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# THE UNIQUENESS OF NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ELDSERSHIP

DAVID W. MILLER

*The uniqueness of NT church eldership is a reason for the view that the NT pattern of eldership is binding on today's churches. NT eldership is not merely a cultural adaptation. NT eldership is distinct from eldership in Hellenistic societies and Jewish organizations. Particularly, differences can be shown between eldership in the Jewish synagogue and the NT church eldership.*

\* \* \*

## INTRODUCTION

THE origin of the NT church eldership is a study deserving great attention due to its implications for modern church polity. The central question is this, did the NT church adopt a previously existing model of eldership, or was the office redefined in qualification and function in NT church practice? If the NT church merely borrowed the whole idea of πρεσβύτεροι / 'elders' from previous religious or political societies, then the organization of the NT church is not unique and the whole idea of a basic normative church government structure is less defensible. If the NT church simply borrowed from its immediate, and most culturally acceptable governance structures, then one could argue that a church is free to do the same today. Church polity would then become an area of Christian liberty where the NT pattern of eldership would not be binding. However, if NT church eldership was unique, not a copy of a cultural model, then NT eldership becomes more significant for the church today. Church eldership would not be a mere cultural adaptation, but a unique, divinely instituted organization, normative for believers no matter what the prevailing cultural views on governance would be.

In order to prove the uniqueness of the NT church eldership, one must show that NT church eldership was distinct from other uses of πρεσβύτεροι in its day. There are two general categories of possible models of eldership which the NT church could have copied: (1) Hellenistic organizations and/or (2) Jewish organizations.

## THE HELLENISTIC ORGANIZATIONS

Some believe that NT church eldership was copied from a Greek model. Hicks claims that πρεσβύτεροι "had been commonly employed before [its Jewish and Christian usage] in a precisely analogous sense in Graeco-Roman civic life."<sup>1</sup> However, upon closer examination of the evidence, it seems the phrase "precisely analogous" is an overstatement. There simply is not enough evidence of the qualifications and duties of the πρεσβύτεροι of Greek societies to make a comparison. Yet even with the scanty information, obvious differences are evident. The Alexandrian guild of six millers called πρεσβύτεροι had an ἱερεύς / 'priest', at its head,<sup>2</sup> while NT eldership had no such ἱερεύς. The Constitution of Sparta denotes a πρέσβυς as a political title for the president of a college.<sup>3</sup> This single πρέσβυς is in contrast to the strong evidence for a plurality of elders in each NT church (Acts 15:4; 20:17; 21:18; Phil 1:1; and Jas 5:14). The five or six priests of the Temple of Socnopaios (or Socnopaeus) were called πρεσβύτεροι. These presbyter-priests were not selected on the basis of age, because their ages range from thirty upwards.<sup>4</sup> Other than the fact that these priests were religious leaders whose selection was not made on the basis of age (this is a notable exception to the rule that πρεσβύτερος in other Hellenistic usages includes the idea of older age), there is little else that is parallel with NT church eldership. The presbyter-priests' investigation of the hair length and dress of a brother priest as qualifications for eldership is much more trivial than the character qualifications established for the NT church elder (1 Tim 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, since the Socnopaios Temple document is dated about A.D. 160,<sup>6</sup> it cannot be considered as a model for NT eldership which was established more than a century earlier. In fact, with the exception of two Egyptian documents (the presbyter-priests of Socnopaios and a local government officer), the Hellenistic understanding of the term πρεσβύτεροι is a reference to "older men," not to an office. The term πρεσβύτερος does not become a title for the member of the γερουσία / 'Council', of the Hellenistic cities until the middle of the second century A.D.<sup>7</sup> Having considered the evidence, it is safest to place no direct link between the office of elder in the NT church and the elder of any Hellenistic civil or religious organization.

<sup>1</sup>James Hope Moulton and George Milligan, *The Vocabulary of the Greek New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976), 535.

<sup>2</sup>G. Bornkamm, "Πρεσβύτερος," *TDNT* 6 (1968) 653.

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.

