

**Appointing Elders in New Churches: How Quickly and How Qualified?**  
**EMS: Ecclesiology & Mission**  
**L. Emery Burton**

**Introduction and Thesis**

- General agreement on the necessity of elders in the church planting process
  - Debate on the timing of appointment and the application of biblical qualifications
- The study was born out of questions from my time on the field and personal study. How quickly can/should local elders be raised up in pioneer church planting contexts?
- **Thesis: Elders should be appointed as soon as possible, ideally within five years of the church's founding, after candidates meet the intent of the biblical qualifications**

**Biblical Examination of Elders**

- I will use the three titles of Elder (*presbuteros*), Overseer (*episkopos*), and Pastor (*poimen*) interchangeably as the same office
- Though there may be differing views of elders for this section, the focus should stay on the question “How Quickly and How Qualified?”

**Timing of Appointment**

- Ideal Timing
  - Timeline of each church from the NT (see timeline with Jesus' death in AD 30)

**Focus Churches**

Paul sought to appoint elders as soon as possible and considered his church planting work unfinished until the task of appointing elders was completed. This is most obvious in Paul's first journey through Galatia

- **Timeline of Elders in Galatia (Acts 14:23)**
  - Luke records Paul and Barnabus' ministry through Cyprus and Galatia in Acts 13-14, culminating in their return to each city to appoint elders. Luke writes, “When they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed (Acts 14:23).”
  - If Paul's first journey was from AD 45-47, then Paul and Barnabus appointed elders in Galatian churches that were less than two years old
- **Timeline of Elders in Ephesus (Acts 20:17-21:1)**
  - Much of the biblical writing concerning elders is in regard to the church at Ephesus
  - We first see Paul in Ephesus in Acts 18:19-21, where he briefly reasoned with the Jews in the synagogue before leaving. Priscilla and Aquila, along with Apollos for a time, labored in the city of Ephesus until Paul returned. After this brief visit in the summer of AD 51, he returned to minister in the city for about three years, from the summers of AD 52 to AD 55. Paul's ministry in Acts 19:1-20:1 is summarized by Luke, “all the residents of Asia heard the word of the Lord, both Jews and Greeks (Acts 19:10)” and “the word of the Lord continued to increase and prevail mightily (Acts 19:20).”
  - Luke records their meeting with these elders in Acts 20:17-21:1. If this meeting took place in AD 56/57, there is evidence of elders within six years

- Some have argued that the origins of the church could not be traced to Paul's short visit, but Schnabel rejects this, showing that Luke's account favors Paul as the planter
  - Elders were appointed in Ephesus by AD 57, within six years of Paul's first visit, and likely even earlier
- **Timeline of Elders in Crete (Titus 1:5)**
  - There were also churches in numerous cities on Crete by the time Paul wrote to Titus in the mid-60s (Titus 1:5). Despite conjecture about Paul's time in Crete, his letter is pertinent to the appointment of elders
    - While it is possible Paul found a struggling church of Jewish pilgrims who returned to Crete after Pentecost in AD 30 (Acts 2:11), it seems more likely that Paul and his coworkers were responsible
  - Schnabel and Mounce postulate that Paul visited Crete post-Acts (& Roman imprisonment), around AD 63, after spending AD 62 in Spain
  - Mounce observes "that Paul was with him, left, and is asking Titus to finish the work and to appoint elders as was Paul's custom." Mounce explains the youth of the Cretan churches and concludes, "While there may have been Christians in Crete for some time, it seems doubtful that the church had thrived for very long."
  - If he is correct, Paul thought it vital that the young churches have elders within five years

### **Non-Explicit Churches**

These churches may have had elders, but the biblical text falls short of using one of the terms explicitly. They at least had leaders, but they are not explicitly called elders

