

Should Every Local Church Have a Senior Pastor?

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The standard form of local church government in the United Pentecostal Church International calls for one person to serve as pastor (spiritual leader and overseer), or in a few cases two persons may serve as co-pastors. Since the New Testament speaks of elders in the plural, some have concluded that the leadership of a local congregation should be collective and that no one person should be the senior leader. Which approach is more biblical?

In the Old Testament, we find many examples of teamwork (e.g., Moses and Aaron, Deborah and Barak), delegated authority (e.g., the seventy elders), and mentoring (e.g., Elijah and Elisha). At the same time, God typically anointed senior leaders in charge of significant groups, institutions, and endeavors. Examples are Moses, Joshua, the high priests, the judges, Samuel, the kings, and the prophets.

The New Testament does not provide detailed instructions about church government. Undoubtedly this lack of specificity is intentional, because in God's plan the precise form of church government can vary depending on culture, circumstances, times, and preferences. An organizational form that works in twenty-first century North America might not work as well in the first-century Middle East or even the twenty-first century Middle East.

The New Testament does teach us important principles for church government. For instance, we find that the local church is primarily responsible to handle its own affairs under spiritual leadership. At the same time, there is strong emphasis on unity, interdependence, fellowship, ministerial accountability, organization, and structure.

Local churches were led by elders, people whom God calls to the ministry of preaching, teaching, leading, and overseeing the church. In the New Testament, the titles of elder (*presbuteros*, "elder, presbyter"), bishop (*episkopos*, "overseer"), and pastor (*poimen*, "shepherd") are used interchangeably for the spiritual leader of a local congregation. Acts 20:17, 28 says elders (*presbuteros*) are overseers (*episkopos*) and are to feed the church, literally, "to tend as a shepherd" (*poimaino*). Titus 1:5-7 equates elder with bishop. I Peter 5:1-4 describes the work

of elders as shepherding the flock (*poimaino*) and taking oversight (*episkopeo*). I Timothy 5:17 similarly describes elders as ruling.

Why does the New Testament speak of “elders” in the plural when describing local churches? We must remember that there were no church buildings in the first century. All believers in a city were considered members of one church, but there was no one building in which all could meet together. Instead, they met in various house churches. In this context, it appears that the elders of the city were the council of leaders of house churches—what we would consider to be pastors of various churches within a city. Another way to view them would be as a ministerial staff or team of a large church.

This explanation reveals how closely the ministers in a city worked together, considering themselves as ministers of one church. From it we can learn some important lessons about unity, mutual accountability, and team leadership. However, nothing in this concept would contradict the idea of a senior pastor or head of the team, which is God’s typical plan throughout the Bible. And nothing in this concept would preclude an individual elder from being responsible for a local house meeting. To examine this idea further, let us look at every biblical book that describes the New Testament church in existence (Acts through Revelation).

Acts: While the twelve apostles were the supreme leaders of the church, James the brother of the Lord, who was not one of the Twelve, became the chief elder or senior pastor in Jerusalem. (See Acts 12:17; 15:13; 21:18.)

Romans: Paul mentioned at least three and probably five house churches in Rome with their leaders. (See Romans 16:3-5, 10, 11, 14, 15.) Priscilla and Aquila apparently served as the pastors of the church in their house.

1 and 11 Corinthians: Corinth may fit the model of a council of elders with no strong central leader. However, it was a new church, and it appears that, as the founder, Paul was still functioning as their senior pastor in a transitional phase.

Galatians: This letter was written to a group of churches in a region, so there is no identification of a senior pastor.

Ephesians: It was probably a circular letter written first to Ephesus, the capital of the Roman province of Asia, but also meant for the other churches in Asia. (See Acts 19:10, 26.) This could explain why Paul elsewhere referred to a letter to Laodicea (Colossians 4:16), why Ephesians contains no references to individual saints in Ephesus, and why many manuscripts omit the recipients in Ephesians 1:1. If this letter was written to a group of churches, then again, we would not expect mention of an individual pastor.

Philippians: Paul apparently addressed the senior pastor in Philippians 4:3, asking him to mediate a dispute between two female ministers in the church.

Colossians: It seems that Ephaphras was the senior pastor (Colossians 1:7), and he was on a trip to visit Paul at the time, perhaps to discuss the heresy in Colosse against which the letter was written. He also had responsibilities for other churches in the area (Colossians 4:12), so he may have been a regional leader. Nymphas was apparently the pastor of a house church in neighboring Laodicea (Colossians 4:15).