<sup>5</sup>Moulton and Milligan, *Vocabulary*, 535.

<sup>6</sup>Ibid.

<sup>7</sup>A. E. Harvey, "Elders," *JTS* 25 (1974) 320.

## THE JEWISH ORGANIZATIONS

The eldership of NT churches is regarded by most scholars to be borrowed directly from the Jews. Lightfoot represents many when he states, "the name and office of the presbyter [elder] is essentially Jewish."<sup>8</sup> There are three possible Jewish sources of the eldership: (1) the OT elder, (2) the Sanhedrin elder, and (3) the synagogue elder. Each will be examined to see if a pattern for the NT church eldership is set.

*The OT Elder*

The elders of the days of Moses and Joshua (זקן / 'old', Exod 3:16, etc.) are described as "representatives of the whole people, and they are this only in the sense of mere representation, not with any initiative or governing power, but along with and under leading figures like Moses and Joshua."<sup>9</sup> These OT elders were in contrast to NT church elders who were to rule and teach the Word (1 Tim 5:17). NT elders were not mere representatives of the people, answering to the dictates of one man, such as Moses. The elders of Israel who met for decision-making later came to be leading men from the tribes or districts. These elders were so powerful that they were able to demand a king (1 Sam 8:4). They continued to exert great influence during the reigns of Saul, David, and Solomon. However, the elders continued to be representatives of the people. Their function and qualifications were vastly different from those of the NT church elder in a local congregation. During the exile these elders became an aristocracy. Hereditary dignity and nobility determined membership among the elders.<sup>10</sup> In no way could NT church eldership be construed to be an aristocracy. A. E. Harvey properly concludes that there was no "institution in Old Testament times which could be regarded as the forerunner of the . . . Christian presbyterate."<sup>11</sup>

*The Sanhedrin*

Every important city with a significant Jewish population during NT times had a court known as a Sanhedrin comprised of twenty-three elders. The highest court known as the Great Sanhedrin met in Jerusalem, and was comprised of seventy or seventy-one members.<sup>12</sup>

<sup>8</sup>J. B. Lightfoot, *St. Paul's Epistle to the Philippians* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1971) 191.

<sup>9</sup>Bornkamm, "Πρεσβύτερος," 6. 655.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., 6. 658.

<sup>11</sup>Harvey, "Elders," 320.

<sup>12</sup>Simon Cohen, "Sanhedrin," *Wycliffe Bible Encyclopedia* (1975) 2. 1520.

According to tradition, the seventy elders traced their origin to Moses' seventy elders in Num 11:16. The extra one was probably added to make sure there was never a tie in any decision.

Douglas further explains:

In New Testament times the Great Sanhedrin in Jerusalem comprised the high priests (that is the acting high priest and those who had been high priest [*sic*]), members of the privileged families from which the high priests were taken, the elders (tribal and family heads of the people and the priesthood), and the scribes, that is, the legal experts. The whole comprised both Sadducees and Pharisees.<sup>13</sup>

However, sometimes the scribes alone were called elders (Matt 15:2; Mark 7:5 and Acts 4:5–8). Luke refers to the entire Sanhedrin as elders (Luke 22:66). This threefold (priests, scribes and elders), twofold (rulers and elders, or chief priests and elders), and single (council of elders) designation of the Great Sanhedrin is confusing, and forces an overlapping definition of the term elder. Like the Great Sanhedrin, each local Sanhedrin's primary duty was judicial—interpreting the law and passing out sentences to offenders.<sup>14</sup> However, the function of each Sanhedrin as a court does not find a clear counterpart in the function of NT church eldership. Discipline in the local church is given to the spiritual (Gal 6:1–2), but such are not specified as elders. In fact, the whole church seems to have some responsibility in discipline (Matt 18:15–17 and 1 Cor 5:1–13). While NT eldership did decide on some doctrinal matters (Acts 15), the NT never gives it the responsibilities of a court by way of example or specified duties. There are too many major differences between the Sanhedrin eldership and the NT local church elder to claim the former provided the pattern for the latter. Harvey astutely concludes:

