Response to David A. Huston's Paper: "The New Testament Elders"

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This paper was presented by Gary Erickson at the May 2003 UGST Symposium as a response to David Huston's paper, The New Testament Elder. Both papers are presented on this website for the reader's consideration.

Introduction

David Huston is to be commended for writing a thought-provoking paper concerning the plurality of leadership in the local church. There is much in the paper I agree with, but in my response I will primarily focus on issues of disagreement rather than simply celebrate points of agreement. I have deduced from reading the paper that Huston believes every New Testament church was led by a pool of leaders frequently called "elders" and that these elders were appointed, mutually submitted to one another, were collegiate, and were from the local geographic area of the specific church in which they served. Huston states that the terms "bishop," "elder," "overseer," and "presbyter," found in the King James Version of the New Testament, are all referring to the same position; also, that "shepherd" or "pastor" (Greek, *poimen,* Hebrews 13:20; Ephesians 4:11; I Peter 2:25; I Peter 5:4) is not an appropriate term for human, church leadership. This office was reserved for Jesus Christ alone. Since there are no clear records of the New Testament churches electing a leader by the democratic process, he concludes that this is an inappropriate procedure for the contemporary church as well. Huston believes the New Testament church leadership structure and ministry are to be emulated in today's church in strict detail.

I will seek in my response to show that Huston fails to be convincing with some of his projected ideas due to the fact that he ignores the diversity and complexity of ministry in the early church. He fails to explore the cultural milieu in which the first church operated. He fails to delve into the possible implications of various leadership terms used in the New Testament, and his explicit conclusions fail to consider the fluid nature of apostolic polity. I will attempt to show that the technicalities of church leadership in the first century are not as important as the principles of leadership that can be drawn from their example.

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The New Testament Philosophy of Church Government

Jesus said, ". . . All power is given unto me in heaven and in earth" (Matthew 28:18). (See also John 5:27.) Paul proclaimed Jesus to be the head of the church (Ephesians 5:23). All human authority in the church is delegated authority and must emanate from Him. This truth is the cornerstone of the foundation upon which the church is built (Ephesians 2:20).

It is important to consider the premise from which the early church built its forms of leadership. Many terms are used in the New Testament for leaders: bishops, elders, apostles, prophets, teachers, overseers, administrators, and presbyters. Terms denoting officialdom are conspicuously missing from the New Testament. The term "minister" (Greek, *diakoneo*) is used frequently to describe the function of workers in the church. It means "to be an attendant, i.e. wait upon, . . . technically to act as a Christian deacon. [1]" It is used to describe the role of a servant who dutifully waits on his master's table. The distinction between the servant and his master was great at the time of the New Testament church. This was a radical departure from the normal relationships of a Greek master and his slave. From this, one can conclude that New Testament office-holders are primarily fellow believers rather than dignitaries. Any office in rank came secondary to servant hood. You never find the term "priest" as a designation of Christian leadership. The Scripture is replete with assurances of the priesthood of all believers.

> Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, an holy priesthood, to offer up spiritual sacrifices, acceptable to God by Jesus Christ. . . . But ye are a chosen generation, a royal priesthood, an holy nation, a peculiar people; that ye should shew forth the praises of him who hath called you out of darkness into his marvelous light: (II Peter 2:5; 9).

Each believer can be instructed directly from the Lord (I John 2:27). They can be empowered to speak the word of the Lord (Acts 4:31; 8:4; 11:19; and Matthew 10:27). Each person is encouraged to take part in the worship service with hymns, testimonies and particular manifestation of gifts (I Corinthians 14:26). The entire church is instructed by Paul to partake of the Lord's Supper and is given exhortations concerning its proper administration (I Corinthians 11). Prayer is expected on the part of all believers (Acts 2:42 and I Timothy 2:1). The priestly task of mediating between the believers and God is the responsibility of all Christians. The Christian's whole life is to be given to God as a "living sacrifice" (Romans 12:1).

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[1] Strong's Electronic Concordance, *PC Study Bible*, Tri-Star Publishing, 1989.

The need for leaders, or groups of leaders, flows out of this definition of ministry. The New Testament gives us the clear presence of such leadership, but the existence of a ruling class having absolute authority never exists.

