

# God's Plan for Oversight in the Glorious Church

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The Bible tells us plainly that the Lord will return for a “glorious church, not having spot or wrinkle or any such thing” (Ephesians 5:27). In light of this unalterable reality, how should a local assembly be structured to fulfill its God-ordained purpose? Or stated another way, what is God’s plan for oversight in His glorious church?

This article has been prepared for all who are interested in learning more about the pattern established in the Bible for local church leadership and oversight. Our hope is that those who read it will be stirred to search the Scriptures to confirm for themselves the true biblical pattern and will commit to modeling the pattern in the local assembly as the Lord Jesus supplies the means.

## I. Dominant Patterns in Use Today

When most people think of church structure, the two patterns that most frequently come to mind are: 1) hierarchical and 2) congregational. Let’s take a quick look at these two widely used patterns for structuring a local assembly.

### A. The Hierarchical Pattern

The word “hierarchy” literally means “priest rule” (*hierous*, priest, plus *arche*, rule, highest in rank). This word never appears in the Bible. The concept, however, can be found. John the apostle wrote, “I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us” (3 John 9). The actions of this man, Diotrephes, suggest that he was operating as the highest authority in a local assembly. Apparently his love for being in the limelight resulted in his being unwilling to receive even John, the beloved apostle of Jesus.

John characterized the deeds of this man as “evil” and declared that those who act in such ways have “not seen God” (3 John 11). Certainly John was there when Jesus taught His disciples that to see Him was to see God (John 14:9); therefore, he understood that to see the invisible God, a person must be able to perceive the flesh of God, the body of Christ. The fact that Diotrephes would speak maliciously against John and refuse to receive him and the other brothers is stark evidence that he did not perceive the body.

Paul warned the leaders of the church in Ephesus about men such as Diotrephes, saying, “Also from among yourselves men will rise up, speaking perverse things, to draw away

the disciples after themselves” (Acts 20:30). Christian ministers are sternly warned not to draw away disciples after themselves; their mission is to make disciples of Jesus Christ. When men with these same motives appeared in Galatia, Paul warned, “They zealously court you” because they want you to be “zealous for them,” that they may “boast in your flesh” (Galatians 4:17; 6:13). Again, we are not charged with encouraging people to be zealous for us; they are supposed to be zealous for the Lord. And we are not to be proud over the flesh—the outward appearances of believers—but rather over the cross of Jesus Christ.

The spirit of these high-minded, smooth-talking pseudo-ministers of the gospel ultimately found its expression in the hierarchical system of church structure. But can this pattern be squared with biblical principles? Jesus told his disciples, “You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. Yet it shall not be so among you” (Mark 10:42-43). The love for preeminence, which is envy and covetousness, inevitably leads to the inappropriate exercise of authority over God’s heritage. Jesus went on to say, “But whoever desires to become great among you shall be your servant” (v. 43b). In the kingdom of God, leadership is based on servanthood, not preeminence. Furthermore, when man has the preeminence in a congregation, Jesus does not. The Bible says that in “all things He may have the preeminence” (Colossians 1:18). According to the words of Jesus, the hierarchical pattern cannot be squared with the pattern He taught His disciples.

## **B. The Congregational Pattern**

Many apostolic people recognize the hierarchical church structure as being Roman Catholic, though its roots extend far deeper than the Pope and his staff of cardinals, bishops, and priests. Yet, is a congregational system any better or any more biblical? The modern concept of congregational rule originated during the early years of the Protestant Reformation. In their effort to mitigate the great damage caused by the domineering priesthood, the Reformers created an equally unbiblical structure where the congregation could domineer over the priest, or as the reformers called him, “The Pastor.” Such a structure effectively places the sheep over the shepherd, a patently unbiblical concept. The Bible says, “Recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13). It also says, “Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account” (Hebrews 13:17). These verses, and others, clearly show that God never intended the sheep to be over their shepherds.

## **C. Today’s Apostolic Churches**

Today, most apostolic churches consider themselves to be congregational in structure. The truth is, most are hierarchical. If one man has the final authority and cannot be

removed by the congregation, the church is hierarchical. On the other hand, there are some churches that do use the congregational structure. They “try out” candidates for pastor and vote in the one they like best. They likewise vote him out if they don’t like the way things are going. Neither the hierarchical or congregational form are founded on New Testament principles.

#### **D. The Source of Pastoral Burn-out**

One of the problems inherent in both of these systems is that they establish a non-biblical division between the overseers of the church (the professional clergy) and the members (the laity). This is commonly known as the “clergy–laity concept,” a system of church oversight that is not based on the pattern laid down by Jesus Christ for His Church. Under this system, the clergy handles the so-called “spiritual” and administration matters of the church while the members provide the financial support and spectate. Regardless of whether the system is hierarchical or congregational, great pressure to perform can come to bear on the man in charge, especially if he is sincerely doing his best to serve the Lord.

Many pastors today are frustrated, discouraged, or burnt out. Why is this? If the Bible tells us to “serve the Lord with gladness,” why are so many of God’s servants so unhappy and so unfulfilled? The single leader often finds himself constrained by the pressures and never-ending demands placed upon them as “The Pastor.” All administrative aspects of spiritual life in the church are his responsibility. For some, the Lord never called them to be pastors. He intended them to be evangelists, prophets, or possibly apostles. These men love the Lord and desire to serve Him according to the gifts He has given them, but the traditions of men have pressed them into the role of being “The Pastor.” The result is frustration and spiritual deterioration.

