

Advantages of Pastoral Elderships

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented to review the advantages a pastoral eldership will bring to any established local assembly.

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

No one, regardless of his level of spiritual maturity, can fully trust his 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 different assembly or a remote location. We only have to look at the number of men who have fallen into sin to know that this is true.

When leaders work together in accountable submission to one another, in an atmosphere where openness and honesty are cultivated and highly valued, any differences in doctrine, vision, or implementation that arise which could cause division will 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 take on oversight responsibilities if he is not in open and honest relationship with brothers who love Him enough to tell him when he is 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 may have left open the door for David's subsequent failures 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 and for the men serving in oversight.

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 man 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 assembly, for all genuine ministry is ultimately the ministry of Jesus Christ.

It is the diversity of ministries in an eldership of gifted men that most fully expresses the complete and perfect ministry of the Lord Jesus as Head of the Church. The result is a higher quality of oversight and a better ability to bring the believers to maturity and equip them for ministry, 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 requires 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 bond of collegiality. In fact, an eldership simply cannot work without a deep bond of trust and commitment between the men involved.

Since all decisions must be arrived at through unanimous agreement under the Headship of Jesus, each elder must be willing to admit his errors and yield his personal opinions, preferences, and agendas to the prevailing wisdom 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, which wrote: 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 their 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 humility and servanthood while simultaneously preserving the Headship of Jesus in the local assembly. This is an important gift for a local assembly.

4. Proper Focus

Have we not all one Father? Has not one God created us?
Malachi 2:10

When one man is at the head of a local assembly, 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.¹ 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 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 his gifts. This is how all 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 principles, an assembly is able to function as a dynamic spiritual organism and avoid digressing into stagnant 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 may then develop into apostolic church-planting ministries.

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 the members of an assembly to be very disappointed six months after the new leader takes over.

Furthermore, no assembly in the Bible ever chose by election its own leader or governing body. The Holy Spirit equipped certain men to serve as overseers and the apostles appointed them as elders. In the Bible, the selection and appointment of shepherds is never entrusted to an election of the sheep.

The Apostolic Elder-Overseers

If anyone knew how the Lord Jesus wanted the local assemblies of His body structured, it was Paul, the skilled architect (1 Corinthians 3:10). This man knew how to lay out the plans for a local assembly and raise it up in accord with those plans. Yet nowhere in the New Testament do we read of Paul assigning the ongoing pastoral leadership of an assembly to just one person.

In the salutation of his letter to the Philippians, Paul wrote, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons (v.1.1). He did not mention a pastor, a bishop, or any other single leader of that local assembly. What he did mention was two groups: the bishops and deacons. The NIV translates Paul's salutation: "To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and deacons. "

The words bishops (*ἐπίσκοποι*) and deacons (*διακονοί*) are both plural. There was one church in Philippi but more than one bishop and more than one deacon. The Bible does not tell us how many there were; only that there were more than one. Notice also that the bishops and deacons are described as being with the saints. According to *Strong's Dictionary*, the Greek word denotes union, togetherness, companionship, and resemblance (*sun*, 4862). The indication is that among the local body of believers (all the saints), "there were some who were functioning as bishops (elder-overseers) and some who were functioning as deacons."²

Under the New Testament form of church structure, there is one body with no divisions (1 Corinthians 1:10-13). This includes no division between a so-called clergy and laity. This does not mean there are no distinctions. But the distinctions are based entirely on function, not position or stature. As Paul wrote, "For as we have many members in one body, but all the members do not have the same function (Romans 12:4). Nevertheless, in the body of Christ no one is positionally over anyone else. We are all brothers under one Master; we are all one in Christ Jesus (Matthew 23:8-19, Galatians 3:28).

The distinction of function means that there are some who are appointed to oversee (but not lord over) the assembly and others who are appointed to provide a wide range of service to the assembly. These are the elder-overseers and the deacons. But while these men are expected to discharge their duties with courage, strength, and diligence, in the end there is only one who is to be recognized and yielded to as the Head of the assembly, and that is Jesus Christ —that in all things He may have the preeminence (Colossians 1:18).

The New Testament elders were the pastoral overseers of the local assemblies, who exercised appropriate pastoral authority as a collegial group. Though some

may disagree with this doctrine, none cannot refute it from the Scriptures. There is not a single biblical reference that contradicts the doctrine that the original New Testament assemblies were pastored by teams of mature, gifted, and biblically qualified men.

Endnotes:

1. In 1 Corinthians 4:15 Paul wrote, "For though you might have ten thousand instructors in Christ, yet you do not have many fathers; for in Christ Jesus I have begotten you through the gospel. Paul was not setting himself up as a daddy figure in this passage, but was rather reminding the people who had brought them the gospel, who had founded their assembly, and most importantly, who among their many instructors actually loved them like a father loves his own children.

2. When Polycarp wrote to the believers in Philippi around the middle of second century, he specified only two types of leaders: the deacons (*diakonoi*) and the elders (*presbuteroi*). He did not use the term bishops or overseers (*episkopoi*) as found in the salutation of Paul's epistle. This does not indicate that the Philippians had changed from bishop-leadership to elder-leadership, but that for all practical purposes, the terms bishop and elder were considered synonymous for the first 100 years of the Church. The writings of Ignatius are the earliest to make a distinction between bishops and elders (*Letter to the Trallians*, 3:1).

Note to the reader:

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Rosh Pinnah means Chief Cornerstone in Hebrew.