Leaders were expected to have good moral character. The two lists of qualifications (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9) give at least 22 qualifications which may be grouped into four categories: personal character, public testimony, family, and ministry. [2]"

Historical Development of New Testament Leadership

In order to understand the nature of Christian leadership in the New Testament church and to comprehend the principles that are applicable to today's church, a chronological look at its development can be helpful. New Testament leadership evolved from Jewish roots and continued to be nuanced through the needs of a Gentile church. David Steele states:

> The development of leadership roles and authority in the New Testament is a process. No one conception exists throughout the record. Therefore it is important to show the various stages of that development. Within each stage, one must delineate the function of church leaders, as well as address the issue of authority. [3]

Then as now, various times and circumstances will necessitate a response from the church that will facilitate the Great Commission in the most effective means possible. Paul expresses this principle in the flowing words:

> And unto the Jews I became as a Jew, that I might gain the Jews; to them that are under the law, as under the law, that I might gain them that are under the law; To them that are without law, as without law, (being not without law to God, but under the law to Christ,) that I might gain them that are without law. To the weak became I as weak, that I might gain the weak: I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some (I Corinthians 9:20-22). [4]

Jesus Christ is the head of the church and the twelve disciples were His second in command: "And are built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Jesus

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[2] Ed Glasscock, "The Bible Concept of Elder," *Bibliotheca Sacra*, Jan-Mar, 1987, 73.

[3] David A. Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, (Lanham, MD: University Press of America, Inc., 1986), xi.

[4] All scriptural quotations in this paper are taken fro the King James Version of the Bible, unless otherwise noted.

Christ himself being the chief cornerstone (Ephesians 2:20). These apostles, who were eyewitnesses to the resurrected Christ and were hand-picked by Jesus, were the first leaders of the church. Hence, a plurality of leadership under a single head existed among the apostles. [5]"

> The churches were formed by itinerant apostles who believed themselves called of God to this highest honor (Galatians 1:1). They left behind them, as a rule, certain trustworthy members of the community organization, who were empowered to conduct the affairs of the churches (Acts 6:5). There was, however, no definite method of procedure, for sometimes the apostles appointed the heads of the community (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5) ...and sometimes they were chosen by the churches . .. the latter procedure steadily increased in frequency.[6]

Respect was shown for special talents and abilities among the leaders, especially Peter (Acts 2:14-40). Matthew portrays Jesus as placing Peter in charge of the church (16:18-19; 18:15-18). Jesus would build His church on this potentially promising apostle and the gates of hell would not prevail against it.

At a later point in time, elders apparently appeared first in the church in Jerusalem. [7]"It could have been Jewish elders converted to the Christian faith (Acts 6:7). It is impossible to know when the concept of elders began exactly, but we know they existed at the time when the collection was brought to Jerusalem in Acts 11. In Acts 15, the elders acted under the direction of James as a governing body for the entire church. On this occasion, James is unmistakably the leader of leaders.

The Palestinian church also undoubtedly used some secondary names for its leaders. Philip is referred to as an evangelist (Acts 8 and 21:8). Agabus is called a prophet (Acts 11:27-30 and 21:10 ff). The seven chosen in Acts chapter six are given the ministry of service resembling somewhat the function elsewhere described by the title deacon. [8]"Ordination was another institution borrowed from Judaism.

> This act of ordination was the mode by which they conferred authority and power. In the New Testament those who commissioned the seven in Acts

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[5] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models,* 5.

[6] Samuel Macauley Jackson, D.D., LL.D., *The New Schaff-Herzog Encyclopedia of Religious Knowledge*, Vol. IX, (New York, NY: Funk and Wagnalls Company, 1911), 202.

[7] Ernest Kaesemann, *Essays On New Testament Themes*, trans. By W.J. Montague, (Naperville, IL: Alec R. Allenson, Inc., 1964), 86.

[8] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 6.

6:3-6, and appointed the elders to the Pauline churches, used this laying on of hands. Thus an individual person (s) became the primary giver of authority to, not only the apostles, but to the elders as well.[9]

At first the developing structure emphasized the plurality of leadership. However, to facilitate decisiveness, the Palestinian church began to bestow special authority on an ex-officio head. Plurality of leadership was retained, but alongside it there developed the leader of leaders. This growing influence of the single leader was also reflected in their understanding that the source of authority lay with the individual.[10]

