

BIBLICAL LEADERSHIP AND THE NEW COVENANT PRIESTHOOD

The structure and function of the local church is a topic which most Christians give little thought to. Traditions of men are the standard on this issue rather than the final authority of Scripture. Alexander Strauch, author of *Biblical Eldership*, writes:

For many people, the issue of church government (also referred to as church polity, church structure, church organization, church order or the ministry) is as irrelevant an issue as the color of the church pews. Indeed, for many people the color of the church pews inspires greater interest! To these people, the organizational structure of the church really doesn't matter. The average church member's disinterest in how the church is governed needs to be challenged, however. Church government is an extremely practical and theologically significant issue (*Biblical Eldership*, Lewis And Roth, 1995, page 101).

The normal practice for most local assemblies today is the "one pastor" structure with the focal point of "ministry" surrounding this one man. The "pastor" is viewed as the professional ("clergy") who has some type of special "calling" of God and thereby possesses a holy and unique status as compared to the others ("laity") in the local body. As a result, the local church becomes a "spectator church". In this setting, the "laity" will only sit, listen, sing, and pray while the "pastor" or paid staff does most everything else in the local body. Not only is this unbiblical but it also denies the *every member* ministry of the New Covenant priesthood (Eph. 4:16). Of course, not every "one pastor" structure will function as indicated above. However, if one examines the New Testament data on these issues, one will find that the **Biblical** view of local church structure is ignored by many in the body of Christ today.

Although I admire the zeal, love, and commitment that many of these "pastors" display in their ministry to the body of Christ, I contend that the local church with this structure can hinder or suppress the proper functioning of the New Covenant priesthood. In the discussion that follows, I will endeavor to demonstrate that true Biblical leadership is *not* the "one pastor" system but rather consists of plural eldership. This shared leadership structure best promotes and protects the vitality of the New Covenant priesthood. First, we will examine the biblical support for plural eldership and how this leadership model functions in the local church. Next, we will look at how shared leadership (plural eldership) promotes the priesthood of all believers. However, we begin with a brief review of the New Covenant Priesthood.

The New Covenant Priesthood

Since the New Covenant has completely replaced the Old Covenant (Heb. 8:6-13), the structure and function of the local church must be derived from the New Testament. Unfortunately, the Old Covenant (Mosaic Law) priesthood structure is the pattern of local church organization used by many today in the New Covenant era. Only a few men under the Old Covenant served as intermediaries between God and man. Each person in this setting did *not* possess equal access to God. The focus of ministry was given to the priest, with others in the Old Covenant community depending on these few to approach God on their behalf (Nu. 3:5-10).

In contrast, the New Covenant is a community of all true believers and *all* are members of the holy priesthood. "But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light" (1 Pet. 2:9 NIV). Each believer is of equal value before God and has the same access to Him through union with Christ (Heb.10:19-22). Jesus is the perfect high priest who now brings every believer near to God. All believers, then, are ministers before God and offer spiritual sacrifices. God has gifted each Christian to build the body of Christ (Rom. 12:3-8) and *all* members are to function in the body (1 Cor. 12:12-27).

Therefore, no one person can be known as "the minister" in the church. The New Covenant structure of the local church does not focus on one part (the pastor) of the body but on mutual ministry from all believers. Jon Zens captures how the New Covenant priesthood is to function:

There is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament for the primacy of *one man's gifts*. There is evidence 58 times in the New Testament for the importance of *mutual care and multiple gifts*: "love one another....admonish one another... edify one another....comfort one another....forgive one another.... give to one another....pray for one another." Why are our churches marked by obvious emphasis on "the pastor," but very little - if any - concern for the cultivation of *mutual relationships*? *We have exalted that for which there is no evidence, and neglected that for which there is abundant evidence*. We are used to pawning off our responsibilities on someone else. We want the church to minister *to us*, but we think very little as to how *we* can minister to the needs of others.

(Jon Zens. "The Pastor," 1981, p. 5)

Plurality Of Leadership

According to the New Testament, local church leadership consists of elders and deacons. The role of elder and deacon are the only two local church offices indicated in the New Testament which have continuing validity. For example, the book of First Timothy was written by Paul to give instructions regarding church conduct. When Paul addresses the issue of leadership (1 Tim. 3), the two offices mentioned are elder and deacon. Elders (also called pastors or overseers) are to direct the affairs of the church and deacons are elder helpers with the basic function of serving the body of Christ. The only qualifications for elders and deacons are stated in 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1.