On the other hand, there are some who are truly called to function as pastors and who honestly recognize their limited ability to effectively communicate God’s purpose to the church, oversee the equipping of the saints for ministry, and provide quality care for the sheep under their charge. Often the sheer immensity of this task produces an ever-increasing demand for greater performance through preaching, teaching, ministering, counseling, and visitation. Again, the frequent result is frustration and spiritual deterioration.

Both of these situations have their origin in the traditions of men that arose centuries ago when biblical principles of shepherding were exchanged for worldly methods of human governance and control. Just because a system may appear to work in secular institutions does not necessarily make it appropriate for the Church of the living God, which is a theocracy.

Is there an alternative to these unbiblical structures?

## II. The Apostolic Pattern

What is the apostolic structure for a local assembly? If anyone knew the answer to this question, it was Paul, who called himself a “wise master builder”—literally a “skilled architect” (1 Corinthians 3:10). This man knew how to lay out the plans for a local church and he knew how to build based on those plans. Yet nowhere in the New Testament do we find the task of shepherding a local assembly assigned to one person. For example, Acts 14:23 says, “So when they had appointed elders in every church....” Notice that the word “elders” is plural. Acts 20:17 says that Paul “sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.” Again, there were “elders” overseeing the assembly in Ephesus, not one man. The Greek word translated “elders” in these verses is *presbuterion*, a plural noun which refers to those who are mature.

Irrespective of these verses, many apostolic leaders contend that plural leadership over a local church cannot work. They believe that one man must be the primary preacher, teacher, and administrator. His name appears in the church bulletin and on the sign in front of the building as if it were somehow “his church.” Those who think this way would agree with C. Peter Wagner, supposed church growth expert, who writes:

The local church is like a company with one company commander, the pastor, who gets his orders from the Commander-in-Chief [Jesus]. The company commander has lieutenants and sergeants under him for consultation and implementation, but the final responsibility of his decisions is that of the company commander, and he must answer to the Commander-in-Chief...the pastor has the power in a growing church (*Your Church Can Grow*, p. 65).

If “the pastor has the power,” then why didn’t Paul or any of the other Bible writers ever mention it, even once? The truth is, plural leadership is only unworkable when one of two situations exists: 1) One man believes himself to be greater, wiser, or more qualified than all others; or 2) The man who presently serves as pastor is unwilling to get off his throne due to the power, recognition, and/or financial benefits that come with it. In other words, he really likes being king and doesn’t want to give up the status of his title and office.

Please note that we are not saying that these are the only two reasons why an eldership cannot or should not be established at any particular time; these are simply the only reasons that could ultimately prevent an eldership from working. For example, an eldership cannot function the way God intends when a man with Diotrephes’ attitude is in a leadership role. Any time one man has been granted final authority and loves having the preeminence among his fellow ministers, an eldership cannot and will not work.

## A. Three Distinctions, but Not Three Divisions

The full picture of apostolic structure is clearly revealed in Paul's salutation to the Philippians: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons" (Philippians 1:1). Notice that the word "bishops," which literally means "overseers" (*episkopoi*), is plural. Paul's letter was not addressed to the saints and the pastor. In fact, no letter in the Bible was ever addressed to a lone pastor.

The word "deacons" literally means "those who serve" (*diakonoi*). In the local assembly in Philippi there were the saints, who constituted the general body of believers; the overseers, who shepherded the people; and the servers, who ministered to the practical needs of the congregation. Do these terms indicate a division of classes or levels within the church? As Paul wrote, "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function, so we, being many, are one body in Christ, and individually members of one another" (Romans 12:4-5). Paul also asked the Corinthians, "Is Christ divided?" He then told them that "there should be no schism in the body," for "indeed there are many members, yet one body" (1 Corinthians 1:13; 12:25; 12:20). These verses refute any attempt to attribute a biblical basis to the concept of a division between the leaders and the followers.

In God's way of seeing things, an assembly is a localized expression of His one body and has only one class of members: the blood-bought, blood-washed, born-again believers who have placed their faith in Jesus Christ, who is the Head of the Church. Yet God also sees the members who make up the one body as having a vast array of gifts and abilities; therefore, "all the members do not have the same function." The only thing that distinguishes members of the body is the way in which they function. Nowhere in the New Testament are we told to establish "offices" within a local church.<sup>1</sup> What we are to recognize is functions: some function as overseers, some function as servers, some function as teachers, some function as helpers, and so on. Everyone in the body functions as a saint, and every saint is gifted for specific God-ordained functions.

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The reference to the "office of a bishop" found in 1 Timothy 3:1 in the Authorized Version is misleading. The correct translation is, "If anyone desires oversight..." As Vine's Dictionary says of this verse, "lit., '(if any one seeketh) overseership,' there is no word representing office."

## B. Elders, Bishops, and Pastors

Who were the bishops in Philippi? They were men serving in the same capacity as the elders in Ephesus. In the Bible, elders and bishops are functioning in the same ministry. This can be readily seen in Paul's letter to Titus, where he instructed his protégé, "Appoint **elders** in every city as I commanded you;...for a **bishop** must be blameless, as a steward of God" (Titus 1:5, 7). Clearly a bishop is an elder and an elder is a bishop. In this passage the words are used interchangeably. There is no difference between the two. The different terms only serve to provide different emphases. Whereas the term "elder" denotes maturity, the term "bishop" describes the overarching task of these mature men: overseeing God's flock. If we were to translate this verse literally, we would see that Paul was instructing Titus to appoint *mature men* in every city to *oversee* the local church.