The first Christians were Jewish; therefore, they had no buildings in which to worship. The Gentile believers were no better off, since they came from the temples of cults and mystery religions. The New Testament church was new and lacking in finances and facilities for worship. They did not assemble in sanctuaries as we do today, but believers gathered in houses of those who were wealthy enough to have large homes (Romans 16:4, 5, 14, 15; I Corinthians 16:19; Colossians 4:15; Philemon 2). In the first chapter of Acts the disciples gathered in an upper room of a house for the final meal with Jesus (Acts 1:13). Saul made havoc of the church going from house to house making arrests (Acts 8:3). John Mark's mother held a prayer meeting in her house (Acts 12:12). Jason's household was arrested by Jewish enemies (Acts 17:5). Paul reminded the elders of his teaching from "house to house" (Acts 20:20). Paul suggests that he used his own hired house to teach and preach in Rome (Acts 28:30). Campbell observes:

So long as the local church was confined to one household, the household provided the leadership of the church. . . .Those who came into it will have been to a large extent constrained by the norms of hospitality to treat the host as master of ceremonies, especially, if he was a person of greater social standing or age than themselves. The table moreover was his table, and if prayers were to be said, or bread or wine was to be offered, the part was naturally his to play.[11]

We could assume that the host and head of the family was the most readily considered leader for the church in his house.

[9] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 7.

[10] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 7.

[11] R. Alastair Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority Within Earliest Christianity*, (Edinburgh, Scotland: T and T Clark, LTD, 1994), 126.

As the churches grew, the leadership needed to be distinguished from the laity with some title or appellation. But no one would think of calling the head of the household the elder, for the simple reason that, as we have seen, elder normally occurs in the plural, and the elders would thus be a collective title for the leaders of several leading households acting together. [12] As numbers grew it was impossible for the entire church in a city to gather in one house. The leaders of house-hold churches would need to relate and act together in a representative capacity and at this point nothing could be more natural than to refer to their leaders collectively as the elders. [13] Apostolic letters seemed to have been written to a number of churches within a city to be read in a collective gathering or to be circulated and read in each house-church. According to Campbell, some scholars believe the following:

> At some point in the first ten or fifteen years of the church's existence an office of elder was created similar to that of the Jewish synagogue, either to succeed the Twelve, whose members began to leave Jerusalem in order to preach the gospel, or as assistance to the apostles in the administration of the church. James replaced Peter as the leader of the church and the elders took the place of the apostles.[14]

This view can be enhanced by the fact that Apostles and elders appear together at the church at Jerusalem on three different occasions. They appear without explanation when the Antioch church sent an offering to the church at Jerusalem (Acts 11:30). Secondly, they appear a number of times at the council in Jerusalem (Acts 15). The final mention is when the Jerusalem church received Paul's visit (Acts 21:18). This period of dual leadership could be indicative of a time of training and phasing in the elder's role of leadership. This development of church leadership is complicated further by the fact that others are called "apostles"—not just the original Twelve.[15] The ministry of prophet and teacher must have carried some authority to be effective. The apostles, prophets and teachers were given a clear order of rank: "And God hath set some in the church, first apostles, secondarily prophets, thirdly teachers, after that miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, governments, diversities of tongues" (I Corinthians 12:28). These charismatic gifts of ministry were given importance and value based upon their contribution to the church.

Campbell and Reierson state: "No single clear pattern of formal ministry is

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[12] Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority Within Earliest Christianity,* 130.

[13] Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority Within Earliest Christianity,* 130.

[14] Campbell, *The Elders: Seniority Within Earliest Christianity,* 160.

[15] The following were called apostles: Barnabas (Acts 14:14), Andronicus and Junia (Romans 16:7). There were false apostles in the church (II Corinthians 11:13 and Revelation 2:2). Matthias replaced Judas as an apostle (Acts 1:26) and Paul declared his apostleship numerous times.

present in the Biblical period. . . . During the period in which the New Testament was written, institutional patterns of the Christian church were fluid. . . . It seems reasonable to assume that in such a fluid period rigid distinctions had not been developed. . . [16] They simplify the leadership into two categories. The first group includes elders, bishops and deacons who are directly concerned with sustaining and keeping order within community. Their permanence in the local community is not always shared with the apostle, prophet and teacher. Unlike the local community leaders, the itinerant ministries were not ordained, but their ministry rested upon their inspired character.

