

Is a Plurality of Elders Biblical?

A Christian once adamantly told me that any church that does not have more than one elder does not line up with the biblical standard. To support his claim, he quoted Titus 1:5 which says, “*For this cause I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking and ordain elders in every city, as I have appointed you.*” My friend said, “It says elders, not an elder. It is plural.”

Let me go on the record by stating that I think it is preferable for a church to have multiple elders provided that they are Christlike men that meet the qualifications specified in the New Testament. The point of this article is to show that the New Testament does not require that each church have more than one elder. (I should also point out that in the beginning, churches existed even before elders had been appointed. Though they had no elder, they were still called churches.)

Now there are several passages in the New Testament that speak about multiple elders being associated with the various churches. (See Titus 1:5, Acts 14:23, 15:22, 20:17 and James 5:14.) But there is no command that multiple elders be appointed in every church. The only command we see is the one in Titus 1:5 where Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders (plural) in every city. He did not tell Titus to appoint elders (plural) in every church.

As stated earlier, I believe it is preferable for churches to have multiple elders as long as they meet the N.T. qualifications. But I maintain that Titus 1:5 cannot be used as a proof text to support the idea that a plurality of elders is required in every church. Based upon the known history at that time and Paul’s exact words to Titus (“appoint elders in every city”), one might conclude that pastors were to **oversee** multiple home churches in any given city. Such a conclusion would raise other questions relating to church oversight. Rather than discuss that possibility, let me stick to the idea that elders oversaw just one local assembly of believers (with each local assembly being independent and self-governing).

As stated earlier, there are no commands or specific instructions recorded that multiple elders be appointed in each church. But if there is evidence in the New Testament record that it was the pattern that multiple elders be appointed in each church, that is all we need to know. If that was the pattern, then we have reason to at least conclude that a church without multiple elders is falling short of the New Testament pattern. I maintain that if there was such a pattern, it is not absolutely clear from the New Testament record.

Having said these things, I must discuss Acts 14:23. All of the most popular English versions translate it something like, *So when they had appointed them elders in every church*. On the surface, this might lend support for my friend’s position that every church must have multiple elders. But I will now go way out on a limb and suggest that all of the English versions that translate it this way may be wrong. Are you finished laughing at my statement yet? If you can gather your composure, let me try to make this case. Below is the Greek:

χειροτονήσαντες δὲ αὐτοῖς **κατ’** ἐκκλησίαν πρεσβυτέρους

The Greek preposition translated “in every” is *kata* which normally carries with it the idea “according to” when tied to a noun in the accusative case (as is ἐκκλησίαν /ecclesia). The fact that English translations use the words “in every” could very well be a case of translation being affected by the large church building paradigm of the past few hundred years. By the time the Bible was being translated into English, Christians universally thought of church within the context of a large building. This could have influenced the translators to use the words “in every” when in reality, the idea of “according to” may be more appropriate (in a time when the church met in multiple houses rather than a large building). Based upon the Greek syntax alone, Acts 4:23 could be translated, “So when they had appointed them elders according to each church.” I will insert a parenthetical note into the verse just to give further clarification: “So when they had appointed them elders according to (the needs of) each church.” Though might might call my translating skills into question, I

maintain that my suggestion may have just as much merit as the common translation “in every church.” One thing I am certain about, just based upon the syntax alone, the preposition *kat* in Acts 14:23 could be accurately be translated as either “in every” or “according to.” I am open to feedback from any Greek scholar who can prove that “in every church” is the only possible way to translate this verse.

There is tendency for Christians to misinterpret (or even translate) scripture by assuming it says something it does not say, because it fits their preconceived ideas. In the case of the widespread misinterpretation of Titus 1:5, the tendency is to factor into the interpretation the non-biblical pattern of churches meeting in large buildings. From the perspective of a Christian from a large church trying to make sense of Titus 1:5, substituting the word “cities” with “churches” is justifiable. The problem is that Titus 1:5 specifically uses the word **cities**, not **churches**. The Titus passage does not address any notion of churches having hundreds of people that meet in one building. Such conditions did not exist. Therefore, to be faithful to the text, it must be interpreted within the context of the conditions that Paul was addressing.

The New Testament pattern of growth was an increasing number of home churches becoming established, not acquisition of large buildings where hundreds of Christians could meet. It was not until about 350 A.D. that the practice of using larger buildings for Christian churches began. The Roman Emperor Constantine came up with the idea to build larger buildings for Christian places of worship. Since that time, the practice of meeting in large, ornate buildings has become the accepted norm even though that pattern is nowhere to be found in the New Testament. Because of centuries of practice, Christians now see everything through the large church building paradigm and they interpret the Bible accordingly. Now, if people like me point all these things out, we are demeaned as trouble makers and fringe. But all we are doing is pointing out what the Bible actually says.

When Christians begin to bend Scripture to fit their own ideas and practices, there is a ripple effect. Many other teachings and practices can be affected and the pattern taught in the New Testament is replaced for teachings and practices that are considered rock solid and unquestionable. Thus, “Appoint elders in every city” becomes “Appoint elders in every church.” This then is used to teach that multiple elders must be appointed in every church or it will not be a New Testament church.

I will also note that even if Acts 14:23 is translated “and they appointed them elders in every church,” this does not imply that they appointed multiple elders in every church. It could just as easily mean that they appointed one in church A, another one in church B, etc.

Lastly, let me say that if a church has more than one elder, that is a good thing. The more the merrier. I am simply making the case that if a church happens to have only one elder, it is still a church nevertheless. And if a church is in its infancy and does not have even one elder yet, it also is still a church. It just does not officially have any elders yet.