There would be grave difficulties in regarding the Sanhedrin as a whole as the prototype of the Christian presbyterate. The word "elders" when applied to the Sanhedrin was either a technical name for a specific class of aristocratic laymen, or was a general word with strong Pharisaic overtones, which was used to refer to scribes both inside and outside the Sanhedrin. In neither case is there any easy analogy with Christian presbyters.<sup>15</sup>

### *The Synagogue*

Lightfoot carefully presents a classic case for the view that NT church eldership came directly from the synagogue organization. He states:

<sup>13</sup>J. A. Thompson, "Sanhedrin," *The New Bible Dictionary*, (1962) 1143.

<sup>14</sup>M. H. Shepherd, Jr., "Elders in the New Testament," *IDB* (1962) 2, 73.

<sup>15</sup>Harvey, "Elders," 323–24.

As soon as the expansion of the church rendered some organization necessary, it would form a "synagogue" of its own. The Christian congregations in Palestine long continued to be designated by this name, though the term "ecclesia" took its place from the very first in heathen countries. With the synagogue itself, they would naturally, if not necessarily, adapt the normal government of a synagogue, and a body of elders or presbyters would be chosen to direct the religious worship and partly also to watch over the temporal well-being of society.<sup>16</sup>

Edward D. Morris concurs with this popular theory as he explains:

It still is reasonable to presume that the churches formed among Jewish converts would spontaneously assume the structure of the synagogue, and would create offices which would be parallel to those found wherever a Jewish congregation was organized. That a body of official persons called elders, and elders of the people, and charged with the oversight of the spiritual interests of the synagogue, existed universally in the age of Christ; and that both He and His disciples were familiar with this arrangement, and recognized its historic validity and its religious value, as appears from various references, will not be questioned. It would naturally follow, under these conditions, that the Jewish converts at Jerusalem, in the absence of any divine instructions to the contrary, would organize themselves into what may be termed a Christian synagogue (James 2:2) with its presbytery or central group of elders, to whom, in conjunction with the apostles, the care of the organization should be entrusted.<sup>17</sup>

### The Church and Synagogue Contrasted

According to Luke 7:3 the leaders of the synagogue were designated as elders, but it can be shown that their responsibilities differed greatly from those of NT church elders. Before considering the contrasting roles of synagogue elders and church elders, the various officers of the synagogue need to be discussed.

The highest officer in the synagogue was the ἀρχισυνάγωγος / 'ruler of the synagogue'. His responsibilities as president were to conduct the worship services and delegate various responsibilities (such as who would read the Scripture and who would pray). He also was responsible for the construction and maintenance of the building (many sources show he financed the erection and upkeep!). For all of his responsibilities, he was highly esteemed.<sup>18</sup> It is uncertain whether or not there was only one president. Most of the evidence suggests

<sup>16</sup>Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 192.

<sup>17</sup>Edward D. Morris, *Ecclesiology: A Treatise on the Church and the Kingdom of God on Earth* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1885) 139-40.

<sup>18</sup>W. Schrage, "Ἀρχισυνάγωγος," *TDNT* 7 (1971) 845.

there was only one for each synagogue. But Acts 13:15 speaks of their plurality (ἀρχισυνάγωγοι) in one synagogue (13:14).

Lenski calls these ἀρχισυνάγωγοι "managers" and even equates them with the term "elders," but adds "one of these served as chairman or head of the others."<sup>19</sup> There is evidence from an inscription in Apamaea that a synagogue had three ἀρχισυνάγωγοι.<sup>20</sup> Mark 5:22 is also a passage which some think indicates a plurality of synagogue rulers. However, the plural in Mark 5:22 most likely is a reference to the category, not the number per synagogue.<sup>21</sup> Schrage believes the plurality of ἀρχισυνάγωγοι has a "paucity of sources" (even in the NT only Acts 13:15 and Mark 5:22 use the plural ἀρχισυνάγωγοι; the other seven references are singular). He concludes that "each synagogue had only one ἀρχισυνάγωγος."<sup>22</sup> But even if there were rare instances of a plurality of ἀρχισυνάγωγοι, there is no necessary carry-over of a ἀρχισυνάγωγος (or an ἀρχιεκκλησία / 'ruler of the church!') to the NT church.