1 and 11 Thessalonians: Paul wrote to the church not long after he founded it, and they still looked to him as their senior pastor (1 Thessalonians 2:11, 17).

1 and 11 Timothy: Timothy was the designated leader in Ephesus to help establish the church doctrinally and organizationally (1 Timothy 1:3). He was under the authority of the apostle Paul.

Titus: Titus was the designated leader in the island of Crete, charged with organizing churches and ordaining elders in the various communities under his care (Titus 1:5). He was under the authority of the apostle Paul.

Philemon: Philemon had a church in his house in Colosse, and it is likely that Apphia was his wife and Archippus was his son (Philemon 1-2). If so, Archippus may have been the ministerial leader of this house church (Colossians 4:17).

Hebrews, James, 1 and 11 Peter, 1 John, Jude: These are general letters to the church as a whole or to a region or group, so it is not surprising that they would not mention any local pastor.

11 and 111 John: They were written to local churches. It may be that II John 1 addresses a lady pastor, or perhaps John just addressed the church generally. In III John, Gaius and Diotrephes may have been neighboring pastors of house churches, with Diotrephes wrongly trying to assert authority over the whole region or city (Ephesus). In the biblical sense they were members of the same church of the city. Or they could have been leaders who attended the same house church, in which case we see a team leadership under the direction of John, the apostle who had charge of that area as the senior leader.

Revelation: In Revelation 2-3 we find seven letters to the “angels” of seven churches. The Greek word *angelos* literally means “messenger”; this is the alternate translation provided by the NIV. In this context it does not seem possible that they would be spirit beings, because Jesus gave a message to John to transmit

to the seven messengers. Would Jesus tell John to write letters to angels rather than Jesus communicating with them directly? If so, why would John need to write in Greek to angelic beings? How would he deliver letters to these angels? What were the angels supposed to do in response to the messages? The messages counsel believers to repent, be faithful, and walk in holiness. How could angels cause human churches to fulfill these admonitions? It seems clear that these seven letters were written to seven individual human messengers whom God held responsible to communicate His Word to their respective churches. In other words, they were the seven senior pastors of seven churches in Asia Minor.

Recently, Peter Lampe, professor of New Testament at the University of Heidelberg, Germany, has conducted an unprecedented scholarly study of local church organization and government in the first two centuries in Rome, the city for which we can glean the most information. Here is a summary of his findings as excerpted from his book, *From Paul to Valentinus: Christians at Rome in the First Two Centuries* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 2003).

“In the pre-Constantine period, the Christians of the city of Rome assembled in premises that were provided by private persons and that were scattered across the city (fractionalization)” (364). Nevertheless, “people writing from outside of Rome could address the Roman Christians as a unity.” At the same time, “a plurality of presbyters leads Roman Christianity” (398).

“*All* presbyters are at the same time ‘bishops,’ and the latter designation specifies one of their special duties....The worship leader always is at the same time also in charge of taking care of the poorer members in his liturgical assembly. *Each* presbyter in Rome apparently leads a worship assembly in a house community and therefore also takes care of needy fellow Christians there....Each individual group was presided over by its own presbyter-bishop” (400).

“For a house community in the second century one has to reckon most probably with only one presbyter. Two or three presbyters for a single house-church community can only be established at the earliest for the third century” (400, n. 8).

“On a level *above* the individual house communities occasional conventions of presbyters took place....All this points to conventions at which the presbyters of the city’s individual communities, which acknowledged spiritual fellowship with each other, gathered together” (401).

In summary, we cannot make every detail of twenty-first century UPCI structure conform to first-century church structure, because we do not have enough detail in Scripture to construct a supposed standard model. We have various forms of church government today, within North America as well as overseas, and it seems

that there were also various forms in New Testament times. However, we can find evidence in the New Testament for ministerial credentials, recommendations, ministerial discipline, general conferences, home missions programs, foreign missions programs, regional organization, church business meetings and elections, local church discipline, and so on.

We should follow New Testament principles in structuring local, regional, national, and international organization. We need to pay more attention to principles of team leadership and mutual accountability that are often neglected to our hurt. Nevertheless, to implement these principles we should not try to abolish the office of senior pastor of a local church.