

1. The New Testament teaches that every church has its own council of elders.

In the New Testament Church there was no hierarchy! A local church in the New Testament was not led by a single leader as a priest or pastor or minister, but was led by “a council of elders” (Greek: presbuterion) (1 Timothy 4:14). The tasks of the council of elders were: to be shepherds and overseers over the members (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2). Leadership in the New Testament Church was never the privilege of just one man, but the responsibility of a group of men, who together were called “the elders” (plural) or “the council of elders” (Greek: presbuterion). All elders shared the leadership responsibilities with one another (Acts 11:30; Acts 14:23; Acts 15:2,22; Acts 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1). In the New Testament the words “shepherd” and “overseer” are always associated with the word “elder” (Greek: presbuteros).

2. The elders in the council of elders oversee one another.

The apostle Paul commanded the elders (Greek: presbuteroi) of the church of Ephesus not only to “keep watch over” (Greek: prosechó) the flock, but also to keep watch over the other elders (Acts 20:17,28). Therefore no elder in the council of elders has a position or authority higher than the other elders! In the council of elders there may not be a person that is “primus inter pares” (the first among equals).

In the Bible there is no proof that there was an office within the worldwide Church that was higher or above the elders of the local churches! The modern distinction between “priests” and “one bishop” appointed above these priests and the distinction between “clericus” (office) and “laicus” (lay person) does not exist in the New Testament! “To be an overseer” was one of the tasks of every elder and never of one so-called “bishop”!

3. The consultation at Jerusalem was not a council or synod above the council of elders.

Was there in the New Testament period higher church offices than the elders in the local church?

Read Acts 15:1-2,4,6,22; Acts 20:17,28.

The meeting at Jerusalem was a consultation between the delegates from only two local churches:

- the delegates from the local church of Antioch (from the Gentiles)
- and the delegates from the local church of Jerusalem (from the Jews) inclusive the apostles of Jesus Christ (Acts 15:1-35).

The purpose was to establish whether “circumcision” and the other ceremonial/ritual laws in the Old Testament were still legal in the New Testament Church or not. Certain Jewish Christians from Jerusalem had travelled to Antioch in Syria and had taught the Gentile Christians that they had to be circumcised in order to be saved (Acts 15:1; Galatians 1:6-9; Galatians 4:9-10,17; Galatians 5:1-12; Galatians 6:12-16). This meeting in Jerusalem was a consultation between only two local churches and not a decision making meeting (council or synod) of delegates from all the local churches in the world! This consultation in Jerusalem received no authority from all the churches in the world and therefore had no authority to make any normative decision about other churches.

The word “decisions” or “regulations” (Greek: dogmata kekrimena) in Acts 16:4 belongs to the terminology in courts and were not “enforceable or binding decisions”, but decisions in the sense of “advices” from the apostles and the Holy Spirit to other local churches. These advices may be accepted or rejected. What all Christians must obey (Acts 16:4) is to abstain from idolatry and sexual immorality. And what all Christians from among the Gentiles must avoid is to give

offence to Christians from among the Jews by their behaviour. In order to keep on loving their weaker brothers the stronger brothers must avoid “the necessary things” (Greek: epanagkes), namely eating food that was sacrificed to idols, from blood within meat and from meat from strangled animals (animals that were not slaughtered in the ceremonial correct way) (Acts 15:28-29; see Romans 14:1-6). Thus, these “decisions” were about the law of Christian love!

There is in the Bible not a single proof for having an umbrella organisation (a “council” or “synod”) above the councils of elders of all the local churches in a country or in the world in which the delegates make binding decisions for all the churches in the country or world! Traditional councils or synods only came into existence after the second century A.D.!

4. Development of leadership in Church History into a leadership hierarchy.

Study Dota manual 4, supplement 19.

5	PRAYER (8 minutes)	<i>[REACTIONS]</i> PRAYER IN RESPONSE TO GOD’S WORD
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Take turns in the group *to pray short* to God in response to what you have learned today.
Or divide the group into two’s or three’s and pray to God in response to what you have learned today.

6	PREPARATION (2 minutes)	<i>[ASSIGNMENT]</i> FOR NEXT LESSON
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(Group leader. Give the group members this preparation for at home in writing or let them copy it down).

1. Commitment. Be committed to make disciples.
Preach, teach or study the teaching of “Characteristics of a Christian leader” together with another person or group of people.
2. Personal time with God. Have a quiet time with God from half a chapter of Ecclesiastes 5, 6, 7 and 8 each day.
Make use of the favourite truth method. Make notes.
3. Bible study. Prepare the next Bible study at home. (6) Acts 20:17-38. Theme: Passing on the leadership of the congregation in the world. Make use of the five steps method of Bible study. Make notes.
4. Prayer. Pray for someone or something specific this week and see what God is doing (Psalm 5:3).
5. Update your notebook on making disciples. Include the worship notes and teaching notes and this preparation.