- **Thessalonica (1 Thess. 5:12-13)**
  - Paul founded the church at Thessalonica in AD 49/50. Based on Acts 17:1-10 and Paul's letters to the Thessalonians, we can conclude that Paul stayed there for a few months, though the exact amount of time is unknown
  - While no elders are explicitly mentioned, 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 proves there were leaders in the church within a few months. Fee is shocked these leaders are not identified with a title like "elder," since nothing in the letter prepares the reader for a group of leaders to be present. Though we learn little about their position, role, or structure, these verses indicate that the early Pauline churches had local leaders within a few months. Paul anxiously wrote to the Thessalonians shortly after his visit, describing being "torn away" from them due to persecution. His letters and sending of Timothy show that he felt the Thessalonians still needed further establishing, and the appointing of elders could have been part of this
- **Hebrews (Heb. 13:7, 17, 24)**
  - Similarly, the author says, "Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account (Heb. 13:17)."
- **Corinth (1 Cor. 16:15-16)**
  - Paul urges the Corinthians to "be subject" to people like the household of Stephanas "and to every fellow worker and laborer."

### **Other Churches**

- **Elders in the Church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15; 21:18)**
  - Elders were appointed by AD 44, within fifteen years of Jesus' ascension
- **Timeline of Elders in James' Letter (Jas. 5:14)**
  - Other than the elders at Jerusalem, it is possible that these are the earliest examples of elders in the New Testament
  - Though exact dates for the appointment of elders in these churches are inconclusive, they reveal their existence within fifteen years of Pentecost
- **Timeline of Elders in 1 Peter (1 Pet. 1:1; 5:1-3)**
  - Little definite information can be gathered from 1 Peter, except that the churches of Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia had elders
- **Timeline of Elders in Asia/Outside Ephesus (1 Cor. 16:19; Col. 1:3-8, 4:12-13; Rev. 1:4)**
  - It seems that several churches were planted in the province of Asia in Paul's three years at Ephesus (in AD 54 he writes 1 Cor. 16:19). Epaphras likely established the churches in Colossae, Laodicea, and Hierapolis (Col. 1:3-8; 4:12-13), and others potentially established Miletus and the seven churches of Asia (Rev. 1:4) during this period
  - There is little information to gain about the specific elders of these churches, but it is worth noting that none of them are mentioned to have elders, including Miletus, where Paul met the Ephesian elders
  - However, the Bible's silence on eldership in these churches, while interesting, should not bear too much weight on the discussion (Mounce)
- **Timeline of Elders in Philippi (Phil. 1:1)**
  - Surprisingly, the first mention of overseers in Paul's letters is to the church at Philippi (Phil. 1:1), yet they are not addressed further in the letter
    - Paul's work probably took place from August to October of AD 49. Though it is debated during which imprisonment Paul wrote to the Philippians, it was most likely during his two years in Rome around AD 61/62
  - In this traditional view, we can conclude that the church at Philippi had elders by AD 62, within thirteen years of the church's founding
  - Gordon Fee summarizes some of these other churches: "Though these titles occur only here and in the Pastoral Epistles in the Pauline corpus, one should not construe this to suggest either that the other Pauline churches did not have such leaders or that this is a later development in his churches."

### **Summary of Timing of Appointment**

- |  |   |
|--|---|
| ● Galatia (first journey)- less than 2 years                               | ● Jerusalem- 12 years or less   |
| ● Ephesus- 6 years or less   | ● Palestine? (James)- 15 years or less from Pentecost                       |
| ● Crete- needed elders within 5 years                                      | ● Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia, and Bithynia (1 Peter)- had elders     |
| ● Thessalonica- leaders within a few months, no explicit mention of elders | ● Asia/Outside Ephesus- leaders in 6-8 years, no explicit mention of elders |
| ● Hebrews- leaders, no explicit mention of elders                          | ● Philippi- 13 years or less  |
| ● Corinth- leaders, no explicit mention of elders                          |   |

- **After studying Paul's church planting work, especially in Ephesus, Galatia, and Crete, we see that churches had elders in around five years or less. Therefore, we can conclude that this is an ideal time to appoint elders in a pioneer church planting context**

### **Ministry Context and Biblical Qualifications**

If Paul sought to appoint elders in pioneer contexts as soon as possible, and raised men up within five years, how soon were men qualified and were the qualifications negotiable? Very similar qualification lists are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-9, but there are a few differences

