

## Plurality or Single Eldership?

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### The Home Churches

In the first century, believers met in private homes for worship and fellowship (Acts 12:12; 16:40; Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15-16). In cities where there were a large number of Christians, many houses were used as meeting places for smaller sections of the larger, growing congregation (Acts 2:46). Separate church buildings did not become a reality until the third century.

How many elders ruled in a house church during Bible times? A difference of opinion exists on elder leadership within the local assemblies. Were there several ruling elders in each house church or only one elder who had deacons to assist him? When bringing all the texts of Scripture together, we can conclude that during apostolic times and for the first three centuries of church history that “elders” (Acts 14:23) ruled the individual house churches within a certain geographical region. In other words, there was to be a working plurality of elders, within a city or geographical area, where the collective local churches existed. However, I’m of the opinion that there was one elder per house church, and within every city, there were many house churches, each having one elder.

Nevertheless, each house assembly with their ruling elder would band together with other churches and elders and become known as the regional church of Ephesus or Corinth. The idea that there was only *one local house church* functioning in Jerusalem, Thessalonica, Corinth, Philippi, and Ephesus seems impossible, due to the fact that in Jerusalem itself, 3,000 souls were saved on one given day (Acts 2:41). The Bible clearly says that there were several local churches in the cities and each house church would need a single ruling elder (2 Thess. 2:14; 2 Thess. 1:4; 1 Cor. 14:34; 16:1; 2 Cor. 8:1; Gal. 1:2, 22 Rom. 16:4, 16).

I believe the issue of the plurality of elders deals with the multiple elders that were needed in each city, due to the fact, that there were many local churches represented in each city or geographical location. Each house represented the church of Corinth (the regional church) and each house needed a single ruling elder. So naturally, there were many elders working together and even side-by-side on many key issues in a local region, while ruling their individual house-

churches (Acts 15:2, 4, 6; 16:4; 20:17; 1 Thess. 5:17; James 5:14). These verses speak of the “elders of the church” and “the elders that rule” and obviously point to a regional church in a specific city, or specified geographical region, which consisted of many local house-churches, with their corresponding ruling elder. For instance, “the church of the Laodiceans” (Col. 4:16) refers to the regional church, which consisted of many smaller house churches. So each church had one primary leading elder, but within the church of a specific region, there was a plurality of elders, which would work together in various ways and deal with issues of heresy that were making inroads into the local churches (Acts 15:2-6).

There would be one elder per church, but many elders were obviously needed in each location, due to the growing expansion and size of the church.

Acts 16:5

“And so were the churches established in the faith, and increased in number daily.”

More churches meant more elders. Along with the churches being established, elders would be ordained (“ordain elders in every city” - Titus 1:5), and these individual elders would become the leaders in the local churches. Since there were many house-churches formed in each city, or geographical location, there was a need to ordain many elders (Acts 14:23) and assign a single elder to each local assembly in those particular regions or cities. It would seem best to conclude that each elder would rule a house-church but together they would become known as the unified church of Jerusalem, Ephesus, or Antioch.

Titus 1:11

“Whose mouths must be stopped, who subvert whole houses, teaching things which they ought not, for filthy lucre's sake.”

The term “houses” denotes plurality. The fact that there were various houses represented would speak of the total number of house-churches in a given city or location. There was no doubt many smaller church-houses in each city (location). Such was the case on the island of Crete. Each home had one elder ruling over their assembly, but throughout the city-churches and entire geographical area of Crete, there was an obvious banding together of these elders, as they sought to direct the church of Crete. A common bond and plurality of elders did exist in

Crete, Antioch, Corinth, Philippi, and Ephesus, even though there was single leadership for each local assembly.

I think this same pattern is represented in the book of Acts.

### **Every Church**

Acts 14:23

“And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.”

The word “elders” (presbuteros) denotes plurality. Of course, many suggest that Paul and Barnabas ordained a plurality of elders in each individual local church and that every house church had several functioning elders. However, it seems better to understand the expression “ordained elders in every church” as the total number of elders ordained in the regional church, which was located in a specific geographical area or city. In other words, the elders were ordained for the functioning of the collective church in a particular city or region.