As we said earlier, the word translated "elders" refers to men who are older or more mature. This does not necessarily mean older in chronological age, since some men are more spiritually mature in their thirties than others are in their sixties. As used in describing the leaders of a Christian assembly, the word carries the connotation of experience, dignity, authority, and honor. Clearly, the use of this word is intended to convey the positive concepts of maturity, respectability, and wisdom.

In ancient Greece, the word translated "bishop" was a common term similar to our English words supervisor, superintendent, or manager. The literal meaning is "one who watches over others." This idea is closely related to the meaning of the Hebrew word for shepherd, *ra'ah*. Like the Greek, this word literally means "to see or watch over." We can see here that the word "elder" denotes the qualities and characteristics of church leaders whereas the term "bishop" describes their function.

Speaking to the elders of Ephesus, Paul tells them, "Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers [i.e. bishops, watchmen], to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood" (Acts 20:28). This passage further describes the responsibilities of elders instructing them to "shepherd the church." The verb *poimaino* means "to tend as a shepherd," which encompasses the complete shepherding task.

The shepherding metaphor blends the ideas of leadership and authority with tenderness, genuine care, hard work, self-sacrifice, and constant watchfulness. The noun form of *poimaino* is the ordinary Greek word for a shepherd (*poimen*). Whereas the verb form is used three times in the context of Christian leadership (John 21:16; 1 Peter 5:1-2; and Acts 20:28); the noun form is found only once, where it is often translated "pastor" (Ephesians 4:11). It is interesting to note that in the New Testament the term "pastor" or "shepherd" is never once used as a title for church leaders. This practice was started by the Reformers. In the Bible, Jesus alone holds the title Shepherd (John 10:11; Hebrews 13:20). In fact in 1 Peter 2:25, He is referred to as "the Shepherd [*poimen*] and Overseer

[*episkopos*] of your souls.” Since the work of overseeing and shepherding cannot be separated, in a general sense, a pastor is a bishop and a bishop is a pastor. In the New Testament, the terms elder, bishop (or overseers), and pastor (or shepherd) all can be used to describe men who are functioning as leaders in a local assembly. This is not to say that everyone doing pastoral work is an elder. Nor is it to say that everyone functioning as an elder is a pastor (e.g. apostles, prophets, evangelists; ref. Ephesians 4:11).

### **C. Those Who Rule: Gentle Strength**

Another New Testament phrase that refers to those functioning as elders and overseers is “those who rule.” Paul specifically stated that those who rule are elders. 1 Timothy 5:17 says, “Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor.” He also stated that those who rule “watch out for your souls,” a clear reference to the oversight function (Hebrews 17:13). In Hebrews 13:24 he wrote, “Greet all those who rule over you, and all the saints.” The phrase “those who rule” clearly points to a plurality in the local leadership.

In our modern way of thinking, the hierarchical system is most often associated with the phrase “ruling over.” But we must understand the biblical concept of ruling by thinking of Jesus. Clearly He is the ultimate Ruler of the Church. Yet He described Himself as “gentle and lowly in heart” (Matthew 11:29). At the last supper He told His disciples, “If I then, your Lord and Teacher, have washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I have given you an example...” (John 13:14-15). And as the Shepherd of the flock, He declares, “I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd gives His life for the sheep” (John 10:11).

Ruling a local church must always be understood in the context of the spirit of Jesus. It is not a heavy-handed style of rule, but a rule based on love, care, gentleness, concern, and compassion. It can be characterized as “gentle strength.”

### **D. Offices verses Functions**

It is important to understand the difference between the concept of “holding an office” and “functioning in the body.” In the Church of the living God, there is only one person who holds an office—the Lord Jesus Christ. He is the Head of the Church, the Shepherd of the Sheep, the Lord of All. No one else holds an “official position” in His Church. This means that if we use the Bible as our guidebook, there is no such office as pastor, elder, deacon, bishop, administrator, or anything else in a local assembly. What the Bible does describe is the functioning of the members of the body. As Paul described it, “We have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function.” He did not say they do not all hold the same office.

There is a great diversity of functions within the body, but no offices. As soon as offices

are established, an unbiblical distinction is made between the office holder and those who do not hold office. This inevitably leads to a clergy–laity split. As we have shown, Paul said there are to be NO DIVISIONS in the body.

For some, distinguishing between offices and functions is just semantics. But nothing could be farther from the truth. There are three very good reasons why we must not establish offices in our local churches:

- In many churches, a man’s authority is based on his office or the position he holds. But this is not a biblical idea. In the Bible, authority is based on relationship, character, and gifting. Under the office concept, a man with little anointing or very poor character could exercise supreme authority over an entire congregation. This could never be the will of God.
- When an office is vacated, the assembly usually feels the need to fill it as soon as possible. This often results in the installation of unqualified, inexperienced, or untested men into offices that carry with them vast authority. The practice of placing single leaders in unscriptural positions without accountability to others is a formula for disaster. The multitude of believers wounded by the moral and spiritual failures of unaccountable single leaders is powerful testimony against these unbiblical practices. Again, occupying a particular office should never be the basis for authority. The issue is not filling an office; it is enabling the life–functions of the body to operate.
- Offices inevitably bring with them titles. But the practice of prefacing men’s names with titles such as Reverend or Pastor violates the Lord’s prohibition in Matthew 23:8-10, where He said, “But you, do not be called ‘Rabbi’; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ.” Paul never referred to himself as “Apostle Paul,” only as “Paul, an apostle,” denoting his function in the body. The only titles appropriate for use in the Church of the living God are “brother” and “sister.” In Acts 9:17 and 22:13, Paul is called “Brother Saul.” The Church is a family, not a corporation.