- Application of Biblical Qualifications
  - While these qualifications have been rightly used as a guide for church leadership, they should be interpreted in light of their historical situation
    - Many of them contrast with the apparent false teachers. The situation shows Paul is not giving a checklist, but is concerned that the right type of person be appointed to leadership
    - Texts aimed at a specific situation in the past can still apply today, though this is not automatically the case
    - Moo states there must be “very good evidence” to limit the application of a text. These qualifications are generally viewed as being universally applicable because our circumstances are viewed as being the same (i.e., with respect to the need for godly leaders)
  - These commands should be universally applied today, though not every one should be seen as normative

### **Dr. Benjamin Merkle's Situational Qualifications**

- Such as being the husband of one wife or having submissive children
- Not a recent convert
  - Paul writes, “He must not be a recent convert...” in 1 Timothy 3:6, but not in Titus 1
  - Many scholars assume this qualification was omitted to Titus because the Cretan church was much younger than that of Ephesus. In the case of Crete, then, all elder candidates were likely recent converts. Philip Towner summarizes, “The omission of an age/maturity requirement in the Cretan instructions (cf. 1 Tim 3:6)... reflect[s] the church at the missionary stage where ‘mature’ believers were nonexistent.”
  - Merkle continues, “Another difficulty is that Paul does not specify what constitutes a ‘recent convert’ . . . In some churches, it might be unwise to let a person become an elder who has only been a Christian for five years. In other churches, however, it may be unwise to wait that long. So even if this requirement is universal, its application may depend upon the local context.”
  - This does not mean, however, that one's context allows one to ignore other qualifications for an elder. For example, most of the qualifications are issues demonstrating godliness and must not be compromised
  - From our study of the qualifications of elders, we can conclude: (1) The lists are general in that they primarily reflect one's behavior and not one's tasks, (2) They are specific in that Paul is seeking to counter the lifestyle and behavior of the false teachers, and that they were written for needed leader positions in the church, (3) They are not

comprehensive or a fixed set, and (4) They are non-negotiable in that the intent of the qualifications must be upheld today

- If there are already established leaders (as there were in Ephesus), a candidate must not be a new convert in order to protect him from pride and falling
- The intent of “not a recent convert” is non-negotiable; that is, if possible, a recent convert should not be appointed. Yet, if in the context there are only recent converts, an elder may be appointed if they are the right type of person and can teach, therefore meeting the qualifications for an elder