The synagogue president had a paid assistant (the ἀρχισυνάγωγος was not paid) known as the *hazzan* or "attendant" (ὕπηρετης, Luke 4:20). He was responsible for the furniture and gave special attention to the scrolls. He announced the start and end of the Sabbath day by blowing a trumpet. He, in some cases, was even the schoolmaster for the young in the synagogue school. He carried out the sentence of punishment passed by the elders.<sup>23</sup> History has shown many futile attempts to correlate the attendant with a NT church official. Some connect the Hebrew word *רֵאֵה* / 'to see' with *hazzan* and equate him with the office of the church bishop (ἐπίσκοπος / 'overseer').<sup>24</sup> However, there is no functional correspondence between the ὕπηρετης and the ἐπίσκοπος. The two terms are almost opposites!

In the seventeenth century, the synagogue *hazzan* was equated with the deacon of the church.<sup>25</sup> However, the biblical and extra-biblical sources show that the *hazzan* (ὕπηρετης) is never called a διάκονος.<sup>26</sup> Furthermore, the NT never connects the title of ὕπηρετης with the church office of deacon (as it connects ἐπίσκοπος with πρεσβύτερος). Finally, because the *hazzan* cared for the synagogue, he has been best compared with the modern church custodian.<sup>27</sup>

<sup>19</sup>Richard C. H. Lenski, *The Interpretation of the Acts of the Apostles* (Minneapolis: Augsburg, 1934) 513.

<sup>20</sup>I. Sonne, "Synagogue," *IDB* (1962) 4. 489.

<sup>21</sup>Schrage, "Ἀρχισυνάγωγος," 7. 844.

<sup>22</sup>*Ibid.*, 7. 846-47.

<sup>23</sup>Cohen, "Sanhedrin," 2. 1642.

<sup>24</sup>Sonne, "Synagogue," 4. 489.

<sup>25</sup>*Ibid.*

<sup>26</sup>H. Beyer, "Διάκονος," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 91.

<sup>27</sup>Sonne, "Synagogue," 4. 489.

Three other synagogue officers not mentioned in the NT are (1) the collectors of alms (גבאי-צדקה); (2) the messenger; and (3) the herald of Shema. The collectors of alms did as the title suggests and had no connection with the conducting of synagogue worship like the ἀρχισυνάγωγος and his assistant.<sup>28</sup> The messenger recited prayers aloud and the congregation followed his lead. It seems that eventually the *hazzan* took over the messenger's role.<sup>29</sup> Preceding the prayers of the messenger, the herald of Shema led the congregation in responsive Scripture reading or antiphonal reading.<sup>30</sup>

The elders of the synagogue were left with administrative and disciplinary functions. It may be questionable even to call the elders of the Jewish community synagogue officers.<sup>31</sup> The elders had special seats of honor in the synagogue but were not responsible for the worship.<sup>32</sup> Edwin Hatch states:

With worship and with teaching the elders appear to have no direct concern. For those purposes, so far as they required officers, another set of officers existed. In other words the same community met, probably in the same place in two capacities and with double organization. On the Sabbath there was an assembly presided over by the ἀρχισυνάγωγος or ἀρχισυνάγωγοι for the purpose of prayer and reading of the Scriptures and exhortation; on two days of the week there was an assembly presided over by the γερούσιάρχης or ἀρχόντες or πρεσβύτεροι for the ordinary purposes of a local court.<sup>33</sup>

A careful study of the organization of the synagogue reveals a structure different from that of the NT church. The NT church presents no clear counterpart to the synagogue office of president, his paid assistant, alms collectors (which may relate to ushers of today, but not to any such NT position), the messenger, or the herald of Shema. Furthermore, the NT church elders differ greatly from the synagogue elders. The NT church elders are encouraged to rule and to teach (1 Tim 5:17) and must be able to teach to qualify for the position (1 Tim 3:2). If the synagogue set the pattern for the NT church organization, then one cannot explain the origin of deacons (plural) in the church. This office is totally foreign to the synagogue. Even Lightfoot admits the diaconate was an "entirely new creation."<sup>34</sup>

<sup>28</sup>Beyer, "Διάκονος," 2. 91.

