

Response to
Should Every Local Church Have a Senior Pastor?

by David K. Bernard

(from September-October issue *Forward* magazine)

Before I begin my response to Bro. David Bernard's article, let me first say that I hold the author in high esteem. I had the privilege of spending a week with him in Nigeria in February 2001 as we taught seminars together on the Oneness of God. During that time I grew to respect and admire his faith, his fortitude, his consistency, and his willingness to risk dangers and endure hardships for the gospel (the last hotel we stayed in had no running water for three days). I also honor him for the contribution he has made to the restoration and clarification of biblical truth, perhaps more than any other man since the days of the apostles. I do, however, hold a different view concerning church leadership. So it is in the spirit of brotherly disagreement that I offer my response to his article titled *Should Every Local Church Have a Senior Pastor?*

Response by David A. Huston (in red):

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. [This statement acknowledges that the UPCI does not forbid assemblies from having more than one pastor in a collegial arrangement. Could we not say then that if two co-pastors are acceptable, three, four, or five would be acceptable as well?] 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? [The author acknowledged in the first sentence of this paragraph that in some cases two persons serve together as co-pastors. What material difference is there between two co-pastors and collective leadership with no senior pastor? The only conceivable difference might be the number of people involved.]

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. [These “senior leaders” are types of Jesus as the Head of the Church. The author has made no scriptural connection between the existence of these men in pre-New Testament times and the structure of local church government in the New Testament.]

The New Testament does not provide detailed instructions about church government. [This conclusion is asserted without any basis or supporting data.] 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. [This conclusion is asserted without any basis or supporting data. It would be just as easy to assert the opposite.] 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. [Whether a particular organizational form appears to work or not work according to the human perspective is an inadequate and improper basis for determining church structure. The question is not, “What works?” The question is, “What does the Bible say?"]

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. [We fully agree with these statements.]

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. [We fully agree with the content of this paragraph.]

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. [This assertion is supposition. We do not and cannot know this as a certainty.] 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. [The fact that the early believers met in

homes is without question, but this does not mean they met exclusively in homes. Are we to believe that all the believers in a local jurisdiction never met together in some sort of common meeting place? The word “church” means “an assembly” or “a gathering.” How could the Bible speak of the church of a particular city if the believers of that city never gathered together in one location? 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. [It may appear this way to the author, but this is certainly not the only way to interpret the available evidence. There is no place in the Bible that directly connects elders, bishops, or pastors with the leadership of house churches. They could just have easily have been the collective leaders of the entire city-wide assembly. The Bible says that Paul and Barnabas appointed elders in every church, not in every house (Acts 14:23). Paul instructed Titus to appoint elders/bishops in every city, not every house church in every city.]

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. [The issue is not whether the concept described in the preceding paragraph contradicts the idea of a senior pastor; it is whether the Bible ever states that there was a senior pastor over the elders/bishops of a city. The fact is, the Bible never even suggests that such a structure existed in the New Testament churches. The first mention of this structure is by Ignatius in the 2nd century.] And nothing in this concept would preclude an individual elder from being responsible for a local house meeting. [It is true that an elder may have led a house meeting, but this was not typically the role of the elders, and elders were definitely not limited to leading house meetings. For example, James instructed, “Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church, and let them pray over him....” (James 5:14). Does this mean that if a believer is sick, he should call for all the house church leaders in the city? Of course not. It means he should call for the team of leaders who oversee the city-wide assembly.] 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.) [Not one of the verses the author has noted describes James as a chief elder or senior pastor of the Jerusalem church. Galatians 2:9 describes James, along with Peter and John, as a pillar of the church. It does not place him in a superior position over Peter

and John but as an equal. The idea of a pillar suggests that these three men were leading figures in Jerusalem, but it does not indicate they had authority over the other apostles and elders. We agree that in the beginning the oversight of the Jerusalem church was by the Twelve. In Acts 15 we read of “the apostles and elders” and in Acts 21:18 only the elders. This suggests that over time the Jerusalem church transitioned from an apostle-led assembly to an elder-led assembly (a collective team in both cases). James is mentioned as being with the apostles and elders in Acts 15 and with only the elders in Acts 21:18. In Galatians 1:19 James is called an apostle. Nowhere is he called a pastor or overseer, and nowhere is he said to be the single leader of the local assembly. This is a traditional view without any scriptural basis.]