When the text says “every church” (Acts 14:23) it is speaking broadly about the regional church that was represented in the areas of Antioch, Lystra, or Iconium. Each region was known as the Church of Antioch, Church of Lystra, or Church of Iconium; however, this does not mean there was only one church per region and many elder ordained for that one church. Rather, many local house-churches were established in each city, or throughout the different areas of Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, which represented the regional church in that city, and each church needed a single ruling elder. Hence, there was a need to ordain many elders in every geographical region, who could pastor individual churches in those regions, which in return, would represent the regional church of the city or area.

In other words, each elder that was ordained to rule in an individual house church represented the regional church of Antioch or Lystra. The reference refers to the sum total of the governing elders in a specified region, who would individually lead and pastor local churches, and represent the collective church in a given area. For instance, the church of Antioch had many house churches and therefore a need for many functioning elders. Paul and Barnabas ordained “elders in every church” (the regional church of Antioch or Lystra) which consisted of many

individual local churches. As a result, there was a need for a plurality of elders in the church that was represented in the cities of Antioch, Lystra, or Iconium (Acts 14:21). The regional church of Antioch was represented by many local New Testament churches, and each church required an individual elder or leader. Each region had many local churches; therefore, there was a need to ordain many elders in the region, who could individually pastor a local church, which represented “the church” of Antioch. Every local house church, where an elder was ordained, represented the collective church in that area.

Philippians 1:1

“Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.”

Once again, we see that in every city, such as Philippi, there was a plurality of bishops or elders working together in these geographical regions. A common bond and plurality of elders did exist throughout the entire geographic region, but there was single leadership for each local assembly and individual church autonomy.

### **Every City**

Elsewhere, Paul taught that Titus and the leadership should “ordain elders in every city” (Titus 1:5). Again, this stresses the need to ordain many elders in a city, since there were many local house churches representing the regional church in that city. In essence, each church established in the city would need to have an elder to lead it and teach it, and together, these elders would constitute the regional church in that city.

### **The Overseers**

Acts 20:28

“Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood.”

This again speaks of a plurality of elders in a certain geographic region, who were called overseers. In the church of Ephesus there were many elders that would

*network together* and be closely linked together, as a governing body of men, which were part of the church of Ephesus (the sum total of all the churches represented in Ephesus). They would become a plurality of elders working together in each city *even though they individually ruled a house church*. As they would band together in each geographical location, they would be called the church of Corinth, the church of Jerusalem, the church of Ephesus, or the church of Thessalonica. In one sense, each local church had an individual leader, but in another sense, the elders within a geographic city or region would sometimes band together (Acts 15:1-6), in order to make important decisions and determine the direction that the collective local churches were moving in a given area.

### **The Churches**

It's important to understand that there was a functioning body of local churches and elders networking and banding together within each city. They were autonomous and yet interconnected in many ways. Thus, when Paul gave instructions to the church in Thessalonica (1 Thess. 1:1), he was giving instructions for all the local churches (2 Thess. 1:4 – “churches of God”), which were represented in the local house-churches in that region. The same would be true for each church that he wrote to. Each church Paul addressed would represent the total number of local churches (“the churches of the saints” – 1 Cor. 14:33) in a given area and the letter would be distributed among the assemblies on parchments (2 Tim. 4:13).

You will remember that there were no such things as Baptist churches, Bible Churches, or Brethren Churches in the early days of local church life and ministry. There was the Church of Crete or the Church of Corinth (1 Cor. 1:1). The churches on the island of Crete or in Corinth consisted of many house churches and for each house church there was one elder that would rule and teach the Bible. The elders in each city would then band and work together, as the local church in that particular city or location, such as “the bishops and deacons” of Philippi (Philippians 1:1).

Charles Ryrie states:

“The fact that the early church met in homes (Rom. 16:5; 1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 4:15) makes it more difficult to settle this debate conclusively (the debate about several elders per each house church). Clearly the church in each city (that is the sum

total of the house churches in each city) had elders (Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5), but whether this also means that each house church had more than one elder is not certain. In other words, each house church might have had a single elder who, together with the other elders in other churches, constituted the elders of the church in that city.”