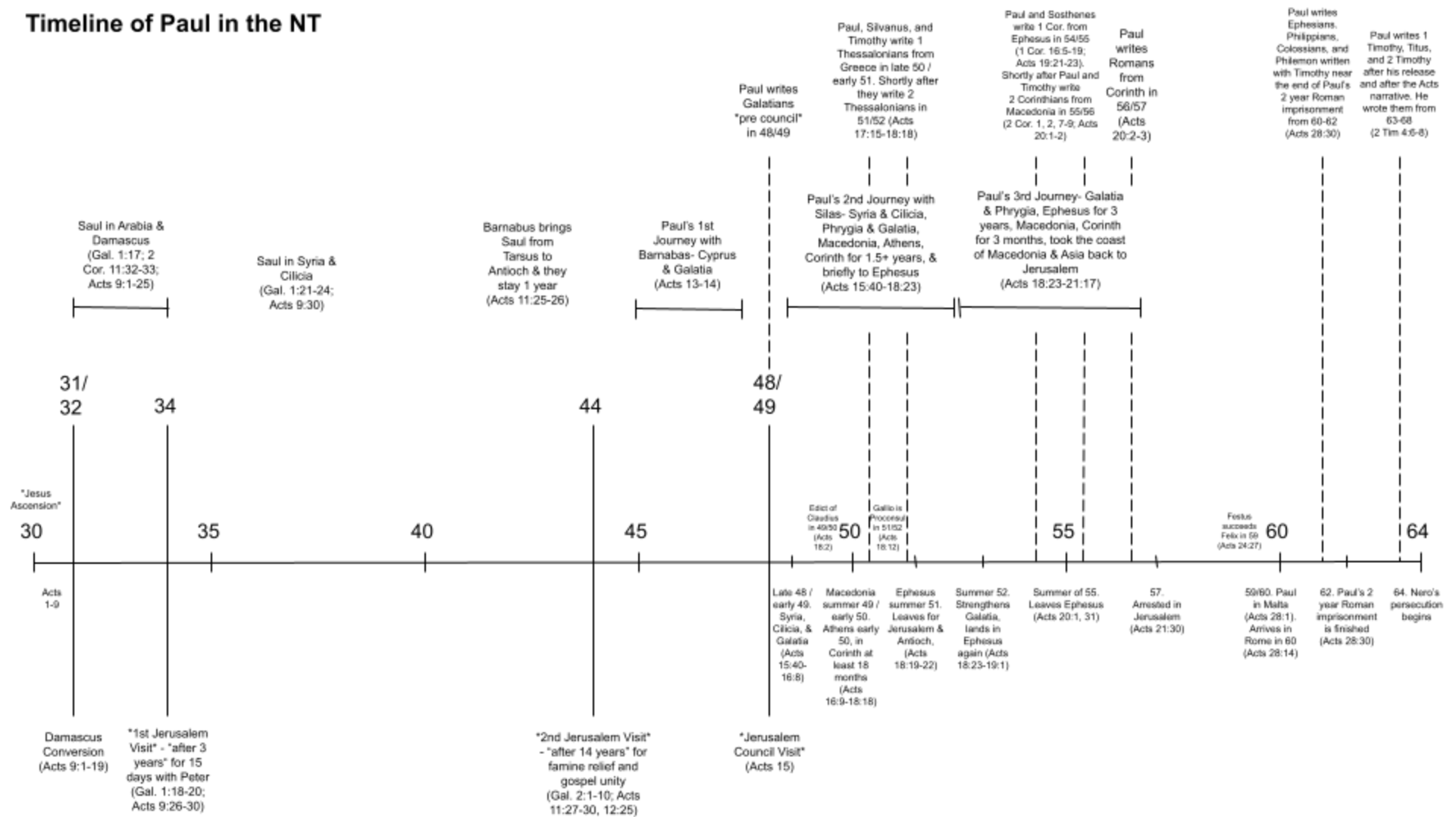
### **Summary of Findings**

- **Elders should be appointed as soon as possible, ideally within five years of the church’s founding, after candidates meet the intent of the biblical qualifications**

### **Takeaways and Implications**

- Evaluate our commitment to and methods of leadership development to ensure that new believers (by the Spirit) can be qualified and capable of fulfilling the role of elder in five years or less

# Timeline of Paul in the NT



## \*Potential Differences and Notes:

- Date of Jesus' birth and death
  1. We used a date proposed by Wade Burleson of Thursday, April 6, AD 30 for Jesus' death. He relies on the OT festivals/Jewish calendar, NT accounts, and it agrees with astronomical possibilities. This date advocates for an earlier birth range of 6-4 BC. The referenced authors and others hold this view but date Jesus' death one day later on April 7, AD 30.
  2. Another option for Jesus' death is Friday, April 3, AD 33. It relies on the NT accounts, astronomy, and early church tradition. This date advocates for a later birth range of 3 BC - AD 1. H.W. Hoehner, A. Köstenberger, and others hold this view. This would push back the dates of Acts 1-14, shortening the time for it to have taken place.
- Date of Paul's Jerusalem visits and letter to the Galatians. Here we must examine Acts 9, 11, and 15 to align its events with Paul's account in Galatians 1-2 where he says "after 3 years I went..." (1:18-20) and "after 14 years I went..." (2:1-10).
  1. No reference to a council decision, only two visits listed, the privacy of the meetings, and the timing of Peter's hypocrisy dates Galatians and the 2:1-10 visit pre-council, equating it with the Acts 11 famine relief visit. The referenced authors, F.F. Bruce, T. Schreiner, and others hold this view.
  2. Others argue the Galatians 2 visit is the Acts 15 Jerusalem Council visit due to their similarities in participants, issue, and outcome. C. Keener, J.B. Lightfoot, and others hold this view but have wide variations in their post-council dating of Galatians (50-57 AD).

## Works Referenced

- *"Paul the Missionary"* by Eckhard J. Schnabel
- *"From Pentecost to Patmos"* by Craig L. Blomberg