The Last Eldership

How a congregation loses its shepherds, and why it rarely notices until they are gone

Phil Pennington, with research assistance · November 2026 · Bible Research project

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Every congregation that has lost its eldership can name the day it happened. The elders resigned together, or the last of them died, or a vote was taken and the men who should have stood did not. What almost no congregation can name is the day the eldership actually ended, because that day came years earlier and nothing visible changed. The men still met. The budget still passed. The announcements were still made. But the thing Paul described to the Ephesian elders, men appointed by the Holy Spirit to guard a flock against wolves "from among your own group" (Acts 20:28–30), had already stopped existing. What remained was its outline.

This article is about the sequence of causes that produces a last eldership, in a congregation, in a movement, and once in the whole church. The sequence is old. It is visible in the second century and in the nineteenth, and it is running now in congregations that would be astonished to be told so. It has one root and five stages, and the root is a question.

The question

The question is where the authority to teach comes from. There are two answers. Either it is *conferred*, delivered by appointment against stated qualifications and handed down as a deposit to be guarded (1 Tim 6:20; 2 Tim 2:2), or it is *generated*, produced by gifting, sincerity, results, the will of the people, or the direction history seems to be moving. Paul answered the question in the very passage that regulates the assembly: "If anyone considers himself a prophet or spiritual person, he should acknowledge that what I write to you is the Lord's command" (1 Cor 14:37). He did not deny the Corinthians their gifts. He denied that gifts adjudicate order.

Everything that follows is what happens when a congregation gives the second answer without knowing it has. No eldership was ever dissolved by a vote to adopt generated authority. It is adopted the way a house settles, one small accommodation at a time, each reasonable, none announced.

Stage one: the elders stop teaching

The New Testament elder is first of all a teacher. He must be "able to teach" (1 Tim 3:2), able to "refute those who contradict" (Titus 1:9), and the elders who "work hard in speaking and teaching" are worthy of double honor (1 Tim 5:17). The office exists to guard a deposit, and one guards a deposit by knowing it well enough to recognize a counterfeit.

The first accommodation is the quiet transfer of teaching to the hired man. It happens for good reasons. He is trained, he has the time, he is good at it. The elders keep oversight of buildings, budgets, and personnel, and they come to think of this as their work. Within a decade the congregation has a preacher and a board, and it calls the board an eldership. Nothing in the bylaws has changed.

The effect is not felt until the congregation is confronted by a teaching it has never had to answer. Then the men who were appointed to refute discover they cannot, because refuting requires knowing, and knowing was outsourced long ago. A board can approve or disapprove what the staff proposes. It cannot guard, because guarding is a teaching function and the board does not teach. Whatever the elders personally believe, the office has already become what a progressive polity would make of it: a body that ratifies.

Stage two: the vacuum fills

An eldership that no longer governs by teaching leaves a space, and the space is always filled. In the Restoration Movement's history it has been filled by one of three things, and the second century knew all three.

The first is a dominant man. The apostle John met him at the end of the first century: Diotrephes, who "loves to be first," who refused the apostle's own emissaries and expelled those who received them (3 John 9–10). The movement met him as the located preacher who controlled the pulpit and therefore the congregation, and it fought a hundred-year war over him under the name of the pastor system. The war was never settled because both sides were half right: a congregation without a trained teacher declines, and a congregation whose teacher answers to no one has a pope. The New Testament's answer, elders who are themselves the teachers and an evangelist who works under them, was the one answer neither side adopted.

The second is an outside authority. When Corinth deposed its presbyters out of envy, the church at Rome wrote to restore them. When Rome's own elections were disputed, synods adjudicated. When Antioch's synod deposed Paul of Samosata without the congregation's consent and he refused to leave, the church asked the emperor. Each intervention solved the immediate dispute. Each took from the congregation a piece of what Acts 14:23 had placed there, and none was ever returned. The movement met this as the editor-bishops of the twentieth century, men who could disfellowship a congregation through the papers, and as the denomination the Disciples of Christ voted themselves into in 1968.

The third is the congregation itself, deciding by majority. This one looks most like freedom and is the purest form of generated authority there is, because a vote is the institutional expression of the belief that the congregation decides what it will believe, and decides again when the majority changes. Lipscomb, in 1877, said that men claiming official authority over a congregation without its consent were "essentially a pope" and should be "resisted even to the disruption of the body." A century later Bragwell named the resulting "democratic thinking" as the chief reason congregations have no elders at all. Both were describing the same drift from different ends.

Stage three: the deposit becomes a process

Once the eldership is a board and the authority has moved to a man, a body, or a vote, the deposit itself begins to change character, because there is no longer anyone whose office it is to keep it fixed. The change is rarely announced as a change in the status of Scripture. In the Churches of Christ it has almost never been announced that way, because the movement's identity rests on the authority of Scripture and no congregation would knowingly surrender it.

