

Shepherding the Church of God

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As fellow members of the body of Christ each of us is responsible to love and care for God's family. This includes watching over one another, encouraging one another, and caring for our fellow brothers and sisters in Christ in a variety of ways. However, despite the care we are each to have for one other, it is also clear that each local church in NT times also had "elders" or "overseers" who were appointed (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) to look after, care for and lead God's people - as a shepherd watches over his flock (I Peter 5:1-4; Acts 20:25-28). This way of caring for God's people stands as a great example for us today and we would do well to follow the pattern of the first century believers as closely as possible in this regard.

The qualifications of an elder are listed in I Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:5-10. Their function in serving believers is to:

- A. Rule or manage (Gr. *proistemi*) - I Timothy 3:4, 5; 5:17.
- B. Teach God's Word - I Timothy 5:17.
- C. Guard the truths of Scripture from error - Titus 1:9.
- D. Oversee the church as a shepherd does his flock - Acts 20:28; Hebrews 13:17; I Peter 5:1-3.

Elders are set in the church by God (Acts 20:28), but stress is laid upon their due appointment by other leaders (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).

Leadership in the Church

From my understanding of the New Testament, here are several important observations I have made on the issue of leadership in the church:

(1). Local church leaders are identified in the Bible by two basic titles. One title is the word "bishop" (KJV, NKJV) or "overseer" (NIV) from the Greek word *episkopos*. The other title is "elder" from the Greek word *presbuteros*. These terms are used

interchangeably.¹ The word "bishop" means "an overseer; someone who watches over something in order to manage or care for it." This word was used as an official title among the Greeks. In the Athenian language it was used specifically to designate commissioners appointed by governing authorities to regulate a new colony.² The word "elder" carries with it the idea of someone who is mature and distinguished, and carries a position of rank and responsibility.³

(2). These spiritual leaders were to rule ("manage" in the NIV) and shepherd God's people. To rule, or manage, is the more technical term, whereas pastor, or shepherd is the more illustrative. The Apostle Paul first uses the word "rule" in his listing of the qualifications for leadership in I Timothy 3:4-5. There he says that one who aspires to be a bishop, or overseer, should be:

one who rules his own house well, having his children in submission with all reverence (for if a man does not know how to rule his own house, how will he take care of the church of God?) (I Tim. 3:4-5 NKJV).

We need to take note that this word "rule" is in the context of a father's role in the family setting. This is a very important point. First, it denotes a relationship between a family unit and the local church. A family unit is a church in miniature. Just as a father is to lead, and guide, and be responsible for his family, and to carry authority (Eph. 6:1), so too are the elders of the church.

Secondly, this illustration from the family gives us a functional definition to the word "rule". It is an all inclusive concept. There is nothing that is not included in the father's, or the elder's task. It involves total and complete oversight of the family, or the church. In other words, God holds the father responsible for the overall leadership in the home.

¹Compare Acts 20:17, 28; Titus 1:5, 7; I Tim. 3:1,2; I Thess. 5:17, 19.

²*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary of Old and New Testament Words*, edited by Unger and White. *A Critical Lexicon and Concordance to the English and Greek New Testament*, by E.W. Bullinger. *St. Paul; The Epistle to the Philippians*, by J.B. Lightfoot, McMatters Publishers, p. 95.

³*Vine's Complete Expository Dictionary and A Critical Lexicon and Concordance*.

In the same way he holds the elders responsible for the overall leadership of the church. Now, nowhere does this give a father, or an elder, the right to be a tyrannical dictator. It does give him the right, however, to lead, guide, manage and care for God's people. It also gives him the right to discipline when necessary and to do all of these activities with God-given authority.

Thirdly, this relationship between the family and the church shows us the importance of our not attempting to fashion a philosophy of leadership for either the home or the church outside of the principle taught in I Timothy 3:4-5.

Fourthly, this family relationship leads to a very important question as regards the church. It is clear from the Bible that God never intended the home to function with more than one primary leader - the husband and father (mother and other adults being secondary leaders). Does this imply that local churches also need one primary leader? Before I answer that question, let me set forth a few more pieces of information on church leadership from the terms "pastor" or "shepherd".

"Ruling" = "Shepherding"

The words "pastor" or "shepherd" are used more often in the Bible to describe the overall leadership responsibility of an "elder" than the word "rule." The Apostle Peter used this word more descriptively than any other New Testament writer. In I Peter he writes,

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers [Gr. episkopeo], not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you. but being examples to the flock (I Peter 5:1-3).

As with the term "rule", shepherding is an all inclusive term. A shepherd is responsible for the total welfare of his sheep, and he has authority to carry out his responsibility. In the church, Jesus Christ is the Chief Shepherd (I Peter 5:4), leaders are in essence "undershepherds." Leaders, or elders, are to guard the flock from savage wolves (i.e., false

teachers - Acts 20:17-31). Look at what Paul says to the elders of Ephesus:

Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with the blood of his own (Acts 20:28).

Elders are also to feed their "flock" by declaring to them the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27; Titus 1:9). In addition, they are to care for them and pray for them when they are ill (James 5:14).

Psalm 23 shows us the shepherd's responsibility more completely than perhaps any other section of Scripture and it gives us a good model for leadership. Look at the following illustration of this Psalm:

Psalm 23:

v. 1. "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want."

[An elder helps meet the spiritual needs of his people]

v. 2. "He makes me to lie down in green pastures."

[An elder helps to make the believer secure and at peace]

v. 3. "He leads me beside the still waters. He restores my soul; He leads me in the path of righteousness."

[An elder leads a believer to God's Word to quench spiritual thirst, and to restore and encourage the believer to walk in the will of God]

v. 4. "... though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil; For you are with me."

[An elder stays with his people to aid them in times of danger and trouble]

v. 4. " .. Your rod and Your staff comfort me."