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. [This tells us nothing about the oversight of the city-wide church in Rome. None of the people named in Romans 16 are identified as pastors, bishops, or elders.]

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. [Paul was the founding apostle of the church in Corinth but was not on site when he wrote his letters to the church. Any leader who is hundreds of miles away and without telephone or online contact is hardly capable of being a pastor to anyone. Paul wrote to give counsel to and answer questions from the church he had founded, but the letters tell us nothing about the leadership structure of the church. Writing around 96 AD, Clement of Rome stated that the Church in Corinth was lead by elders.]

Galatians: This letter was written to a group of churches in a region, so there is no identification of a senior pastor. [We must be careful not to form a doctrine out of nothing.]

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. [We would also not expect mention of any teams of local elders/bishops. Eisogesis is the practice of reading into the Scriptures what is not there. This practice has led to many errors.]

Philippians: Paul apparently addressed the senior pastor in Philippians 4:3, asking him to mediate a dispute between two female ministers in the church. [The author neglected to mention the salutation, which addresses this letter to “all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons.” This tells us with certainty that this city-wide assembly was led by bishops/elders and not a single individual. The author’s reference to someone Paul referred to as “true yokefellow” offers no suggestion at all that this individual, whoever he was, was the senior pastor of the church. This is pure speculation.]

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). [In the references to Epaphras cited by the author, there is no mention of him being a leader in the Colossian church, much less the senior pastor. He is called a “dear fellow servant,” a “faithful minister of Christ,” and a “bondservant of Christ,” but none of these descriptions indicate a leadership role. To say that this man seems to be the senior pastor is eisogesis.]

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). [Actually, they looked to him as their founding apostle.]

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. [Timothy was urged by Paul to stay in Ephesus for the purpose of straightening some things out (1 Timothy 1:3). He was not the senior pastor but rather a representative of the founding apostle doing the apostolic work of setting things in order. Paul’s instructions to Timothy include many details on the selection, appointment, and practical management of elders, who were to lead and teach the assembly (1 Timothy 5:17).]

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. [Like Timothy, Titus was in Crete on a temporary basis as Paul’s representative to complete what was lacking in these newly established assemblies and to appoint elders to oversee the assemblies in each city.]

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). [As the author says, Archippus may have been the ministerial leader, but then again, he may not have been. We simply do not know from the information provided. Why speculate?]

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. [These letters do not mention any local pastors by name, but some of them do mention local leadership, always in the plural (Hebrews 13:7; 17; 24; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-3). In 1 Peter 5:1 the writer refers to himself as a “fellow elder.” According to the author, this would make Peter no more than a house church leader.]

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. [This letter was written to a believing mother. There is nothing in the letter to indicate that she served in any kind of leadership capacity.] 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. [This letter is addressed to Gaius, but there is nothing in it to indicate that Gaius served in any kind of leadership capacity. He was simply being commended for helping out some of the traveling brethren who had come his way. There is, however, reason to believe that Diotrephes was some kind of church leader, since he had the power to refuse to receive certain brethren and to put members out of the local assembly. This is the only suggestion in the entire New Testament of an assembly with a single leader, or at least with one leader who was asserting himself over the others. But Diotrephes is hardly someone we should view as a model of pastoral leadership. He rejected John, who was one of the Twelve, and spoke maliciously against him and his companions. John characterized this man’s conduct as “evil” and concluded that he “has not seen God” (v.11). John, on the other hand, described himself as an “elder.” Does this mean that the apostle was currently serving as a house church leader or could it mean he was part of the oversight team of a large city-wide church such as Ephesus?

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. [It may not seem possible to the author, but the same word is used 70 additional times in the book of Revelation where it is

universally understood to be speaking of spirit beings. Is it reasonable to conclude that in the seven times the word is used in chapters 2 and 3 it changes meanings from spirit beings to human beings?] 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? [The author has answered his own questions. The letters were written in Greek because they were written to the churches, not the angels. The angels were simply responsible for picking up the letters from John, who was in isolation on Patmos, and delivering them to the churches where they would be read. The angels were not responsible for causing the human churches to fulfill these admonitions; they were only responsible for delivering the 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. [The author states this conclusion on the basis that it “seems clear.” But to interpret seven angels as seven senior pastors when not one senior pastor has been mentioned up to this point in the Bible seems more like starting out with a conclusion and then twisting the facts to support the conclusion. This is how much doctrinal error began.]

