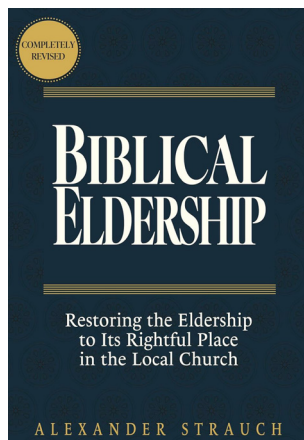


Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership

By Alexander Strauch. Lewis and Roth Publishers, Littleton, CO, 1995. 3rd ed. Rev. and expanded. 287 pages.

Reviewed by William “Bill” in the Arabian Gulf

Bill has served in the Middle East for 40 years, mostly as a tentmaker in the Arabian Gulf. His family shares Christ with Gulf locals, builds up local believers, and encourages expatriate churches to reach out to locals. He was an elder in a Western church previously led by a pastor and a committee; was one of two elders in a house church of Gulf locals (BMBs and BCBs) led by a Gulf BCB; and is now an elder in a bilingual Arabic-English speaking church.



From the United States to Europe to the Middle East, most churches seem to be led by one person, a senior pastor. Is this biblical? Should we teach traditions to local churches we plant, or the clear teaching of the Bible? If you are interested in what the New Testament (NT) says about church leadership and structure, this is the book for you! The author argues persuasively that the biblical model is qualified male elders together pastoring, serving, and leading a local church.

The book has generally been well received, even by those who do not agree with all of it (e.g., male eldership). I have met the author, from a college roommate's church, a respected elder and one of several

preachers of a good-sized, very open and lively Plymouth Brethren church. He gave me my first copy of this book, asking me to tell him how I thought it would be understood in the Middle East; sadly, I never did.

In the short, personal introduction, the author relates how he became interested in this topic. He looked in vain for a full book on the biblical teaching on church leadership. (By church leadership, the elders are intended, not other leaders under them with different responsibilities and qualifications.) Throughout the book, the author defines key terms and explains the implications of how we use the biblical words for leadership. He says that “elders,” “overseers,” and “shepherds/pastors” all refer to the same office. There are word studies on the word translated as appoint or elect and the word for overseer. He demonstrates from the NT who the overseers were and discusses their later separation in church history into two totally different offices, elders and bishops, quoting Jerome and Lightfoot. A simple installation later became clerical ordination.

The task of the elders is to pastor and teach the flock, not to be a governing board. Elders as the top church leaders should function as a team, sharing leadership, with its advantages and disadvantages. Within a team, like among the apostles, there can be “greater among equals.”

A chapter on male elder leadership begins sensitively, knowing it is controversial. He explains from Scripture the model of male leadership in the apostolate and likewise in the NT churches, and headship and submission in marriage and also in the family of God. Finally, he responds directly to egalitarian criticism.

In another chapter he covers common breaches in qualification for leadership, moral and spiritual character and abilities, and the Spirit-given motivation. Servant Leadership discusses Jesus’ teaching, Paul’s example of humble leadership, and teaching on elders’ servant leadership.

The author defends the idea of the church governed by a plurality of elders as a consistent practice taught and seen in the charges to elders. He shows that a group of elders reflects the nature of the church as a family of God, a non-clerical community given to humble service, under the headship of the Lord Jesus Christ. This church structure is not optional; it is an apostolic directive.

Several chapters exposit relevant Scripture. In Acts, a group of elders are appointed for each local church. Paul's farewell message to the elders of the church of Ephesus reminds them to oversee and shepherd the flock.

Each qualification for elders is explained, including controversial ones (e.g., a one-wife sort of man). Honoring and paying the elders who are ruling well is discussed, prescribing double honor for those working hard at teaching. He mentions protecting and if need be, disciplining an elder, courageous service, and assessing prospective elders cautiously. In Titus, elders are appointed in each town. Each of the other qualifications are explained (e.g., children who are faithful and orderly).

Peter instructs the elders—who shepherd and oversee the flock voluntarily, not autocratically—touching on the reward for faithfulness. James's instruction for the sick to call the elders to pray and anoint with oil is discussed, also whether the oil is medicinal or symbolic (concluding it is mostly spiritual). An application of James: elders are to deal with sin in the congregation.

The final section includes the correct relation of elders and the congregation, contrasting false extremes and loving, biblical leadership. The author contrasts the Old Testament community with the New Testament community, explaining the exalted place of the Christian congregation as ministers of Christ and a royal priesthood. He mentions ways the congregation is involved, including examination of prospective leaders and church discipline. He holds up the appointment of the first deacons in Acts 6 as an example of church leadership and congregation working together. Even in the Jerusalem council in Acts 15, the

congregation expressed their opinion, allowing, under the guidance of the leaders, unity to come about.

Evaluation and Practitioner's Angle

What is missing? I thought elders involving the congregation in major matters was missing, but it is there, in the last chapter. More on comparing the biblical model with common alternate models, and on practical matters, could be included--these are added in the newest 2024 edition.¹

The book is well researched and easy to follow, refers to scholarly literature, and shows the author's pastoral heart and practical experience. This is no Bible-only book and no denominational hack; it is very well done, with depth. It is thoroughly biblically based. It runs against many traditions, and even against evangelical churches with a biblical pattern on paper, but not in reality. For example, some churches have elders as a board of directors, setting policy, with the senior pastor running the church, instead of all pastoring and leading together—using their various giftings and time available. The book holds up the Bible's image of church leadership for us to look deeply into and seek to conform to.

