

The Question of Elders
Part 3: What is the nature of leadership? (E. Radmacher)

1. How does a multiple leadership of elders function? See Acts 4:36-37; 1 Corinthians 4:16; 1 Timothy 3:1-8; and 1 Peter 5:2-3.

A third issue regarding church leaders, and probably the most important, is the *nature* of their leadership. Growing out of the concept of “multiple elders” is the concept of “mutuality of the ministry.” I appreciate the expressed humility of even the Apostle Peter, who, in addressing the elders, designated himself as their “fellow elder.” Some who use the term “pastor” today seek to demonstrate this mutuality by giving the same title to each one on the staff who meets the qualifications of 1 Timothy 3:1-8, i.e., Pastor of Visitation; Pastor of Counseling; Pastor of Evangelism, etc.

This expression of mutuality has the distinct advantage of giving recognition to the diversity of spiritual gifts sovereignly distributed by the Holy Spirit. What a release it is for a pastor or elder to realize that he doesn't have to be the preaching elder or the teaching elder before he can exercise leadership through his gift which, for example, may be encouraging/exhortation or administration. Many are the pastors who have been thrust into teaching or preaching roles when their gift was really more in the area of a one-to-one ministry. Others are elevated to the “senior pastor” role when they really do not have the administrative gift that would be desirable for the position. It has been exciting to see many of these men really come alive and find fulfillment as they have been released from the lonely role of “*the pastor*.”

A beautiful illustration of this beneficial diversity of gifting among the leaders in the New Testament is seen in the relationship of Barnabas and Paul. On one occasion I was talking with my wife about Joseph in Acts 4:36-37. We considered the fact that Joseph lost his name in favor of his gift and, consequently, the passage says, “And Joseph, who was also named Barnabas by the apostles (which is translated ‘son of encouragement’), a Levite of the country of Cyprus, having land, sold it and brought the money and laid it at the apostles feet.” Here was a leader in the early church who used his gift so well that he lost his name in favor of his gift, namely, Barnabas. Later in Acts 9, Saul of Tarsus came to faith in Christ near Damascus and “immediately he preached the Christ in the synagogues, that He is the Son of God.” (Acts 9:20). Luke records that “Saul increased all the more in strength, and confounded the Jews who dwelt in Damascus, proving that this *Jesus* is the Christ.” Some of the Jews plotted to kill him but Saul escaped to Jerusalem. When he got there, “He tried to join the disciples but they were all afraid of him and did not believe that he was a disciple. But, Barnabas {gifted encourager} took him and brought him to the apostles. And he (Barnabas) declared to them how he (Saul) had seen the Lord on the road, and that He had spoken to him and how he had preached boldly at Damascus in the name of Jesus.” Unfortunately, the situation worsened and the Hellenists attempted to kill him, so the brethren brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

Later, however, the brethren in Antioch spoke to the Hellenists, preaching the Lord Jesus. And the hand of the Lord was with them and a great number believed and turned to the Lord. When news of this came to Jerusalem, they sent out Barnabas to go as far as Antioch, “and he *encouraged* (italics mine) them all that with purpose of heart they should continue with the Lord.” After seeing a great many people added to the Lord, Barnabas departed for Tarsus to seek Saul. Now may I remind you that Asia Minor was a large land and Tarsus was at the eastern end of it. Having the gift of encouragement, he sought out Saul of Tarsus, found him, and brought him to Antioch where the two of them remained for a year. They went there as Barnabas and Saul, but they returned as Paul and Barnabas - each of them using their spiritual gifts to accomplish God's purpose.

May I suggest that their probably would never have been a mighty teacher named Paul the apostle if there had not been a strong encourager like Barnabas. We must never underestimate the power of the proper use of our spiritual gifts. These occurrences are just as available to us today as they were with Joseph and Saul of Tarsus.