<sup>29</sup>Sonne, "Synagogue," 4. 490.

<sup>30</sup>Ibid.

<sup>31</sup>Ibid. Sonne does not even mention elders in his discussion of the officers of the synagogue.

<sup>32</sup>Shepherd, "Elders," 2. 73.

<sup>33</sup>Edwin Hatch, *The Organization of the Early Christian Churches* (Oxford: Rivingtons, 1881) 59.

<sup>34</sup>Lightfoot, *Philippians*, 191.

The NT local church has a simple two-level organizational structure of a plurality of elders and a plurality of deacons (Phil 1:1). The synagogue has the monarchical president who is responsible for worship. This is an "eldership" that is not responsible for anything other than judicial matters of the Jewish community. The great organizational differences between the synagogue and the NT church (shown in chart 1) invalidate the claim that the former gave birth to the latter.

Beyer rightly deduces:

Familiar forms of synagogue and Pharisaic order were no doubt before the eyes of the first Christians. But their community, based on the great commission to preach the Gospel and to live according to it in the most inward of all societies, was something new and distinctive, so that for the fulfillment of its mission new offices had to be created, or to develop out of the matter itself.<sup>35</sup>

#### The Elders of Acts 11:30

According to Donald L. Norbie, the eldership is bluntly mentioned without any explanation in Acts 11:30 because its origin is due to the synagogue counterpart. On the other hand, the institution of the diaconate is given a lengthy explanation (Acts 6:1-7) because the synagogue had no such office.<sup>36</sup>

On the surface this sounds like a convincing argument for close ties between NT church eldership and the synagogue. But there are problems with this theory. First, the passage in Acts 6 does not specifically mention an office of deacon, but rather a ministry of serving tables (*διακονεῖν τραπέζαις*). Andre Lemaire claims the seven in Acts 6 have "nothing to do with the deacons."<sup>37</sup>

Beyer explains:

Appeal is frequently made to Acts 6 in explanation of the rise of the diaconate, though the term *διάκονος* is not actually used. On this view, the deacons undertake practical service as distinct from the ministry of the Word. It is to be noted, however, that the Seven are set alongside the Twelve as representatives of the Hellenists, and that they take their place with the evangelists and apostles in disputing, preaching and baptizing. This fact shows that the origin of the diaconate is not to be found in Acts 6.<sup>38</sup>