[An elder lovingly disciplines believers when they go astray, and helps to protect them from their spiritual enemy]

v. 5. "You prepare a table before me ... "

[An elder provides the food of the Word of God for the believer to feast on]

v. 6 "You anoint my head with oil ..."

[An elder helps the believer to walk in all the fullness of the spirit of God within ("oil" being symbolic of the gift of the holy spirit)]

In essence then, an elder "shepherds" or "rules" the believers in his care by caring for them in the same way that God and Christ care for us. Ruling and shepherding describe synonymous functions when the leader shows Christ-likeness in behavior, preaches the Word of God, exhorts and warns God's people and prays and comforts them. All of this is done with divine authority as "undershepherds." It is God who has made them "overseers" (Acts 20:28).

Leadership in the Local Church

Now let us go back to the question of whether there should be one primary leader in the local church. What do the scriptures teach? First, the NT does speak of the "elders" (plural) of the church. The only exception is when an individual elder is mentioned (e.g. I Tim. 3:1-2).

Secondly, the term "church" as it is used to refer to local churches is a specific area, always refers to all the believers in that area, whether or not they met together regularly or not. For example, Acts 8:1 refers to "the church which was at Jerusalem." Now we know from the Book of Acts that there were thousands of believers in Jerusalem (Acts 2:41; 4:4). They certainly did not all meet all the time in the same place! We are told that they met in the temple and from house to house (Acts 2:46). I would venture to say that the most common meeting place was in the homes of believers. Would each of these "home fellowships" that made up the church at Jerusalem have an elder? Its very possible. Would they have more than one elder? That is possible too, especially if that group were rather large.

The church in Ephesus provides another example for us. In Acts 20:17 Paul "sent to Ephesus and called he elders of the church." Here again we have "elders" in conjunction with a single, local church. But again, this does not mean that all the believers met in the same place all the time. It is true that Paul taught in the School of Tyrannus for about two years (Acts 19:9-10), but they also no

doubt met in homes. Paul said that in Ephesus "he taught ... publicly and from house to house" (Acts 20:20). There is no clear biblical evidence that all the believers in any given city, met in a "mega church" set-up. The cultural realities of the time probably could not have supported such a venture. The church in any given city was more likely to be broken up into smaller units that occasionally all gathered together.

One last example is from the Book of Titus. In Titus 1:5 we read that Paul left Titus in Crete to "appoint elders in every city." Assuming that the church in any local area was made up of "house churches," we can ask some interesting questions:

A. Did every house church, or small fellowship, within the larger church at Jerusalem, or Ephesus, etc. have one elder only? If they did, this would not be in contradiction to the previous reference to the plurality of elders in Jerusalem, or Ephesus. This would simply indicate the possibility of more than one house church in each city.

B. Was there more than one elder in each house church? This is very possible, especially if the fellowship was rather large. Archeologists have discovered ancient homes that held Christian meetings. Some of these homes had extra rooms built-on that could hold up to a few hundred people.¹

From these biblical examples what can we honestly conclude? We can conclude that there were a plurality of elders in Jerusalem and Ephesus, and in the cities of Crete. The same would be true for Lystra, Iconium and Pisidium Antioch because we are told that in these cities Paul and Baranabas "appointed elders in every church" (Acts 14:23). But we cannot honestly conclude anything beyond this! There is simply no more biblical information regarding church structure to explain more fully the concept of elders and how they functioned and governed in any given city.

Is it wrong then for a local church, i.e., one that meets together in one place, to have a plurality of elders, or pastors? No. In fact, there is simply no way that one person can meet all the needs of every believer in the fellowship. Proverbs 11:14 also says, "... in the multitude of counselors there is safety." A

¹*Evangelism in the Early Church*, Michael Green, Eerdmans Publishing Co. pp. 207-223.

group of godly elders serve as a model of Christ-likeness for many different people. I do not believe, however, that a church should be led by "committee." I do think that elders in any particular church should thoroughly discuss matters and work them out. There should be a godly consensus. But sometimes a decision has to be made that is not popular, yet needs to be made. It is at this time that a trustworthy leader needs to step in. I also do not believe that the general membership of believers is to make decisions on how and where to lead the church. I do not believe this kind of thinking is biblical. It seems to me to be an over reaction to those church leaders who have become little dictators.

There is a lot of evidence, however, pointing to the fact that lines of authority need to be established for the church to function effectively. The Apostle Paul was certainly recognized as having authority over Timothy and Titus. In turn, these men were recognized as having authority in given cities to appoint elders. It is only reasonable to assume that certain elders were given authority to give direction to the church in any certain location. It is also highly possible that the NT churches were patterned somewhat after the Jewish synagogue. Though there was a counsel of elders within every synagogue, the Bible also tells us about those who were primary leaders. For example,

Then Crispus, the ruler of the synagogue, believed on the Lord with all his household (Acts 18:8).

Then all the Greeks took Sosthenes, the ruler of the synagogue (Acts 18:17).

In conclusion, there is I believe much biblical evidence giving elders (overseers, pastors, shepherds) authority in the church. It is also sound counsel for any church to have a plurality of elders. But there is also a good deal of biblical evidence that someone should be appointed as a primary leader. I believe that practical experience would argue for this as well. When a church does not have clear lines of authority, a group of elders can become insecure and lack vision. Along with this, the door is open for disunity due to power struggles. Finally, however, it is extremely important to realize that the more responsibility or authority an elder has, the more the elder is to be a servant! As Christ has said,

... whoever desires to become great among you, let him be your servant. And whoever desires to be first among you let him be your slave - Just as the Son of man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Matt. 20:26-28).

This servant leadership needs to be worked out in very practical applications as we seek to help people physically and spiritually to be their best for God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

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