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). [We agree with this professor that the early church in Rome was led by a “plurality of presbyters (elders).” This fits the New Testament model. We do not agree that the believers met exclusively in private homes. In Corinth, for example, there were occasions when “the whole church comes together in one place” (1 Corinthians 14:23).]

“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). [We agree that elders/bishops were intimately involved in the meetings which took place in private homes. But we do not believe their work was limited to such meetings. The Bible teaches that the elders of a church were jointly responsible for overseeing and shepherding the church, the whole church of the city; not that each elder was responsible for one house church (Acts 20:17, 28).

“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). [This conclusion is based on extra-biblical sources which are not suitable for establishing correct church structure. The issue is not, what was the structure in the second and third centuries? It is, what was the structure in the first century? To discover this we must stay in the Bible.]

“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). [The only convention of presbyters (elders) recorded in the Bible is found in Acts 20:17-38 when Paul called together the elders of Ephesus. This was in impromptu meeting initiated by Paul on the occasion of his passing by on his way to Jerusalem. This is not to say that the elders did not meet together on a regular basis. We believe they must have gathered routinely for discussion, planning, and ministry. We acknowledge that Acts 13:1-3 may be referencing an elder meeting but we cannot state this with certainty. If it was, then it must be acknowledged that the five men named had the authority to act in behalf of the entire church of Antioch. We would also acknowledge that the Acts 15 meeting included the elders of Jerusalem, but it also consisted of the apostles, men from another assembly, and other brethren of the Jerusalem church.]

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. [The only reason the author would draw this conclusion is because he has not allowed the Scriptures to speak for themselves but has instead read into various verses what is not explicitly stated. The result is that the various references to church leadership come across as vague, incomplete, and sometimes contradictory. But all this obscurity disappears when the same Scriptures are simply taken as they are.] 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. [The appearance of various forms of church government is the result of assemblies being in various stages of maturity. In the New Testament, newly planted churches were led by apostles (or their representatives) until such time as elders/bishops could be appointed to provide on-going oversight.] 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 find no evidence of church business meetings or elections (which is not to say that there were no business meetings). We find elders and deacons being appointed but find no basis for the election of leaders. If the author is suggesting that ministerial credentials, general conferences, home missions programs, foreign missions programs, and regional organization were accomplished by a centralized government with authority over the local assemblies, then we adamantly disagree. We do agree that many of the local assemblies worked together, exchanged ministries, and supported church planting efforts, particularly the work of Paul.]

We should follow New Testament principles in structuring local, regional, national, and international organization. [We would add that we also need to follow New Testament precedents and practices while avoiding the traditions received from the Catholic and Reformation churches.] We need to pay more attention to principles of team leadership and mutual accountability that are often neglected to our hurt. [Amen.] Nevertheless, to implement these principles we should not try to abolish the office of senior pastor of a local church. [Why not? What could it possibly hurt? If one experienced pastor is good, why wouldn't five be better?]

The author's entire case for the office of senior pastor rests upon supposition and leaps of logic. He states many conclusions without providing supporting information. He seems to have started with a conclusion and then set out to prove it. Yet, he fails to cite even one verse that specifically mentions or describes a single individual (other than founding apostles) with pastoral authority over a city-wide local assembly, with the possible exception of Diotrephes.

This article is replete with terms such as appears, seems, may have been, apparently, does not seem possible, and most probably. These words express hopeful conjecture but are hardly the language of sound doctrine. Rather than establishing a leadership structure around what the Bible seems to be indicating, let us stick with what is expressly stated. We believe that anyone who looks at the plain words of Scripture without the prejudicial lense of tradition and modern practice will immediately see that in the New Testament, each city had one local assembly meeting both publicly and in private homes and was led by a collective

group of men called elders or bishops (overseers). We find no chief elders or senior pastors other than Jesus Christ Himself, who is the Chief Shepherd (i.e. Senior Pastor) of the Church (1 Peter 5:4).

This response is merely that: a response. It is not intended to serve as a comprehensive study on the subject of plural pastoral leadership. For more extensive explanations of many of the points made in this response, please visit the Apostolic Free Library, which can be found at www.GloriousChurch.com.