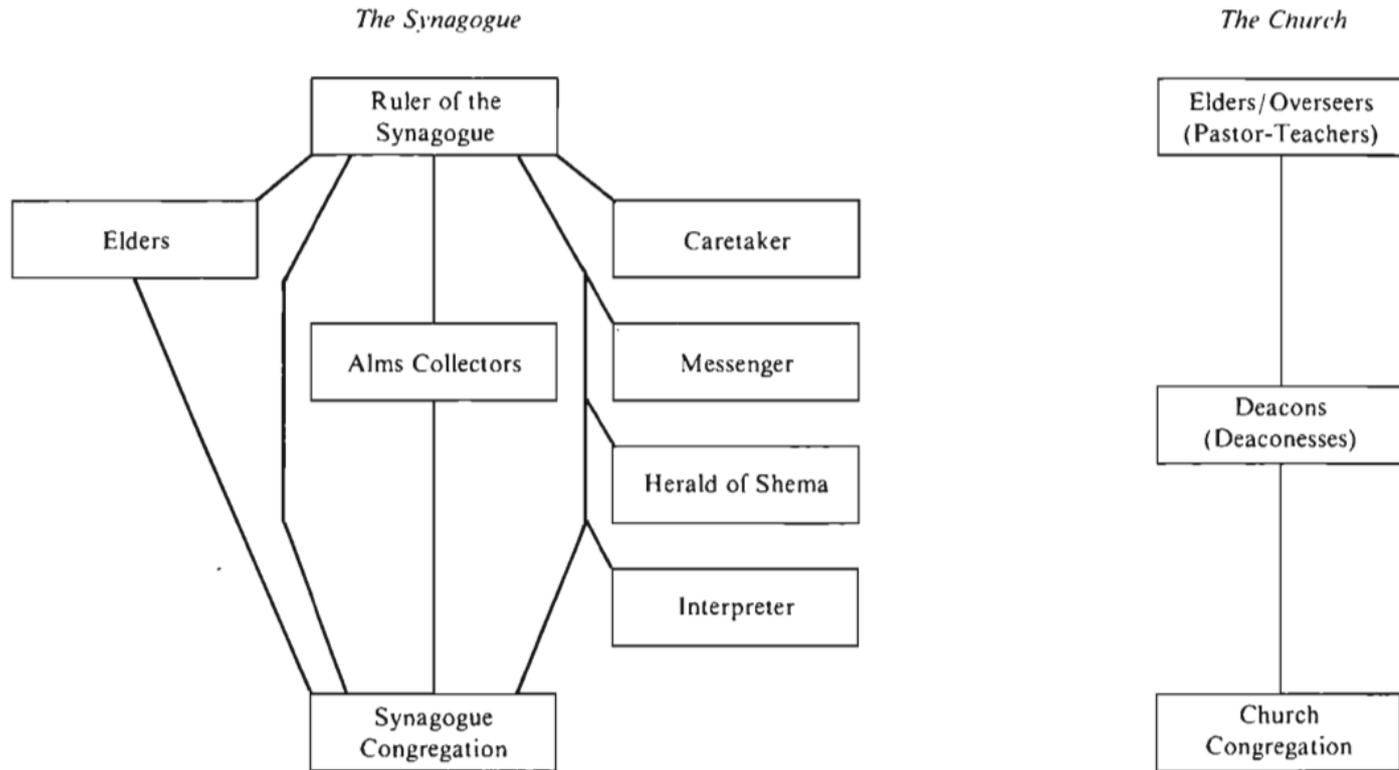
<sup>35</sup>H. Beyer, "Ἐπισκέπτομαι," *TDNT* 2 (1964) 619.

<sup>36</sup>Donald L. Norbie, *New Testament Church Organization* (Chicago: Christian Libraries, 1955) 36-37.

<sup>37</sup>Andre Lemaire, "From Services to Ministries: 'Diakonoi' in the First Two Centuries," *Office and Ministry in the Church* (ed. Bas Van Iersel and Roland Murphy; New York: Herder, 1972) 36.

<sup>38</sup>Beyer, "Ἄδιάκονος," 2. 90.

Chart 1: Organization of the Synagogue and the Developed New Testament Church



It is interesting that several lexicographers agree with Beyer by not placing either διακονία or διακονέω of Acts 6 under the special category of the office of deacon, but rather in the general categories of service, ministry or care.<sup>39</sup> Similarly, H. M. Gwatkin writes:

The traditional view, that the choice of the Seven in Acts 6 is the formal institution of a permanent order of deacons, does not seem unassailable. The opinion of Irenaeus, Cyprian, and later writers is not decisive on a question of this kind; and the vague word διακονία (used too in the context of the apostles themselves) is more than balanced by the avoidance of the word *deacon* in Acts.<sup>40</sup>

One wonders how Geoffrey S. R. Cox could say Luke gives the diaconate "prominence,"<sup>41</sup> when Luke never even uses the technical term διάκονος.

There are also several good reasons for equating the seven of Acts with some of the elders of Acts 11:30. Two of the seven, Stephen and Philip, have ministries that relate better to those of an elder than to those of a deacon. Gwatkin gives the following evidence to connect the seven in Acts 6 with the elders of Acts 11:30.