While we are on this subject, let us point out that the root meaning of the title “Reverend” comes from the word “revere,” which means to venerate or be in awe of someone. Strictly speaking, this attitude should only be directed toward the Lord Himself, for “holy and awesome is His name” (Psalms 111:9). Imagine writing a letter to believers, exhorting them to be humble like the Lord, and then signing it, Respectfully yours, The Awesome Saul of Tarsus.

None of us would even consider calling a church leader by the title Lord, High Priest, Prince, Master, or King; so why use other titles reserved by the Scriptures for exclusive application to the Lord Jesus or employed by the Scriptures to describe various functions

of the members? Let's just do away with both the concept of establishing offices and the practice of using titles in the body.

### **E. What They Are Not**

A bishop is not the chief overseer of a large church or a group of congregations. Neither is he a regional denominational leader. A deacon is not just a man doing menial jobs around the church or assisting in the management of the business affairs of a church. An elder is not just a man who advises and assists the chief pastor. And a pastor is not the highest position within a local assembly.

### **F. Unbiblical Titles**

The title "Senior Pastor" is exactly equivalent to the term, Chief Shepherd. Yet would any of the men who have assigned themselves the title Senior Pastor allow themselves to be referred to as the Chief Shepherd. It hardly seems so. The idea of a senior pastor who operates as a chief pastor over a large church with other sub-pastors under him is completely without biblical mandate.

And what about the title "Pastor Emeritus"? This term literally means one who deserves to be called shepherd but is no longer doing the work of a shepherd. He is retired. Where did these titles originate anyway? Clearly not from the Scriptures.

In the Bible, we read of the bishops (the overseers), the deacons (the servers), and saints (the holy people of God) (Philippians 1:1). This is not to say that those who serve in specialized capacities and those who oversee are not saints. They are just as much saints as the rest of the body of believers. They have simply been called to function in specific ways for the benefit of the assembly as a whole. In the context of local church oversight, we never read of any individual called The Pastor, The Senior Pastor, or The Pastor Emeritus. What we do read of are teams of mature men called elders or bishops, but never do we see a solitary leader over an assembly.

## **III. The Purpose of an Eldership**

Colossians 1:18

And He is the head of the body, the church...that in all things He may have the preeminence.

Acts 14:23

So when they had appointed elders in every church, and prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

The apostolic pattern is clear: in the early Church, the apostles placed the local assemblies they founded under the oversight of a team of elders. Before considering the structure of a biblical eldership in a local assembly, it is important to first understand its purpose, since the structure of anything is dependent upon its purpose. In a broad sense, the purpose of an eldership is to provide a local assembly with a *transparent interface* through which Jesus can fulfill His role as the Head of the Church.

It is important to understand that within the context of this article, the Headship of Jesus pertains to His leadership over the local body as a corporate entity. Headship pertains to individual members only relative to their relationships and ministries within the body. In other words, the elders reflect the Headship of Jesus to the assembly as a whole in the way that a husband reflects the Headship of Jesus to His family.

An *interface* is a point of connection, a place where interaction and communication take place. Jesus may fill all space, but this does not mean He interacts and communicates in every place. In today's world He has chosen the Church to be His interface with lost mankind. As Paul wrote, God has chosen by "the message preached to save those who believe" (1 Corinthians 1:21). In this case, the one preaching is an interface between God and man. Within the Church, God's primary interface is the eldership, in particular as concerns the body as a whole. It is through the elders and the operation of His gifts of grace that Jesus connects with and directs each local body. This does not mean direction can never come from outside the local assembly or that elders should pay no attention to the ideas and messages of non-elders. It only means that the eldership is the principal interface, not the exclusive one.

Elders must not see themselves as just a point of connection, but as a *transparent* point. This is a vital component in the manifesting of Jesus to His people. The word "transparent" means "having the property of transmitting light without appreciable scattering so that bodies lying beyond are entirely visible." The elders are there preeminently to make Jesus entirely visible. This was Paul's intent when he wrote, "Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ" (1 Corinthians 11:1). The idea is that Jesus be clearly seen as the Head of the Church. But the word "transparent" also means "free from pretense or deceit; clear." This means that the faith and love of the elders must be pure, untarnished by carnal thinking or selfish motives. They are to accurately communicate the character, purposes, and ministries of Jesus Christ, not their own agendas. The idea is that Jesus be provided with a free-flowing channel through which He can feed, lead, protect, care for, equip, and make Himself known to His people without being diminished, exaggerated, or distorted in any way.