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Not only does the concept of “multiple elders” release the church leaders to truly enjoy the mutuality that God intended in the ministry, but it protects them from developing the “benevolent dictator” approach of ecclesiastical lordliness. How fitting are the words of Jesus on this issue of the uniqueness of leadership in his Kingdom as opposed to the world’s approach. “Ye know,” He said, “that they who are accounted to rule over the Gentiles exercise lordship over them; and their great ones exercise authority upon them. But so shall it not be among you; but whosoever would be great among you, shall be your minister; and whosoever of you would be the chiefest, shall be servant of all” (Mark 10:42-44).

Charles Edward Jefferson, in his book *THE MINISTER AS SHEPHERD* (lectures on preaching at Bangor Theological Seminary in 1912), singles out two temptations from the many that face a pastor. He sees them as love of gain and love of power: “Covetousness and ambition, inordinate desire to possess for personal gratification and an unlawful love of advancement, prominence and authority. Christian history makes it clear that these are the cardinal sins which ever lie like crouching beasts at the shepherd’s door.”

In expanding the opportunities that feed a pastor’s love of rulership and quicken his appetite for absolute dominion, Jefferson states: “What liberty a minister enjoys in the disposition of his time! No other man but the retired millionaire is such a monarch of his day as is the minister. He can read on Monday morning, or write, or walk, or mingle all three, just as he deems best. On Tuesday morning he can attend to his correspondence, or catalogue his library, or eat the heart out of some new book, or meet a company of friends, just as he decides. The order of his going out and coming in is largely at his own discretion. Within wide limits he is the monarch of all the hours he surveys. Such liberty is dangerous, it has spoiled its thousands.

His dominion over his sermons is still more wonderful. He is free to say what the text shall be, the topic, the illustrations, the arguments, the conclusions, and no one can interfere. He can adopt any style of preaching that he likes, he can follow whatever line of thought he chooses. A merchant has to give his customers what they ask for, a hotel keeper must supply what his guests desire, but a preacher can give what he thinks his hearers ought to want and ought to have, no matter what their needs and wishes really are. For half an hour or more every Sunday morning everything is silent while he speaks. This unparalleled immunity from the noises and interruptions and contradictions which other men are subject to, begets in certain types of men a tone of mind which says: ‘I am Sir Oracle, and when I open my lips, let no dog bark.’

In social life a minister is ever at the front. He is the observed of all observers. Wherever he sits is the head of the table. He has his critics and detractors, but they are not visible at social functions. In social life, especially in small towns, there is a deference paid to ministers which no other man receives. This burning of incense before the minister has a tendency, in many cases, to turn his head, and to lead him to think more highly of himself than he ought to think. Is there a celebration in the town, the minister must attend it; is the fitting word to be spoken on a state occasion, the minister must speak it. Here is a true description of ministers not a few: ‘They love the chief places at feasts and the chief seats in the synagogues, and the salutations in the marketplaces, and to be called of men, Rabbi.’ They love these things because they are human and because they are accustomed to them, and because they think they have a right to them. Constant deference and obedience have a tendency to beget in men of a certain grade a haughty and unlovely disposition.

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“But mightiest of all the forces working for the undoing of the minister’s heart is the liberty he has in devising and shaping the policy of the church. Laymen, as a rule, are too busy to take continued interest in church affairs. The result is that in many parishes almost everything is rolled upon the pastor’s shoulders. Is a change to be made, he must make it; is a new work to be undertaken, he must start it; is there a fresh responsibility to be assumed, the pastor must shoulder it. In a multitude of parishes the minister must not only preach and conduct the prayer meeting, and make all the pastoral calls, but he must also superintend the Sunday School, manage the finances, map out the work of every organization, and possibly act even as leader of the singing.

No wonder that ministers come to feel sometimes that they are of considerable importance. It was in this way that church government blossomed into Romanism. The laity in the early Christian centuries were largely ignorant, incompetent, and indifferent, and the whole shaping and managing of the church fell inevitably into the hands of its clerical officials. Laymen in our day are not ignorant or incompetent, but many of them are indifferent because they are so busy. They have no time to bother with church affairs. Church administration is left, therefore, largely in the hands of the pastor. This is bad for him, and it is bad also for the church. It makes it easier for the minister to build up in himself a dictatorial disposition and to nourish in his heart the love of autocratic power.”