[Since] the seven seem to rank next in the Church to the apostles, we may be tempted to see in them (if they are a permanent office at all) the elders whom we find at Jerusalem in precisely this position from 44 onward.<sup>42</sup>

However, it may be a problem to view the πρεσβύτεροι of Acts 11:30 as a specific church office. Peter used the term πρεσβύτεροι in his Pentecostal sermon as a reference simply to older men (Acts 2:17). It makes some sense to believe that the apostles would give the responsibility of the relief fund to trusted older men of Judea in Acts 11:30.

An interesting line of reasoning is presented by Andre Lemaire:

<sup>39</sup>BAGD, 184; LSJ, 398; Joseph Henry Thayer, *A Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1972) 137-38; G. Abbott-Smith, *A Manual Greek Lexicon of the New Testament* (Edinburgh: Clark, 1977) 107-8. Abbott-Smith combines the office and work of διάκονος in the definition of διακονία into one category, making it impossible to determine any distinction. But under διακονέω Acts 6:2 is given the general definition and only 1 Tim 3:10 and 13 are defined specifically under the category "to serve as deacon."

<sup>40</sup>H. M. Gwatkin, "Church Government in the Apostolic Age," *Hastings Dictionary of the Bible* (New York: Scribners, 1905) I, 440. See also the discussion in Gordon D. Fee and Douglas S. Stuart, *How to Read the Bible for All its Worth* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1982) 93-94.

<sup>41</sup>Geoffrey S. R. Cox, "The Emerging Organization of the Church in the New Testament, and the Limitations Imposed Thereon," *EvQ* 38 (1966) 33.

<sup>42</sup>Gwatkin, "Church Government," I, 440.

The institution of the presbyters is not reported by the author of Acts; it is taken for granted—any Palestinian Jewish community was organized on the “presbyteral” model and had a college of elders at its head. . . . It is likely that presbyters were appointed on this model in the new Jewish Christian communities in the diaspora and that it was Jewish Christian apostles . . . who “appointed elders in every church” in Cilicia and Southern Asia Minor (Acts 14:23).<sup>43</sup>

Lemaire’s thesis is founded upon the inadequate notion that the synagogue and the church had a similar organizational structure, especially with regard to the eldership. It has been shown that the differences between the church and synagogue organization exceed any similarities.

Thomas M. Lindsay correctly explained the functional differences between the Jewish elders and church elders of Jerusalem when he wrote:

When we find “elders” in charge of the community in Jerusalem, ready to receive the contributions for the relief of those who were suffering from the famine which overtook them in the reign of Claudius, it is impossible to doubt that the name came from their Jewish surroundings. At the same time it must always be remembered that Christian “elders” had functions *entirely different* from the Jewish, that the vitality of the infant Christian Communities made them work out for themselves that organization which they found to be most suitable, and that in this case *nothing but the name was borrowed* [italics added].<sup>44</sup>

To be sure, Acts 11:30 is a difficult passage from which to prove anything concerning the NT church eldership. Employing such a problem passage as evidence for the theory of the synagogue/church eldership correspondence is highly questionable. Furthermore, since no reappointment of synagogue elders as church elders is ever stated in the NT, such a theory is seriously lacking in credibility. And since no mention of the synagogue eldership as the form or pattern of the church elders is ever clearly established in the NT, it would be best not to force any connection between the two.

### Church Worship in the Synagogue

One of the reasons why most believe that the synagogue was the pattern of NT church government is the fact that the early church

<sup>43</sup>Lemaire, “Service to Ministries,” 41–42.

<sup>44</sup>Thomas M. Lindsay, *The Church and the Ministry in the Early Centuries* (reprint; Minneapolis: James Family, 1977) 153.

worshipped in the synagogues. Paul testified before Agrippa that he punished the Christians (before his conversion) in "every synagogue" (Acts 26:10-11). James refers to the synagogue as the place of Christian worship (Jas 2:1).