I agree with this conclusion and think that it is Scriptural. You have a right to disagree with me on this issue; however, there is still good Biblical evidence that suggests only one elder (leader) ruled a house church, which represented the entire regional church in a specific area or city.

1 Timothy 3:1

“This is a true saying, If a man desire the office of a bishop, he desireth a good work.”

### **The Single Bishop**

Another intriguing argument for a single elder in each house congregation is found in 1 Timothy chapter three. A bishop (episkope) was simply an overseer and is another name for the leader of the churches (Acts 20:17). The current concept of a Bishop has been derived from the Roman Catholic Church – not from the New Testament. Bishops today are those who supervise dioceses (districts) containing numerous churches. In early times, they would often acquire great wealth, power, and influence. In time, history reveals that they ruled the declining Roman Empire. The words Bishop and Episcopal began to take on nonbiblical meanings and were given unscriptural usages as the hierarchical structure arose in Christendom. Today bishops are seen to wear big, religious-looking hats and capes. They are seen as high-ranking church dignitaries. They picture a man living in a palace and ruling over many churches. But this is not the bishop that existed during Bible times and within the individual local churches. The New Testament never speaks of a governing body of bishops, a synod or ecclesiastical council, which ruled over all the local churches. In fact, the term overseer in 1 Timothy 3:1 was used in the singular and not plural, indicating there was one bishop presiding over one local church, which could individually lead and guide his flock.

When Paul described the qualifications for the bishop he does so consistently in the singular (vv. 1-7; Titus 1:7). But when he lists the qualifications for deacons he

switches to the plural (vv. 8-13 – vs. 8 - “deacons”). This is important to underscore and indicates that there was one elder and several deacons in each house church. The very fact that this is exactly what developed in later centuries, and throughout the history of the church, suggests there was one ruling elder in each assembly during the first century.

Peter wrote to many local churches throughout the Roman Province (1 Pet. 1:1) and then mentions how the people would have elders ruling them (1 Pet. 5:1 – “elders which are among you”). This observation suggests that each house-church in a given locality, which had an elder ruling the assembly, would represent the regional church in that given area. Every region would have a local network of elders banding together in a certain locality and in this way there would be a plurality of elders in a particular city or location. There was a need for elders to the leadership work and also working together to do God’s work.

### **The Sick**

James 5:14

“Is any sick among you? let him call for the elders of the church; and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.”

Here is one example, among others (Acts 15:1-6), where elders from different locally-connected churches, represented by one regional church, would band together in order to serve others. The elders of the “church” would be a reference the regional church in a given area or locality. The collective churches, along with their elders, would band together for various ministries. In this case, it was for prayer and the prospective healing of a saint, who was backslidden. Elders in a given area and from different local church assemblies did come together for various tasks and ministries. The lesson we learn from this is that fundamental and like-minded churches should have close fellowships and be a blessing and help to each other. Together we share a common bond in doctrine and practice.

### **The Stars**

Revelation 1:20

“The mystery of the seven stars which thou sawest in my right hand, and the seven golden candlesticks. The seven stars are the angels of the seven churches: and the seven candlesticks which thou sawest are the seven churches.”

Here is another verse that suggests a single elder per each house church. The stars are seen to be a symbolic representation of the messengers of the seven local churches. The Greek term for “angels” (angelos) literally means “messengers.”

Who are the messengers? Several arguments have been given.

### 1. The angelic argument

Some suggest that these stars represent literal angels (unfallen angels who are guardians over the churches) since in the Bible stars can represent angels (Job 38:7; Rev. 9:1). However, stars can also speak of faithful witnesses (people).

Daniel 12:3

“And they that be wise shall shine as the brightness of the firmament; and they that turn many to righteousness as the stars for ever and ever.”

Furthermore, the very term “angelos” (messenger) is used of human messengers (Matt. 11:10; Luke 7:25; 9:52; James 2:25). I’m convinced that the identity of the stars (literally - messengers) are not unfallen angelic beings acting as guardian angels over the Church. There are several reasons for this conclusion.