Some will contend that the Bible does not present a specific pattern of church government which is binding upon the local church for all times and places. However, Scripture gives us only one model for church government. This structure is plural eldership (shared leadership). There is *no* example in the New Testament of a local church ruled by one elder. Some maintain that Paul, Timothy or James were pastors, but no Scripture can be found to support this. Each local church is to function with a **plurality of elders**.

The New Testament provides clear evidence for plural leadership: Acts 14:23; Acts 20:17,28; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5 and James 5:14. You will note that it is elders (plural) and church (singular). Thus, at least two or more qualified men must be elders at each local church.

Functions Of Biblical Elders

As with any subject, the careful definition of terms is crucial. Many will state that they embrace the plurality of eldership structure, but in reality they practice the "one elder" model. The New Testament uses the words "overseer", "elder" and "pastor" in reference to the same office. These words are interchangeable. The different functions for the office of elder are described by the terms of elder, overseer, and pastor.

Acts 20:17-36 deals with Paul's farewell to the Ephesian elders and provides support for the interchangeability of terms for the role of elder. In Acts 20:17, Paul sends for the "elders" of the church. Then in verse 28, Paul refers to this same group of elders as "overseers" and "shepherds". "The term "elder" refers to maturity; "bishop" ("overseer") refers to oversight and administration, and "pastor" refers to the elements of shepherding such as feeding and guarding" (Jon Zens. "The Major Concepts of Eldership In The New Testament," *Baptist Reformation Review*, Summer 1978, p. 29).

Overall, elders are to govern or direct the affairs of the local church (1 Pet. 5:2-3). Biblical elders equip believers for the work of ministry (Eph. 4:11-12). Pastors (or elders) are to develop and prepare believers through teaching, exhorting, directing, protecting, caring and serving the body of Christ. The idea of elders doing sermon preparation and delivery as their main functions while almost ignoring the shepherding aspect is foreign to the New Testament. Elders are to love people and must be actively involved in people's lives.

As already indicated, the New Covenant priesthood is a body of believer/priests who are gifted by the Spirit to minister to one another (1 Pet. 4:10-11). Elders, then, do not take on *all* the work of ministry for themselves. Rather, biblical elders function as player-coaches to develop and direct believers into active ministry. The elders are responsible for facilitating this mutual ministry concept.

Equality And Diversity Among The Elders

All elders have equal authority and share equal responsibility for leadership in the local assembly. The only "Chief Shepherd" in the church is Jesus Christ (1 Pet. 5:4). Since all elders are pastors and all pastors are elders, the idea of an elder board with a "pastor" as the commanding officer is without New Testament warrant. The concept of elder equality does *not* indicate that all elders perform the exact same functions. All elders are equal because they occupy the same office.

The true test of plural eldership is the submission of elders to one another in the decision-making process. That is, *all elders* of a local church have the final say on matters pertaining to the faith and practice of that local assembly. Of course, the elders are all subject to the final authority of God's Word. Elders, thus, must work together as a council of equals to arrive at conclusions which each elder is supportive of. One can see why having Biblically qualified elders is of great importance.

Although elders are equal in office, they are not equal regarding gifts and spiritual influence. The eldership should promote each man's gifts and abilities in such a way that maximizes the edification of the body. Each elder is responsible to lead and care for the flock, but flexibility exists as to how each man will function in the body. Some would assert that 1 Timothy 5:17 divides elders into "ruling" and "teaching" functions. However, this text simply points out the diversity of gifts among the elders since *all* elders must rule and teach in the church (1 Tim. 3:2,5). Those elders who rule well and labor in the Word are counted worthy of "double honor". This "double honor" may include some financial provision for the elders since "the laborer is worthy of his wages" (1 Tim. 5:18). Hence, some elders may receive "double honor" from the body, but even the most gifted teacher among the elders still remains equal in authority among the eldership.

Promoting The New Covenant Priesthood

With the biblical foundation of plural elder leadership laid, we will now examine how this model of eldership promotes the proper functioning of the priesthood of believers. One major way biblical eldership encourages the true nature of the local church is through the denial of the "clergy/laity" distinction. The New Testament never indicates such a distinction. Although each local church is to be ruled by elders (Heb. 13:17), the New Testament does not specify this leadership as some separate priestly class of "ordained" leaders. Instead, the New Covenant makes *every believer* a royal priest before God (Rev. 1:6).