### **A. The Nature of Headship**

The only way to understand biblical headship is to examine the purpose and ministry of

Jesus: He is the model. Colossians 2:19 speaks of those who are “holding fast to the Head, from whom all the body, nourished and knit together by joints and ligaments, grows with the increase that is from God.” The term “holding fast” means to lay hold of something and refuse to let go. Just as a body must stay connected to its head, so must the body of Christ, and each member individually, stay connected to Jesus. Therefore, the biblical concept of headship involves **connectedness**. As it pertains to an eldership, there must be a connectedness between the members of a local assembly and the elders overseeing the assembly. In other words, the elders cannot oversee from a distance any more than a head can communicate movements to a body if it is severed from it. Hence, Peter addressed his comments to “the elders who are *among you...*” (1 Peter 5:1). This phrasing indicates that Peter considered the elders to be in adult-to-adult relationship with the all the members of assembly. The fact that Jesus has revealed Himself as the Head testifies to the necessity of eye-level connectedness between elders and the believers they are leading.

In addition to connectedness, headship also speaks of **origination**. As the Head of the Church, Jesus is said to be “the beginning” (Colossians 1:18). In other words, Jesus is the one who took the initiative in getting the Church started. He is also the one out of whom the Church comes forth. Headship therefore involves **taking the initiative**. And just as the head of a river, being its source, gives water to the river, so it is that Jesus is said to have “loved us and given Himself for us.” So must it be for a local team of elders. They must not lead passively or reactively, but must actively and proactively love the members of the assembly, being willing to “very gladly spend and be spent” for them (2 Corinthians 12:15). Like the Good Shepherd, they must lay down their lives for the sheep (John 10:15).

This means that headship is founded in **love** and is preeminently something that is **given**.

When the Bible speaks of Jesus being the Head of His Church, it is not describing something He has taken unto Himself. It is describing something He **gives** to us. Headship has nothing to do with bossing or controlling people; it has everything to do with **giving**. “God so loved the world that He gave....” (John 3:16). As the Head, Jesus not only gives us saving grace, but He also gives us direction as a local assembly and the resources to fulfill His purpose. This is a great gift to us, since we don’t know the future and are often unaware of our greatest needs. But Jesus knows all things and is able to make them all work together for our good.

So we can see in the example of Jesus Christ that headship involves...

- A close and intimate relationship between the elders and the assembly.
- The elders rejecting passivity and taking the initiative in shepherding the flock.
- The elders actively loving and freely giving of themselves to the people.

What are the dynamics and responsibilities of the elders as they provide Jesus with a transparent interface for His functions as the Head? The book of Ephesians describes three aspects of headship.

## **B. Headship as Oversight**

Ephesians 1:22-23

And He put all things under His feet, and gave Him to be head over all things to the church, which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

As the Head, Jesus is “over all things” to His body. From this perspective, He is the **Overseer** of the Church. As the interface for the Headship of Jesus, the elders are responsible for watching over the well-being of the people and seeing that they are properly cared for.

In order to fulfill their oversight responsibilities, Jesus invests the elders with certain authority. This authority is not exercised by lording it over people, however, but through serving in love. Like Jesus, oversight authority is never exercised harshly or forcibly, but lovingly and for the benefit and blessing of the ones being overseen.

How did Jesus qualify to be raised up to the throne of heaven where He could sit as the Head and exercise authority over all things to the Church? Philippians 2:7-9 tells us that it was because He “made Himself of no reputation,” taking on “the form of a bondservant,” and “humbled Himself and became obedient to the point of death, even the death of the cross” that “God also has highly exalted Him and given Him the name which is above every name.” It is important that we recognize that Jesus qualified to oversee our lives by laying down His life. This means that **humility** and **giving in love** are prerequisites of headship.

Paul, whose own life was modeled after the life of Jesus, wrote in 1 Corinthians 11:1, “Imitate me, just as I also imitate Christ.” One of the responsibilities of oversight is providing an example to the ones who are being overseen. Peter instructed the elders to “shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:2-3). As the transparent interface for the Headship of Jesus, elders must provide the local assembly with an accurate and consistent example of what it means to be a truly spiritual person.

Overseers watch over the growth and life activities of the assembly. But they don’t do this passively or reactively. In other words, when something is not right, they step forward and deal with it. Elders are to be strong and courageous leaders, challenging their assemblies to deny ungodliness and worldly lusts and to live soberly, righteously, and godly in this present age. They must declare the truth boldly, pull down strongholds, and

strip away excuses for spiritual failure; yet they must always do so with gentleness, patience, and kindness, not brute force. This is what headship oversight and authority is all about!

### **C. Headship as Support**

Ephesians 2:20

Having been built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus Christ Himself being the chief corner stone.....

1 Corinthians 3:11

For no other foundation can anyone lay than that which is laid, which is Jesus Christ.

As the Head of the Church, Jesus is also the foundational Cornerstone of the Church. This means that He is the one upon whom the Church rests and depends. He supports the Church. This shows us the second responsibility of headship, **support**.

The word “support” has several definitions including: to endure bravely or quietly; to promote the interests of someone; to uphold or defend as being valid or right; to assist; to help; to pay the costs of someone; to keep from losing courage; to keep something going.

As the transparent interface for the Headship of Jesus, elders must be there for the people—to sustain them and hold them up. People need to feel that they can rely on their elders during difficult times when they may feel like giving up. Elders must be able to guide them in finding hope and strength in Jesus by helping them to understand the spiritual dynamics of their trial.

Elders must understand that God sees His people as being like sheep: weak and vulnerable. This means that elders need to courageously bear the brunt of the challenges the local assembly is facing. Paul admonished the elders of Ephesus, “Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood” (Acts 20:28). The Church is valuable to God; He paid a high price to purchase it. And He is not willing to let it fall apart. Therefore, the elders are to uphold and sustain the people they are watching over just as a shepherd does his sheep.

