

The Question of Elders

Part 2: How many leaders does a church need? (E. Radmacher)

1. Many small businesses today are ruled and managed by a single person. What does the Bible say about the number of leaders that a church may need for its proper function? See Acts 14:23; 20:17; 21:18; Philippians 1:1; James 5:14; 1 Timothy 3:2; 5:17; Titus 1:5-7; 1 Peter 5:1).

More important than the names of church is the number of them. In recent generations, we have witnessed the appearance of a single pastor as the numerical norm for church leadership. As a result, people accept the fact that this tradition is a biblical norm. Such is not the case. To the contrary, multiple leadership was the norm in the early church.

Consider the following careful handling of the subject by Robert Saucy in THE CHURCH IN GOD'S PROGRAM: "Number of Elders. The evidence of the New Testament points to a plurality of elders in a church. Each time the term appears it is plural. Paul and Barnabas ordained 'elders in every church' (Acts 14:23, cf. Tit 1:5), and it was a group of elders that Paul called from Ephesus in order to give them his farewell (Acts 20:17). Again, in addressing the leaders of the church at Philippi, the apostle mentions the 'bishops and deacons' (Phil 1:1). If there were deacons (plural) here, there was also a plurality of elders. James also confirms this, instructing the sick to 'call for the elders of the church' (Jam 5:14; cf. Acts 21:18; I Tim 5:17; I Pet 5:1).

"The two exceptions to this plural use, upon close examination, do not refute this consistent pattern. From the singular 'bishop' in I Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:5-7 some have argued for the possibility of a single elder or for a third office of a single monarchical episcopate over the elders. The context, however, refutes this.

Titus is told to ordain 'elders in every city.... If any be blameless.... For a bishop must be blameless' (Tit 1:5-7). The singular is clearly used as a generic reference to the bishop as a type, and the same is true of I Timothy 3:1. Proof of this interpretation is seen in the fact that Timothy was ministering in Ephesus (I Tim 1:3) where, as has been noted, there was a plurality of elders (Acts 20:17). The singular use of elder in 2 John 1 and 3 John 1 may be explained by the fact that the early church took over the Jewish system of teaching or Tannaite elders whereby a famous rabbi such as Hillel was known in the absolute sense of 'the elder.' It is probable that John, author of these letters, had acquired a similar reputation in Asia and was known simply as 'the elder.' This same title of honor continued in the post-apostolic church. Thus, the reference here is not to a single elder church but, rather, a noted elder. The apostle Peter, likewise, called himself an elder, but certainly not in the sense of being the single elder in a certain church (I Pet 5:1).

"It is doubtful also that the 'angels of the seven churches' (Rev 1:20ff) are references to the pastors. One of the churches, Ephesus, is known to have had a plurality of elders (Acts 20:17). Furthermore, this would exalt the elder above the congregation in the figure of a star compared with that of a lampstand for the church (1:20, NASB). In the New Testament the elder is always a member of the community of believers. As 'angels' (angeloi) elsewhere in the Revelation always refer to real angels, and angels are also represented by stars (cf. Rev. 9:1, and probably 12:4), the angels of the churches are probably to be understood as real angels representing the churches, corresponding in some way to the angels that are related to nations (Dan 10:13, 20-21; 12:1).

The plurality of elders does not necessitate that all be considered equal (cf. I Tim 5:17). It does, however, avoid the concept of a single ruler of a congregation and distributes authority as well as responsibility among several, thus corresponding to the Jewish community from which the office of elder was adopted."

It seems quite plain that no local church in the New Testament was ruled and managed by one person. Rather, the plurality of elders appears as the norm. Thus, the "one-man" ministry is a violation of this important guideline.

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In passing, it is interesting to observe that the words “the pastor,” which we use so often, would have been strange to their ears. In fact, the definite article is never used with the term “pastor” except when referring to Jesus Christ. Truly, He is the Good Shepherd, the Great Shepherd, the Chief Shepherd. No other single human being has the same unique qualities that can merit the definite article in front of the title.

I have heard the defense made for the single pastor over the local church on the basis of the parallel between the church, the body of Christ, and the local church. It is certainly a reasonable conclusion to draw from the comparison. Furthermore, it is certainly more efficient to have rule by one rather than rule by many. It occurs to me, however, that there are at least two reasons why we have a single divine leader over the church and the churches, and yet we always need multiple human leaders.

First, Christ is sinless. He always does that which is only the will of the Father. Hence, there is no need for a further expression of the Father’s will in any issue. It will always be right. Human leaders, even Christian ones, are sinners and they only accomplish God’s will imperfectly. Multiple leaders, therefore, will serve as a “check and balance” on each other and serve as a safeguard against the very human tendency to play God over other people (cf. Mark 10:42-44).

A second factor that breaks the parallel between the divine and human leadership of the church is the matter of spiritual gifts. Surely Christ manifests all of the gifts that are given for the edification of the body of Christ, but no human leader possesses all of the gifts. One of the major teachings of I Corinthians 12 is diversity of the gifts. No one member is the sole expression of the mind of Christ, the Head of the Body. Thus, if the church is going to have the advantage of all of the gifts manifested in its leadership, then it must have multiple leadership so that the leaders’ gifts and talents complement one another and there is a mutuality of ministry.

Now, It must be admitted that such a shared ministry has some functional problems that need to be resolved, but the assets are far greater than the liabilities in current situations where it is implemented. Furthermore, in the multiple leadership of churches of the New Testament, such as Ephesus and Philippi, there were certainly no insurmountable functional problems. In fact, whatever problems they encountered, were apparently not worthy of mention. Surely men who fulfill the qualifications of an elder/bishop will be able to provide the kind of mutual leadership whereby they can equip every saint to do the work of the ministry.

One functional question that is frequently raised, however, is the question of the equality of leadership. Does each elder have equal authority? Scripture does not give specific direction at this point. It doesn’t demand equality, nor does it set it aside. Thus, this may be another of those areas where God allows a degree of diversity. I would see no problem with a kind of hierarchical organizational structure among the elders for purposes of expediting the business of the group so long as it does not in any way inhibit the full contribution of each of the elders to the decisions that need to be made and the leadership that needs to be given. It would seem that any ranking of elders, however, should grow out of demonstrated ability among the elders rather than arbitrary appointment apart from earned recognition (cf. I Tim. 5:17). Furthermore when responsibilities are delegated, there must be the delegation of commensurate authority.

Another question that arises relates to unanimity as a basis for action. Some churches require unanimous consent among the elders before action is taken on any issue. Others feel that this is unrealistic and require such unanimity only on major issues involving morals or doctrines. Certainly all would prefer unanimity and, where it is not present, great patience should be exercised to see to it that greater communication is achieved until the disagreements are resolved and consensus is achieved.

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