It is my conviction that God has provided a hedge against these powerful temptations by the concept of multiple elders. The check and balance that is provided by men of equal authority is most wholesome and helps to bring about the desired attitude expressed by Peter to the plurality of elders: “...shepherd the flock of God among you, not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock” (1 Peter 5:2, 3).

As Jefferson notes: “A little Protestant despot, a petty parochial pope, is a sorry caricature of a minister of Jesus Christ. A minister who boasts under his breath that he proposes to run things and who chuckles at his adeptness in manipulating people, and who says by his manner that he is the boss of the parish, is a man who is a stumbling block in the way of Christian progress.”

Perhaps this aspect of the nature of church leadership can be captured succinctly in two contrasting images: the shepherd and the cowboy. God picture His children as sheep, not cattle. Cowboys drive cattle, but shepherds lead sheep. How graphically the latter is portrayed in Psalm 23! The Good Shepherd goes *before* the sheep and prepares the way. He finds food. He provides protection against the adversary. He sets an example, a pattern of living that can be followed.

Remember that word “example” in 1 Peter 5:3, “Be examples to the flock”? Hear it again in 1 Peter 2:21: “Christ also suffered for us leaving us an example that ye should follow his steps.” Paul practiced the same kind of leadership: “Be ye followers (imitators) of me” (1 Cor 4:16). Furthermore, he taught it to his understudy, Timothy: “Be thou an example of the believers, in word, in conduct, in love, in faith, in purity” (1 Tim 4:12).

Pattern living is the heart of leadership in the New Testament church. Even in the strong passages exhorting believers to obey their church leaders, the appeal is made on the basis of their doctrinal and practical example. Consider Hebrews 13:7: “Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the Word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their manner of life.” Again, note verse 17: “Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves; for (because) they watch (spend sleepless nights) for your souls, as they that might give account that they may do it with joy, and not with grief; for that is unprofitable for you.”

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When one really grasps this principle of leadership by example, it changes his ministry to the people. How often have all of us been guilty of exhorting God's people to take the lead in a particular area when we haven't set the example for them and shown them how to do it. Perhaps no more frequent demonstration of this is seen than in the area of exhortations to soul winning. How much better it would be to "show and tell" rather than to just "tell." This seems to be the genius of New Testament church leadership.

There is yet one crucial question, "Who is to have final authority in the church on the human level?" There are those who construe the "rule" of the elders to be synonymous with final authority. In such instances the elders are self-perpetuating and the congregation has no vote in the determination of the elders that shall rule over them. In my opinion such a practice is a violation of the priesthood of each individual believer, which is both biblical (cf. I Peter 2:5, 9) and basic to the concept of congregational authority.

Regularly the Scriptures give the church a responsibility together with commensurate authority for conducting their business, i.e., choosing officers (Acts 6:3, 5; 14:23), exercising discipline of its members (Matt 18:15-17; 1 Cor 5:4-5, 13; 2 Thessalonians 3:6, 14-15), sending missionaries (Acts 13:2-3), etc. This does not mean that these churches may not delegate the managing of much or most of their daily activities to those elders whom they have chosen to rule over them, but it does mean that the congregation never relinquishes ultimate authority. And if it should happen that the elders as a group act irresponsibly, the congregation, in assembly, would need to bring them to account.

At this point, therefore, it may be well to carefully distinguish between congregational government and congregational authority. The congregation has the authority to conduct **all** of its business in session, if it chooses, but this would make meaningless the choosing of elders and deacons. Obviously, the special qualifications required by Scripture for these offices presume special spheres of leadership. Therefore, the congregation must be careful not to destroy their own efficiency and effectiveness by becoming immersed in the managing or governing for which they have elected spiritually-qualified leaders, and the leaders must be careful not to usurp authority for themselves which rightfully belongs to the congregation as a whole. Their governing is by guiding, not by directives. I believe that this balance can be preserved when the leaders lead by love, teach by example, and when the congregation exercises proper submission to those whom they have chosen in submission to the Word of God and the Spirit of God. Surely the balance is portrayed in Hebrews 13:7 and 17. May God help us to find it in practice.

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