### **D. Headship as Comfort**

Ephesians 5:25

Husbands, love your wives, just as Christ also loved the church and gave Himself for her, 26 that He might sanctify and cleanse her with the washing of water by the word, 27 that He might present her to Himself a glorious church, not having

spot or wrinkle or any such thing, but that she should be holy and without blemish. 28 So husbands ought to love their own wives as their own bodies; he who loves his wife loves himself. 29 For no one ever hated his own flesh, but nourishes and cherishes it, just as the Lord does the church.

As the Overseer of the Church, Jesus is **over** His bride, watching over her and providing for her. As the Cornerstone of the Church, Jesus is **under** His bride, supporting her and holding her up. But as the loving Husband of the Church, Jesus is **close by her side**, loving her, comforting her, and caring for her. In fact, the Spirit of Jesus is called the Comforter, *parakletos*, which means “the one who comes along side.” This means that **comfort** is the third responsibility of headship.

To comfort means to be near for nourishing and cherishing. The word “nourish” means to feed, strengthen, or promote the growth of someone. The word “cherish” means literally to warm someone. It also means to brood over, to hold dear, to show affection, to cultivate with care and affection, or to harbor in the mind deeply and resolutely.

While oversight means watching over what the assembly is doing, comfort means doing things together. Today, many leaders are unwilling to relate laterally to the members of local assemblies, believing that such a relationship would diminish their authority or erode the people’s respect. As a New Testament model, however, we see no such behavior in the ministry of Paul. Instead we see him meeting in an upper room into the wee hours of the night, teaching the Word of God to the people (Acts 20:7-9). In the last chapter of the book of Acts, we see him inviting whoever was willing to come into his house to learn about Jesus. No, Paul was not aloof and aloft, but a participant in the life of the body right alongside the people, as an equal member of the assembly. He continually demonstrated by his actions his love and deep concern for the well-being of the people.

Paul wrote to the Philippians telling them, “Brethren, join in following my example, and note those who so walk, as you have us for a pattern” (Philippians 3:17). The people of God need more than teaching to be transformed into the image of Christ. They must also have spiritual people around them who can serve as a pattern of spiritual life. Hebrews 13:7 instructs, “Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow.” The word “follow” literally means mimic or imitate. Like it or not, for good or for ill, the elders serve as the most conspicuous pattern within a local assembly.

How did Jesus love the Church? He gave Himself for her on the cross, not because He wanted to suffer, but because He wanted the Church! Similarly, elders gain the respect and cooperation of the people they oversee by genuinely loving them and giving themselves for them.

We are **NOT** saying...

- That elders should be closed and unreceptive to input from believers in the body.
- That elders should micro-manage the lives of the people.
- That all aspects of body ministry must originate with the elders.
- That those who are not elders cannot take any initiative.

The purpose of an eldership is not to control or dominate the people of God; it is not to form a new kind of clergy or erect an unbiblical wall of separation between the leaders and the rest of the believers. It is rather to express the heart and character of Jesus Christ to the people for the purpose of overseeing the spiritual life of the body, supporting the people in their trials and distresses, and comforting them in their spiritual development. These purposes are achieved by feeding, leading, protecting, and equipping the saints for the work of ministry. The ultimate goal of eldership service is that all believers would be conformed to the image of Jesus and be responsive at all times to the leading of God's Spirit in ministry and body life. An eldership does not exist for its own sake, but for the sake of the body. It is a gift.

Having established the purpose of an eldership, let's now examine the biblical structure.

## **IV. The Structure of an Eldership**

The body of Christ has no divisions. As Paul rhetorically asked, "Is Christ divided?" (1 Corinthians 1:13). The implied answer is obviously, "No! Jesus Christ is not divided." Thus, neither is His body. For there is "one body and one Spirit" (Ephesians 4:4). This one body is expressed on the earth, however, through a variety of localized assemblies, each being a microcosm of the larger whole. These assemblies are not cookie-cutter look-alikes in every aspect of ministry, but they are structured according to the pattern established in the New Testament.

By reading through the book of Acts, it is clear that local assemblies are established by apostolic teams, which then appoint a team of elders to function as overseers. The founders continue to have input into the assemblies, but generally they move on to found new assemblies in other regions. Each localized assembly is the representation of Jesus on the earth in its particular city or region, showing forth the manifold grace of God.

Since the purpose of the eldership is to serve as an interface through which the Lord Jesus functions as the Head of the Church in a living and practical way, it is vital that it be structured in such a way that He is able to freely do so. What then is the correct structure

for a team of elders overseeing a local or regional assembly?

### A. Plural Oversight

In his first letter, Peter wrote, “The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder...” (1 Peter 5:1). The term “fellow elder” is one word in the original language, *sumpresbuteros*. This word is a compound consisting of the word *presbuteros* (elder) combined with the prefix *sum*, which means along with or together. In short, Peter’s use of this word testifies to the idea that the original Christian elders saw themselves as a group of men working together, a group that Peter included himself in as an equal.

The pattern established in the book of Acts reveals that once a local church has been properly established and God has raised up qualified men willing to be set in place as elders, a plural eldership is to be established. There is no verse in the Bible that indicates there was ever a position in any local church where one person gives direction to the elders, or gives direction through the elders to God’s people. This role belongs exclusively to the Lord Jesus. God’s Word does not instruct His people to be subject to their leader, but to their leaders—plural! Consider the following Scriptures:

“From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church” (Acts 20:17).