It is announced instead as a change on a single question, justified by a single new argument: that the New Testament is moving in a direction, and that faithfulness means continuing the motion past the text. The argument has been applied to women's roles in a small number of congregations by elderships that would reject it on any other subject. But the argument is not a conclusion. It is a method, and a method does not stay on the question it was borrowed for. The congregations that used it to open the teaching office in the 1950s and 1970s used it again, nearly word for word, to redefine marriage a generation later, and discovered they had no ground left to refuse, because they had already conceded that an instruction Paul grounded in creation (1 Tim 2:13; 1 Cor 11:8–9) could be set aside by appeal to trajectory. Paul knew how to give a local, reputational reason when he had one (1 Tim 5:14). In the assembly instruction he reached past Ephesus to Genesis. An interpreter who treats that as expendable has no tool left for distinguishing anything in Scripture from its culture.

There is an irony at this stage that deserves to be stated plainly. When an eldership appoints women as elders, it uses the authority conferred on it by the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 to set aside one of those qualifications. The office is being used to amend the terms of the office. Paul told the Ephesian elders to guard against men from among their own group. He did not contemplate that the elders would be those men.

Stage four: the church becomes an agency

A deposit is guarded by shepherds. A process is advanced by an organization. Once the congregation understands its purpose as advancing something in the world rather than keeping something delivered to it, it reorganizes accordingly, with professional staff, program budgets, regional cooperation, and a governing board, and the local eldership of teaching shepherds becomes an anachronism nobody quite remembers the reason for. The Disciples of Christ did this in one vote, converting a convention of autonomous congregations into a denomination with "three manifestations," and their own historians say that mission and unity were prioritized over restoration and liberty. Over a thousand congregations declined to be listed under the new design.

The Churches of Christ have never taken that vote and are unlikely to. But a congregation does not need a denomination to become an agency. It needs only to stop asking whether its elders teach, and to start asking whether its programs are growing.

Stage five: the last eldership

The last stage is the one the congregation can date. The elders resign, or die, or are not replaced, and the congregation discovers that it does not know how to produce more. This is the stage the research on modern Churches of Christ documents most clearly. The men who are qualified decline the office because it has become a burden of criticism without a corresponding authority to shepherd; the men who seek it are often the ones who should not have it; the congregation has grown used to deciding things by majority and does not want overseers; the elders who remain cannot work with one another or with the preacher; and the congregation has shrunk and aged until it cannot field a plurality of men who meet the household qualifications. A majority of congregations in the movement now have no elders at all, and congregations that lose elders tend to stay without them. One congregation whose eldership dissolved lost a third of its attendance within the year.

None of these causes is progressive in the usual sense. That is the point. The last eldership is rarely dissolved by heresy. It is dissolved by the accumulated effects of having stopped, years earlier, being an eldership in the sense Paul meant, and the progressive method is simply the name for what fills the space when conferred authority has quietly been replaced by the generated kind. The early church's leadership failures were triggered by envy, status, and money, not by false doctrine; the doctrine came later, as a secondary charge. The pattern has not changed.

What keeps an eldership from being the last one

The sequence has a root, and the root is where it must be cut. A congregation guards the hinge, not the list: it can hold every traditional conclusion and still have adopted generated authority if it holds them because they are traditional, or because the majority prefers them, or because they work, and such a congregation will revise them when the tradition, the majority, or the results change. The guard is a settled practice of testing every teaching against Scripture and submitting to what Scripture delivers even when the elders themselves would prefer otherwise.

It has elders who teach, who know the Word well enough to refute, because an eldership that does not teach cannot guard and will not survive the first argument it has never had to answer. It refuses both the dominant man and the business meeting, because both are generated authority wearing different clothes. It holds the narrow position on 1 Timothy 2 precisely and in full, restricting the one function Paul restricts, grounding the restriction where he grounds it, and honoring every form of women's ministry the New Testament records, so that there is nothing for a trajectory argument to grip and nothing the next generation will have to abandon because it could not be defended from the text. And it keeps its building, its pulpit, and its credentials local, not as a doctrine but as the arrangement that has proven, from Sand Creek to the present, hardest to revise from outside.

Paul's charge to the elders at Ephesus ends with a sentence that is easy to read past: "the Holy Spirit has made you overseers." The authority was conferred. It was not generated by the men who held it, and it cannot be amended by them. An eldership that remembers this will not be the last one.

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*Fuller treatment: "Progressive Christianity and Its Outcomes," "Progressive Christianity and the Churches of Christ," and the research abstract, all in the Bible Research project; exegetical foundation in "Yet Another Analysis of 1 Timothy 2:9–15" and Weeks 10–11 of "The Obedience of Faith." Each article available at https://TeachTheWord.Church *