This is the first such book on biblical church leadership! Now there are a handful of others, but this sets the standard, and has been translated into more than 30 languages. The book focuses on teaching the biblical pattern of eldership; see his other works and website for practical

1 The 2024 edition is completely revised with some 80 additional pages, the first major update since the 1995 second edition, interacting with newer commentaries and with alternate views of church leadership. It is also more on the practical side, based on the author's interactions with elders from various churches. The 45-page summary booklet is the *Biblical Eldership Booklet: Restoring the Eldership to Its Rightful Place in the Church*.

guidance for leaders.² If you and your church already have the biblical teaching down, and want a chatty book on someone's experiences, look elsewhere. If you want a comprehensive book, examining all the passages on NT elders, explaining the biblical leadership structure and why the biblical model is vital for church health, this book is for you.

Regarding male leadership, some extend it too far. For example, women and teenagers may have spiritual gifts such as leadership, pastoring and teaching, and should exercise them in accordance with all NT guidelines. The author is speaking of the NT teaching about top leadership of the church under Christ.

How the words pastor and elder are used is especially important. It is sad to see an expatriate elder-led church (where I was an elder) change to a pastor-led church in just a few years, moving from something biblical with good congregational involvement to something traditional and closed. If a church has elders and a pastor, one should think very carefully about this. What are we teaching when we use different words for people in the same office and role? If we use different words for elders and pastors, everyone understands it somehow—usually not in a biblical way.

As an official top leadership role in the church, the author and I see pastor, elder, and overseer as one role. Others may disagree. As I see it, some confuse offices with giftings. Elders need not be gifted teachers but must be able to teach. Elders need not have the pastoring gift, but some may. In two to three passages, the NT says that the job of the elders is to pastor, teach, and oversee the church (e.g., Acts 20:28–30; 1 Pet. 5:1–4).

2 In addition to books previously cited, Strauch also wrote a study guide (*Biblical Eldership Study Guide: Twelve Lessons for Mentoring*), a mentor's guide (*Biblical Eldership Mentor's Guide: Leader's Edition*), and a discussion guide (*Biblical Eldership Discussion Guide*), all published by Lewis and Roth Publishers, Littleton, CO. Strauch also wrote two books on deacons and others on various issues in the church from Scripture, including *Men and Women: Equal Yet Different*. See also: www.biblicaleldership.com.

This study of the biblical words elder, overseer, and pastor is made very difficult by the Arabic translations of the N T: the older Van Dyck/Smith-Van Dyke translation and the newer Kitab Al Hayat (Book of Life) and Today's Arabic Version all translate these words variously, rather than consistently. How are Arabic speakers supposed to know that various words for overseer are all actually the same Greek word, the same office? In modern English translations, these words tend to be translated consistently, so it is clearer to us. All the more need for this subject to be taught to Arabic speakers!

Some believers of Muslim background (BMBs) in the Arabian Gulf like going to an expatriate English-speaking church, instead of—or in addition to—a local BMB group. It is not our preference, but it is what God is doing. For a church seeking to be a comfortable second home for local BMBs, the church should have biblical pastors-elders, modeling the apostolic pattern.

We want BMBs to grow and mature together in local groups, setting their own culture and over time their own theology, but we should not leave them to figure out church leadership by themselves. Teaching the biblical model for church leadership is key to planting a healthy church with leaders working together and submitting to each other. We want to plant churches that are living and will reproduce—not just see individuals saved. How can church leadership be ignored? As we teach biblical leadership, we are also teaching biblical discipleship in a practical way: submitting to one another, being humble servants, and using our gifts to build up others.

As a young leading BMB was taking a seminary course by extension, I mentioned the importance of not being a solitary leader but leading jointly with others. I have been delighted to see how he serves with another BMB leader and involves the whole small BMB group. May we give a vision to believers for a healthy church, with healthy leadership, in accordance with the apostolic example and charge in the NT.

Shared leadership also makes the church more resilient in the face of persecution.

We often begin with a small Bible study; at some point we want to plant a church, with shared leadership caring for the flock. Do we help BMB's make this transition? In a growing, mixed gender Bible study, do we model shared, male leadership as a transition toward a church with elders?

I have given a copy of this book to new elders at an expatriate church even after no longer serving as an elder myself, until an existing elder started giving the book to new elders. I have given copies to pastors of another expatriate church, hoping for the church to institute elders rather than just having a single pastor (which the pastor recently did!).

I strongly recommend this book for those who read English and are readers. For those who struggle with reading English, Strauch's 45-page booklet is a great place to start, summarizing the full book.

Years back, I asked a related ministry if they would help translate the booklet into Arabic. The answer I received was that it was denominational, and "we don't want that." Perhaps I should have explained it better. In my view, this is not denominational at all—it is completely biblical. Is it transformational and different than most denominations? Yes. Should we shy away from important, clear biblical truths essential to building a healthy church? Not at all—we must obey God rather than man.

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