“And we urge you, brethren, to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake. Be at peace among yourselves” (1 Thessalonians 5:12-13).

“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1 Timothy 5:17).

“Remember those who rule over you, who have spoken the word of God to you, whose faith follow, considering the outcome of their conduct” (Hebrews 13:7).

“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls...” (Hebrews 13:17).

After all of the original apostles were dead, several Christian writers began to refer to “the bishop” (or what is now commonly know as “The Pastor”) as being one who had been elevated to a place of singular authority over the other elders. This was the beginning of the hierarchical pattern of church government.

Writing around 110 A.D. (the generally accepted date), a man named Ignatius of Antioch

stated, “Regarding this bishop I am informed that he holds the supreme office in the community...” (Letter to the Philadelphians). In his commentary on this letter, James A. Kleist writes, “Ignatius never tires of laying his finger on the hierarchical constitution of the Church” (p.137). In his letter to the Ephesians, Ignatius referred to the people of God as “the rank and file.” Commentator Kleist explains, “In the present passage, as in several others in these letters, the reference is to *men or persons* in contrast with those in authority, called ‘the bishop’ and ‘the presbytery’ .... Ignatius, in other words, assumes the existence of two well-defined groups in the Church” (p.121).

Going even farther in his letter to the Trallians, Ignatius asserted, “Let all respect the deacons as representing Jesus Christ, the bishop as a type of the Father, and the presbyters as God’s high council.” Here we see the earliest recorded reference to there being a division between the elders of an assembly (the presbyters) and a single bishop occupying a position of supreme authority, a patently unbiblical split. We also see the early signs of an emerging division between Jesus and the Father which, as we know, ultimately resulted in a doctrine of God in which a hierarchy of divine persons was said to exist within the Godhead (Trinitarians universally speak of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit; never the Son, the Holy Spirit, and the Father! Co-equality may be part of the doctrine, but you never see it in practical application.) The Bible describes nothing of a hierarchy in the Godhead or in the Church.

## **B. Collegial Oversight**

The word “collegial” means “marked by power or authority vested equally in each of a number of colleagues.” This does not mean that all the men who comprise a local eldership must be equal in stature, ability, visibility, gifting, or experience. They are simply equal in bearing responsibility for the oversight of the assembly.

Though elders must be collegial, they are not clones. They will differ both in personality and in the nature of their specific ministries. Some may manifest a greater ability to plan and strategize; others may be more gifted in teaching or evangelism. Such differences SHOULD EXIST in an eldership. Diversity of ministry is needed to represent the Lord more completely in the shepherding function. In addition, some serving as elders may derive their income (or a portion of it) from sources outside the assembly. That fact alone does not mean they exercise any less in authority than those who are deriving their income directly from the assembly.

Collegiality implies harmony and cooperation. Elders must work together in fulfillment of their common understanding of the Lord’s vision for the local assembly they oversee. This does not mean, however, that there will never be differences of opinion. The idea is that through prayer and fasting they submit their various ideas to the Lord, eventually agreeing together on issues concerning the oversight of the assembly.

Collegiality mandates that all decisions of the eldership be unanimous. When one elder disagrees with the others, it cannot be majority rule. The one in disagreement should be regarded a check from the Lord to withhold action and continue seeking His will. Only by resolutely abiding by the requirement that all decisions be agreed to unanimously can the body operate freely under the living and practical Headship of Jesus.

### **C. Advantages of Plurality and Collegiality**

There are at least five significant advantages that a plural, collegial eldership brings to a local assembly:

#### **1. Accountability**

“Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety” (Proverbs 11:14).

None of us, regardless of our spiritual maturity, can fully trust our own heart or judgment. We all need someone to watch over both our personal lives and the quality and priorities of our ministries. Those who shepherd others are not exempt from the need to be shepherded, and no one can be truly shepherded from a remote location. We only have to look at the number of prominent ministers who have fallen into sin to understand that this is true.

When leaders walk together in accountable submission to one another, any differences in doctrine, vision, or implementation that arise which could cause division must be faced and dealt with immediately. An inherent part of accountability is confrontation. Proverbs 27:5 says, “Open rebuke is better than love carefully concealed.” It is dangerous for any man to be raised up to a place of great ministerial responsibility if he is not covered by brothers who love Him enough to tell him when he is doing something wrong. God intended that Jonathan walk in covenant with David so that later he could sit beside him on the throne and speak into David's life to help keep Him from error (1 Samuel 23:17). Jonathan's failure is associated with David's subsequent sins as king.

A plural, collegial eldership brings up-close accountability to each man serving as an elder. This safeguard is a tremendous advantage for any local assembly.

#### **2. Diversity**

“There are diversities of gifts, but the same Spirit. There are differences of ministries, but the same Lord. And there are diversities of activities, but it is the same God who works all in all” (1 Corinthians 12:4-6).