The apostle Paul's conversion to Christianity was a phenomenal event. He became a Christian leader par excellence. The uncontested letters of Paul never mention elders. Yet Paul did refer to other leaders, giving them definite names. [17] Some of these have been mentioned earlier in this paper. Distinctions between these various charismata were not clearly delineated. A prophet could teach at times and a teacher could prophesy. Paul functioned in many capacities. When Paul was sent out from Antioch, it was prophets and teachers, rather than elders, who sent him out to minister to the Gentiles (Acts 13:1-3). The basis of authority for Paul was one's call and one's ability to perform a particular ministry in the community, rather than one's status. [18] In Paul's letters to the church at Corinth there are no elders, bishops, or deacons. Paul never addresses a single leader or group of leaders, even when dealing with restoration of order in the church.[19] As a result, a large group of diverse people often shared the leadership. . . .Thus the community itself became the predominate human bestower of authority. . . . No set pattern apparently existed for determining who should take on various ministries. [20] The church choose Titus to be a fellow worker with Paul: "But thanks be to God, which put the same earnest care into the heart of Titus for you. . . .And not that only, but who was also chosen of the churches to travel with us with this grace, which is administered by us to the glory of the same Lord, and declaration of your ready mind" (II Corinthians 8:16; 19). Even though Paul frequently declared his authority of apostleship as coming from God, he partly gained his authority from the church at Antioch.

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[16] Gary C. Campbell and Gary B. Reierson, *The Gift of Administration*, (Philadelphia, PA: The Westminister Press, 1981), 22-23.

[17] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 8.

[18] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 8.

[19] Paul deals with order in worship, the Lord's Supper, speaking in tongues and other gifts of the Spirit, church discipline, delivering of alms, and settling disputes. It appears that each person was equally responsible for whatever happened (I Corinthians).

[20] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 8.

Eventually, the Pauline letters mention other official-sounding titles for local leadership in the churches such as "bishop" or "overseer" (I Timothy 3:2, [Gk. *episkpos*]) or "deacons" (Phillipians 1:1, [Gk. *kiadonos*]). Yet these terms were probably still very imprecise and indefinite. Paul never addressed them with specific charges or responsibilities. Neither did he assume that they had jurisdiction over certain matters. . . [21]

The Palestine and Pauline traditions merged in Acts 20. The leaders at Ephesus were called elders: "And from Miletus he sent to Ephesus, and called the elders of the church. . . . Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood" (Acts 20:17; 28). The author of Hebrews requested submission to these leaders: "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 conversation" (Hebrews 13:7). A listing of leaders is found in the Ephesians: apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors, and teachers (Ephesians 4:11-12). Their function was to equip believers for the work of ministry, for building the body of Christ.

Peter's epistles and Jude show further development in the process of church leadership. In a later development the elders appeared to entirely replace the apostles, and therefore become the sole chief authorities (I Peter 3:2 and Jude 17). [22] The second and third epistles of John are especially informative since they are written by an elder writing with assumed authority and dignity. Although he is a negative example, Diotrephes was a powerful leader in the church (III John 9). His authority seems to include the power to excommunicate from the church (verse 10). His authority doesn't seem to go beyond the limits of his congregation. He, along with Titus and Timothy, are the closest thing to New Testament monarchical bishops of later times.

James spoke of elders (5:14) being supportive of the sick by praying and anointing with oil. He also suggests moderation and restraint in the multiplication of teachers in the church (3:1).[23]

The fullest expression of the final stage of leadership development in the New Testament is the pastoral epistles. In these letters the name "overseer" re-emerges

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[21] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 11.

[22] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 13.

[23] The Greek word *didaskalos* (teacher) in James 3:1 is translated "masters" in the KJV.

as a designation for part, if not all, of the elders. [24] The author of the letter to Titus substitutes the term "overseer" (bishop) for the term "elder" (1:5; 7). It is interesting that the term "overseer" is singular.

> Possibly, the overseer was the leader of the elders, yet still one of them himself. The author of I Timothy supports this theory when he writes, "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor" (5:17). This double honor could have been the awarding of the position of overseer to those elders who ruled, as opposed to those who did not.[25]

If overseers were elders, this could have been a part of a developing function of an overseer and a group of elder colleagues. Steele states:

> The pastoral leadership retained plurality of leadership, common to the whole New Testament, and crucial to a correct understanding of ministry through the priesthood of all believers. Yet, the single leadership of one person, modeled by James in Jerusalem, begins to take shape in these originally Pauline churches. Hence this model not only preserves the multiplicity of input and insight into the leadership of the church, but also provides a vehicle for quick, clear, and decisive action through a single, primary, yet non-dictatorial, authority figure.[26]

As the church matured, different needs brought unique patterns of leadership. The Jerusalem church had a need for quick, definite, clear-cut decisions. Therefore, authority was given to individuals. In the Pauline epistles the need for community building resulted in the predominance of authority being given to the community. In the later church the need for stability and strength against false doctrines brought a merging of the two —an emphasis being placed on tradition, which we know as Scripture.