However, the synagogue was not the only place of Christian assembly in NT times. It is clear that believers gathered in the Temple at Jerusalem for worship (Acts 2:46; 3:1). Admittedly, the use of the Temple as a place of Christian worship was short-lived. Yet it was used, and could have influenced church organization since the church was entirely Jewish at first. Yet there is no correspondence between the Temple officers and NT church officers.

The early Christians also met in homes for worship (Acts 2:46; 11:12; Rom 16:5; 1 Cor 16:19; Col 4:15). But one could not say the organization of the home determined the organizational structure of the church.

The book of Acts shows that homes (Acts 5:42; 16:32; 18:7-8), synagogues (Acts 9:20; 13:5; 17:1; 19:8), and the Temple (5:20; 5:42) were all centers of evangelistic preaching where unbelievers could hear the gospel. The organizational structures of such places where unbelievers gathered do not have any necessary link with the structure of the local NT church.

### The Twenty-Four Elders in Revelation

Geoffrey S. R. Cox believes that the twenty-four elders in Revelation give weight to the theory of the carry-over of the synagogue elder to the church elder. He states:

If our other suggestion is also true, that Christians continued to worship in synagogues, whether with others, or in their own specifically Christian ones, then it would be natural to take over the system which had already served them well. A further support for this is found in the usage in Revelation where we read of the *twenty-four* elders, who can fairly be said to symbolize the worshippers of both Old and New Covenants, and thus to emphasize yet again Christianity as the true continuation and completion of Judaism.<sup>45</sup>

In response to Cox's position, one must first consider the highly debated issue of the identity of the twenty-four elders. The traditional identification held by most scholars is that the elders are angelic representatives. Morris and Phillips are two examples of more recent adherents.<sup>46</sup> Others have identified the twenty-four elders as representing Israel. Still others agree with Cox's position that the elders

<sup>45</sup>Cox, "Emerging Organization," 33.

<sup>46</sup>Leon Morris, *The Revelation of St. John*, (TNTC; Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969) 88; John Phillips, *Exploring Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1974) 103.

represent both OT and NT saints. Strauss quotes H. A. Ironside's dogmatic stance in support of this view.<sup>47</sup> Finally, the view which seems most acceptable to this writer is that the elders are representatives of the church. This position is supported by such commentators as C. C. Ryrie, J. B. Smith, J. A. Seiss, H. A. Hoyt, and J. F. Walvoord.<sup>48</sup> Obviously, to use such a highly contested group as the twenty-four elders to support the theory of the direct link of the synagogue elders to the church is to build upon a most tenuous foundation.

#### CONCLUSION

The uniqueness of the organization of the NT church eldership against its Hellenistic or Jewish cultural setting is consistent with the uniqueness of the church as the body of Christ. This body is a mystery (Eph 3:4-6; 5:32)—a secret of God revealed in the NT. It is fitting that its organizational structure is distinct from any other previous organization. The qualifications and functions of the NT church elders have no clear forerunners.

After all the evidence is analyzed, Beyer's conclusion is worthy of acceptance:

Thus we have in the Jewish community many points of initiation for the Christian offices of bishop and deacon, but neither here nor in paganism are there any exact models which are simply copied. The creative power of the early church was strong enough to fashion its own offices for conduct of congregational life and divine worship.<sup>49</sup>

Of course, the early church's "creative power" was due to its possession of the Holy Spirit, sent by the risen and ascended Christ.

The church today should consider the uniqueness of the NT eldership as motivation to study NT church polity. Our Lord's church should be organized the way he has designed it in his word.

<sup>47</sup>Lehman Strauss, *The Book of Revelation* (Neptune, NJ: Loizeaux, 1964) 132.

<sup>48</sup>C. C. Ryrie, *Revelation* (Chicago: Moody, 1968) 36; J. B. Smith, *A Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Scottsdale, PA: Herald, 1961) 104-7; J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse* (reprint; Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1973) 103-5; Herman A. Hoyt, *Studies in Revelation* (Winona Lake, IN: BMH, 1966) 43; and John F. Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago: Moody, 1966) 107.

<sup>49</sup>Beyer, "Διάκονος," 2. 91.