No single individual can reveal Jesus Christ in the full array of His ministry. Jesus is the only one who operated in all the gifts of the Spirit and functioned in all the gifts of grace. Each of these gifts should be recognized and received as expressions of His ministry. For example, the labor of caring pastors expresses the Lord Jesus as the “Good Shepherd, who lays down His life for the sheep.” The ministry of anointed teachers expresses the Lord Jesus as the “teacher come from God.” The work of apostles expresses the work of Jesus as the “Apostle and High Priest of our confession.” This principle holds true for all other ministries in the local church, for all genuine ministry is ultimately the ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is the diversity of oversight ministry in an eldership of gifted men that most fully expresses the complete and perfect ministry of the Lord as Head of the Church. The result is a better capability to equip the believers for ministry and bring them to maturity, that the body of Christ may be edified. This is a wonderful advantage for any local assembly.

### **3. Character Development**

“As iron sharpens iron, so a man sharpens the countenance of his friend” (Proverbs 27:17).

Participation in a plural, collegial eldership will require a much higher degree of Christian character than serving as a solo leader. A single leader can hide his character flaws for a long time, but not so in a closely-connected team of elders. Over the course of time, many opportunities will arise for the Lord to work on the flaws in the hearts of those who walk in the collegial bond of eldership. In fact, an eldership simply cannot work without a deep bond of trust and commitment between the men involved.

Since decisions of the elders must be arrived at through unanimous agreement, both with the fellow elders and the Lord, an elder must be able to admit error and yield his own opinions to the prevailing judgment of the group. This requires genuine humility. Decisions of the eldership ought to be confidently presented to the congregation in the spirit of the early Church: “For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us...” (Acts 15:28).

This is not to say that an elder must always yield to the opinion of the majority. If he strongly believes his judgment best reflects the mind of the Lord, his dissent may be God's way of keeping the elders from making a wrong decision. An elder must have the character to hold to his belief, not out of a stubborn refusal to yield, but out of integrity of heart. Elders are never expected to go along with the group solely for the sake of unity if it means compromising his own beliefs. This is a prescription for ultimate collapse.

More than any other character trait, humility will be required of those serving as elders. After God worked on Moses for forty years in the desert, he was declared to be the meekest, most humble man on earth. This humility was reflected in Moses' statement, “But You have not let me know whom You will send with me” (Exodus 33:12).

Apparently he had learned that he could not walk in leadership alone. He saw his need for other men to help him.

The ministry of an elder is a call to servanthood (Matthew 20:25-28). The issue is not how much authority an elder has, but how well others submit to it. The hierarchical pattern of church leadership is lording over rather than serving. This promotes a prideful attitude. The congregational pattern places the leader under the authority of the body rather than the Head. This tends to promote a timid and obsequious attitude. Only a plural, collegial eldership encourages a spirit of humility and servanthood while at the same time preserving the Headship of Jesus in the local assembly. This is an important gift for a local assembly.

#### **4. Proper Focus**

“I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, who loves to have the preeminence among them, does not receive us” (3 John 1:9).

When one man is at the head of a local church, there is a strong, nearly unavoidable, tendency for some to focus on him as the head of the church rather than Jesus. With a plural, collegial eldership, this tendency is greatly reduced. The Lord’s leadership pattern prevents any one individual from becoming the dominant authority figure. This is extremely important in a world where many people are looking for a strong father figure. Jesus wants to personally fill this need; he does not want it filled by an isolated single leader.

This is not to say that it is always wrong for leaders to serve as father figures, but it must be kept in proper perspective. The church is told to look unto Jesus, the author and finisher of our faith, not to The Pastor. Diffusing the paternal image among a group of men helps avoid the trap of making one man “Daddy” to the rest of the assembly, a common pride-inducing phenomenon. As Jesus cautioned, “Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven” (Matthew 23:9). Avoiding the Daddy-trap is a significant advantage for any local assembly.

#### **5. Ministry Development and Continuity**

“And the things that you have heard from me among many witnesses, commit these to faithful men who will be able to teach others also” (2 Timothy 2:2). God’s plan is that the local assembly would serve as the seminary for preparing leaders. As the specific nature of a man’s gifting becomes apparent, the elders should be there to encourage development of the gift. This is how all five of the gifts of grace can be expected to emerge over time. Those who demonstrate a clear gifting in oversight and meet the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1 may be brought into the eldership. This will bring strength and continuity to the oversight ministry of the church, which is a great advantage for any local assembly.

By following these general principles, an assembly is able to actually function as a living organism and avoid becoming a static organization. In a mature assembly there should be a continual flow of men into the ministry of deacons, some of whom will eventually serve as elders. Some elders will then develop into apostolic ministry.

There is no “positional limitation” on the number of ministries in a local church. Growth is horizontal in numbers, not vertical through levels of authority. Ministry growth is limited only by the need to meet scriptural ministerial qualifications, not by vacancies or job opportunities.

This idea points to a related advantage of a plural eldership: there is never a need to look for a new leader outside the local assembly. Under the traditional patterns, if the single leader falls into sin, resigns, retires, or dies, the local church must either search out or be assigned a new leader. Often a man comes in who is virtually unknown to the congregation and who is unfamiliar with the specific needs of the people and the overall spirit and ministry of the church. In this kind of situation, much time is often wasted while the new leader gets situated. And it is not uncommon for many members of a congregation to be very disappointed six months after the new leader takes over.

Furthermore, no congregation in the Bible ever selected its own leader or governing body. Moses appointed Joshua, under the guidance of God. Similarly, the apostles “appointed elders” as they were preparing to depart. In the Bible, the selection and appointment of a shepherd is never left in the hands of the sheep.

***Note to the reader —***

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