Response to Specific Positions in Huston's paper

Plurality of Leadership in Today's Church: Huston has called attention to the plurality of leadership in the New Testament church and he believes it should be implemented today. He believes each church should be led by a pool of leaders having equal authority and always functioning as a unified body. Huston does

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[24] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 15.

[25] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 15.

[26] Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church, Biblical Principles and Secular Models*, 18.

service to the contemporary church by calling attention to this multiplicity of leaders. Some pastors today are expected to be an administrator, preacher, teacher, councilor, prophet, evangelist, worship leader, maintenance engineer, servant, and various other jobs his congregation might impose. As a result, the minister suffers burn-out and the congregation suffers neglect. Identifying talent and then delegating responsibility to those best suited for specific jobs among the laity is the only way to build a prosperous church.

Huston's insistence upon elders functioning as a co-equal, collegial entity without a single leadership head is going beyond the New Testament historical record. There are no detailed descriptions as to how the elders worked together, and there is insufficient evidence of titles for leaders of leaders, but that should not lead one to conclude that they functioned without a preeminent leader. This is a doctrine based upon silence. We do know that Jesus was the leader of the Twelve, Peter was given the "keys to the kingdom of God" and became the spokesman for the gospel, and James was the leader of leaders in Jerusalem bringing together consensus and acting as the spokesman. Any group working together to accomplish unified goals must have a chairman, president, coordinator, or spokesman. The headless idea suggested by Huston lacks a model in Scripture, history, and in contemporary times. The concept is only speculation based on bits and pieces of textual fragments. It portrays an idealistic expectation due to the fact that it is unworkable within the framework of normal human behavior.

Nevertheless, pastors would do a service to the church and to themselves by recruiting, training, and engaging workers in the leadership of the local church. These trained and gifted people could form a biblical plurality of leadership, allowing greater use of talent and providing the pastor with a great resource of council and ministry. Many of our larger churches have pastoral staffs and a board of church leaders. This arrangement meets the needs of the contemporary church and does not violate biblical standards.[27]

The Church and Democracy: Huston believes voting for leaders conflicts with Scripture. Here again, he is forming an argument from silence. We do not know

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[27] The pastoral staff working in such ministries as youth, children, administration, outreach, education, and music could function as "elders" and the church board could function as "deacons." Although this may not be a perfect replica of the New Testament model (That model is impossible to ascertain.), it has enough characteristics to find biblical support and to meet the modern needs of the local church. The church today has vastly different needs from the New Testament church. The need for helping the poor has greatly diminished due to government programs. The ease of communication and travel has been radically enhanced. Our times are more sophisticated, people are more educated, and the culture of modernity is permeating every level of life. These complex times will require a diversity of operation to meet the demands of the Great Commission. It seems that the ambiguity of the New Testament church structure permits the church with options to do what is most efficient.

how all of the leaders were selected in the New Testament. It is certain that some were appointed. It is not always clear who is doing the appointing and what criteria are used for the selection. Since the church is the Spirit-filled body of Christ and is urged to "know them who labor among you" (1 Thessalonians 5:12), it must have the authority to approve leadership. The church is also urged to have unity (Ephesians 4:3). The best way a church can determine or measure unity of support for a leader is by voting. The lack of explicit scriptural guidance in this area permits the church with some flexibility to vote or to appoint as the circumstances might require.

Some pastors are multi-talented, intelligent, spiritual and insightful. Their board of directors (elders) might be more useful to help spread support among the members for the direction of the church than to provide advice and council. Other pastors may need extensive input from a board of directors in order to supplement his or her deficiencies. The diversity of situations and leadership mixes will not work with the rigid structure proposed by Huston.

Huston appeals to the analogy of shepherd and sheep to defend his argument against voting members. I think his analogy is being taken too far. "Sheep" are members of the body of Christ, they are a generation of priests, and are filled with the Holy Spirit. They are not dumb, inept creatures with no ability to choose their leaders. Huston warns against creating a gulf between the leadership and the laity as being a biblically unsupportable position. His point is well taken.

Titles for Local Church Leaders: Huston refers to Ephesians 4:11 as the only one place in the New Testament where church leaders are called "pastors," and then he goes on to say: "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." He suggests that our current use of the term "pastor" is inappropriate since he believes it is reserved for Jesus Christ only. Jesus is certainly the "Chief shepherd" (I Peter 5:4) who provides a model for every pastor to follow (I Peter 2:21). If a local church leader is called "pastor" only once in the New Testament, that is enough to make it usable for a church leader today.