First, Christ is not writing to angels in order to give them instructions. Christ writes to people so they can understand His message (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). It’s certain that these passages of Scripture were not written to spirit beings. Spirit beings were not responsible for the actions of the churches. A human being is a much more natural recipient of a message to a church than a heavenly being or angel.

Second, unfallen angels won’t sin. The messages directed to the churches are directed to both the messenger and their people (“thee” includes both the messenger and people – Rev. 2:4-5, 14, 20; 3:1, 2, 3, 15, 17, 19). Christ addresses the messenger of each church at the beginning of each letter and then uses the singular “thee” to illustrate that both the messenger and people are in God’s mind. The point is this, many of these messages include rebuke for sins and unfaithfulness on the part of the messenger and his people (Rev. 2:4-5, 14, 20;



3:1, 2, 3, 15, 17, 19). Since unfallen angels cannot sin, or be part of something that is sinful, there must be another explanation for who these messengers are.

## 2. The human argument.

This argument has been explained in several ways:

### a. The messenger is a regional bishop.

Some suggest that the messengers refer to humans which are actually the seven different bishops presiding over the local churches. In other words, there was one main bishop (main leader) or presiding overseer in each local church district. However, this is conjecture and not fact. We don't read about any hierarchy of bishops in the early church. Religion installed a hierarchy of bishops – not God. This is not a valid argument.

### b. The messenger is a single representative of a regional church.

Another option suggests that Christ is referring to some other type of human messenger other than a pastor. Since there were many churches in each given locality, or region, and Christ addresses only one messenger (not many messengers) for each region (Ephesus – 2:1, Smyrna – 2:8, Pergamos – 2:12, Thyatira – 2:18, Sardis – 3:1, Philadelphia – 3:7, and Laodicea – 3:14), there must be another explanation concerning these messengers. They must be someone who was a *delegate* representing each church.

The explanation goes like this. The stars (messengers) refer to human messengers which are leading representatives of the seven local assemblies but not necessarily the pastors of the assemblies. In other words, each regional church had one representative, who would represent both the pastor and people. In other words, they were working messengers who helped John and the local churches. There are examples of this found in Scripture, such as the two men Epaphroditus and Epaphras, who came to Paul when he was under house arrest (Phil. 2:25; 4:18; Col. 4:12). Second Corinthians 8:23 speaks of the “apostles of the churches” or different delegates sent out to represent the churches. This was apparently the practice of the churches during their early days. They would visit and assist the apostles in their ministry and on their missions.

Thus, the explanation of the seven stars (messengers) could be seven distinct delegates that were chosen by the seven churches to receive John's message and then represent the churches (both their pastor and people). Therefore, some suggest that in the end, this is the best solution. Christ wrote to the seven churches, through seven delegates or representatives, who would deliver the message to the various local churches in each district, city, or region, which would in return represent the local churches in that given region. However, it would seem strange that Christ would place the responsibility for the local churches on the shoulders of church representatives instead of the pastors of the churches. In Acts 20:28 we are reminded that the pastors were "made ... overseers" and in 1 Peter 5:2 the pastors were commissioned to "feed the flock of God." Why would Christ address church delegates (Rev. 2:1), when He wanted to get the attention of the pastors, who were responsible for conveying the teaching of these letters to the churches? There seems to be a better understanding and option regarding the understanding of the "messengers" of these seven churches.

c. The messenger is one pastor leading a single church.

Some suggest, since there was only one star for each church, that this must indicate there was only one pastor and one church in each city. In other words, they assume that there were only seven churches and seven pastors being written to. Christ seems to address only one messenger (not many messengers) for each church (Ephesus – 2:1, Smyrna – 2:8, Pergamos – 2:12, Thyatira – 2:18, Sardis – 3:1, Philadelphia – 3:7, and Laodicea – 3:14). Therefore, some conclude there were only seven pastors and seven churches being addressed.

The problem is this; we know that there were actually many churches in each given locality, city, or region (2 Thess. 1:4 – "churches of God"), which means there was a need for more than one pastor per region or city. As previously explained, there was obviously more than one church in a given city or locality (1 Thess. 2:14; 1 Cor. 14:34; 16:1; Gal. 1:2, 22 Rom. 16:4, 16). Twenty, thirty, or forty house churches in a given area would need the same amount of pastors to oversee them. Therefore, the conclusion that there was only one church in Ephesus and only one pastor for that church seems to be incorrect.