Biblical eldership, then, has no place for special religious titles or exalted positions. No New Testament warrant can be found for titles such as "Reverend", "Minister", "Senior Pastor", "Associate Pastor", etc. Unfortunately, this "professional" clergy system is alive and well in today's Christian culture. When will *sola scriptura* be taken seriously?

In contrast, biblical leadership (plural eldership) promotes the pattern of ministry in which each part of the body works towards building up one another in the body of Christ (Gal. 6:2; 1 Cor. 12:12-27). The elders, like all members of the body of Christ, will have diverse gifts for ministry. Therefore, the focal point of ministry is not the "pastor" but the entire body of believers. While there is a Biblical mandate for qualified leaders in the local church, the body of Christ must be viewed as a unit with "equal concern" for all parts of the body (1 Cor. 12:24-25). All believers are one in Christ Jesus (Eph. 2:13-20) and the clerical class distinction cannot exist in the New Covenant priesthood.

The model of shared leadership also helps communicate the family character of the local church. Believers are brothers and sisters in Christ which produces intimate relationships with one another. Alexander Strauch summarizes this point as follows:

The reality of this strong, familial community saturates the New Testament. The New Testament writers most commonly refer to believers as *brethren*. Peter refers to the worldwide Christian community as "the brotherhood" (1 Peter 2:17; 5:9). The terms *brethren*, *brother*, or *sister* occur approximately 250 times throughout the New Testament. These terms are particularly abundant in Paul's letters (*Biblical Eldership*, Lewis And Roth, 1995, page 110).

Plural eldership is most compatible with this family character. Elders are leaders from among the family. They are not to "lord it over" others but instead act as servant leaders working for the welfare of others in the family (1 Pet. 5:2-3). With this perspective, the Biblical eldership structure protects against self-promotion since the elders are viewed as part of the priesthood of all believers and contribute to the family of believers through leadership functions and gifts.

Finally, the shared leadership structure promotes the New Covenant priesthood through manifesting Christ as the true and only head of the church. Scripture is clear that Christ is head of the church (Col. 1:18). The "one man" pastor system may lead to an abuse of authority where the assembly becomes pastor dependent and not Christ dependent. Plural leadership can help shift the focus from the gifts and influence of the leaders to the absolute Headship of Jesus Christ. With shared leadership it is much more difficult to exalt one man's gifts since each elder has diverse gifts and varying strengths and weaknesses. Elders, then, are *part of* the New Covenant priesthood and not *the* priesthood. Christ alone is Commander in Chief.

Concluding Thoughts

If one takes the doctrine of *sola scriptura* seriously, the structure and functioning of the local church must be Biblical. Traditions of men must be put aside in favor of God's order for the local church. Not only is plural eldership Biblical but it also promotes the New Covenant priesthood. Although many godly men adhere to the "one man" pastor church structure and enjoy very fruitful ministries, pragmatism can never replace Biblical truth. Change is difficult but necessary if one is to honor his Lord.

This examination on Biblical eldership and the New Covenant priesthood is **not** intended to cause division in the body of Christ. Rather, if you hold to the "one man" pastor system you are urged to study the Scriptures on this subject and then strive to find other qualified men from your assembly which can serve with you as fellow elder/pastors. As a result, you will better serve the New Covenant priesthood where each believer is a minister before God and the Glory of Christ will be exalted through His church (Eph. 1:22-23).

Many of the ideas presented in this article did not originate with me. I owe a debt of gratitude to others who have written on this subject which have helped me better grasp the Biblical structure and function of the church. The following resources were consulted and are recommended for further study:

Searching Together, "Four Tragic Shifts In The Visible Church," Volume 21:1-4, 1993, 65pp. **

Sixteen Tests of An Authentic New Testament Church, Fellowship Bible Church, 1980, 64pp.

Bruce Stabbert, *The Team Concept: Paul's Church Leadership Patterns or Ours?*, Hegg Bros., 1982, 226pp.

Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership*, Lewis And Roth, 1995, 337pp.

Jon Zens, "Building Up The Body: One Man or One Another?," *Baptist Reformation Review*, Volume 10, Number 2, 1981, pp. 10-33. **

Jon Zens, "The Major Concepts of Eldership in the New Testament," *Baptist Reformation Review*, Volume 7, Number 2, 1978, pp. 26-33. **

Jon Zens, "The Pastor," 1981, 8pp. **

Jon Zens, "What Is A 'Minister'?", *Searching Together*, Volume 11, Number 3, 1982, pp. 8-21. **

***These resources can be obtained from:*

Searching Together
366 Bench Street PO Box 377
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