Why would Christ address only one pastor if there were many other pastors in the local cities of Ephesus or Smyrna? The answer is obvious; the *regional* church of

Ephesus or Pergamos represents all the *individual* pastors of these cities or communities. For instance, when Christ speaks to the Church of Philadelphia, He is speaking to all the collective churches in that city, whose individual pastors and churches represent the one regional church in the city such as “the churches of Galatia” (Gal. 1:2). In other words, there were multiple churches making up the one church of Ephesus, the one church of Philadelphia, or the one church of Smyrna. However, Christ views each individual pastor or messenger of each local church, as representing the regional church (example – The Church of Ephesus) in that particular city. This is why he uses the singular when referencing the seven churches. Today we would say, “So you’re a pastor in Ephrata or a pastor in Lancaster.” Each single pastor of each church represented the regional church in that city.

When speaking to the “messenger” (pastor) of the city of Thyatira, Christ addresses each pastor individually and personally, since together or collectively, they represent the one regional church in that city. In one sense, every individual pastor in a certain geographical area (Ephesus, Pergamos, Sardis, etc.) must share the letter written to them and become a messenger to their own local church, which represents the regional church of the city. In other words, each pastor in the city of Sardis, who represents the collective church in the city, was given the mandate to supply the truth of the letter, by relaying its contents to his own local assembly or congregation.

It would seem that Jesus Christ is then addressing individual pastors which are tied to the one regional Church of Ephesus (Rev. 2:1), Smyrna (Rev. 2:8), Pergamos (Rev. 2:12), Thyatira (Rev. 2:18), Sardis (Rev. 3:1), Philadelphia (Rev. 3:7), and Laodicea (Rev. 3:14). Christ is singling out individual pastors to spread His letter to their own local churches where they pastor. Christ said, “Unto the angel (any messenger or pastor) of the church (regional church) of Ephesus write” (Rev. 2:1). A single pastor of a local church would represent the regional church in his city. Every pastor would in a practical sense represent the collective (unified) church of their region and become a messenger to his own local assembly in the city.

Here is an important point. If the “lampstands” were seven churches (Rev. 1:20), it makes good sense that the “stars” were the messengers or pastors of the local churches in these same geographical regions. The stars, which are understood as

the “angels,” or messengers, are undoubtedly the pastors who ruled and taught the local churches within the cities and regions being addressed.

J. Vernon McGee remarks:

“I like to hear a pastor called an angel because sometimes they are called other things. So, if you don’t mind, I’ll hold to that interpretation!”

### **Conclusion**

I do believe the concept of one pastor per house church is a Biblical teaching and viable option for understanding the apostolic instruction and structure for early church ministry and government. The Biblical texts regarding regional churches, which actually represent the total number of local house churches in a given area, help us to understand how many elders can be ordained in relationship to the one regional church within a city, but still become a single elder pastoring a New Testament church within that same city. The regional understanding of eldership and ordination, which involves many elders being ordained in a city and geographical region and working together for a common cause, opens the door for individual leadership and eldership (one pastor for one church), since each pastor and church collectively represents the regional church in that area.

Of course, as Christianity grew and churches continued to expand and become larger in size, as we have witnessed today, there is often the need for more than one elder (assistant pastor) to help in a church ministry. However, this should not diminish the need for a leading elder and one to whom everyone can look up to as the senior pastor of the congregation.

Romans 16:16

“Salute one another with an holy kiss. The churches of Christ salute you.”

It’s plain to see there was a common bond of fellowship and interconnection among the early churches, especially those who lived in the same region and locality. One can conclude there were many house churches and elders in every city that were in some ways linked together and who served together for the common good of all the churches. Each elder would rule and lead an individual house church, but they would also band together with other elders in the same city or geographical location, often working and functioning together. The individual autonomy of the local churches was maintained (Acts 6:1-6 13:1-3;

14:23; 15:41), while at the same time, there was a unity, fellowship, and kindred spirit among the local churches in a given region or locality.