



# Is the Early Church Leadership Pattern for Today?

Thus far, this series has reviewed various aspects of church leadership.

- Part 1 gave an overview of various types of church leadership (congregational, presbyterian, elder board rule, senior pastor, house church, professional clergy, and plurality of elders).
- Part 2 noted the interchangeability of the terms *elder*, *overseer*, *bishop*, *shepherd*, and *pastor* and demonstrated that these terms are scriptural names for the same group of church leaders.
- Part 3 indicated that the New Testament pattern of church leadership was a plurality of elders who jointly provided spiritual oversight in and for a church family.
- Part 4 reviewed singular leaders in the Bible as well as when and how the singular leader concept was introduced to the church.
- Part 5 focused on the most important aspect of church leadership, the fact that Jesus Christ is the Head of His Church.
- Part 6 reviewed a church leader's personal characteristics, all of which are the predictable results of faithful growth in Christ.
- Part 7 emphasized the responsibilities and qualifications of church leaders.

Part 8 is the final presentation in this series. This study emphasizes that a plurality of elders – the New Testament plan for church leadership – remains the model for church leadership today. Some churches and denominations may believe that this leadership model is irrelevant on grounds of convenience and/or tradition, but two observations about the early church are biblically indisputable.

1. Each church in the first century was to have a plurality of scripturally qualified elders who ministered together as servant leaders. [See **Church Leadership – Part 3** at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Church%20Leadership-Plurality%20of%20Elders.pdf>]
2. Jesus is Head of His Church, and there is no scriptural basis for anyone else to assume sole spiritual authority over a church family. [See **Church Leadership – Part 5** at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Jesus%20Christ%20is%20Head%20of%20His%20Church.pdf>]

These two observations, however, are largely unrelated to today's accepted leadership model in which one human leader exercises sole authority over a church or group of churches. Examples of this traditional leadership structure – also known as monarchical or hierarchical church leadership – include Pope, Senior Pastor, Cardinal, Denominational Superintendent, or a Country, State, or Regional Church Director. The singular leader model prevalent today is centuries old yet, in spite of its familiarity, is completely foreign to New Testament teaching.

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If you have not yet read the in-depth booklet **Restoring the Eldership to its Rightful Place in the Church** you are encouraged to do so. You can read it online, chapter by chapter, at <http://biblicaleldership.org/booklet>. Not only is biblical eldership clearly presented, but the chapter Biblical Evidence for Pastoral Leadership by the Plurality of Elders is compelling and particularly useful (<http://biblicaleldership.org/biblical-evidence-pastoral-leadership>).

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## REASON FOR MAINTAINING A HIERARCHICAL LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE: TRADITION OVER TRUTH

Those espousing a monarchical leadership structure (a singular leader model) may not realize that New Testament teaching does not support this model. Instead, the singular leader concept in today's church world is based on a centuries-old traditional practice. **Church Leadership – Part 4** presents the origin of this single leader model, noting:

Even though a plurality of elders was the leadership norm in first century churches, Ignatius of Antioch (a church leader in the early second century) was seemingly the first to depart from this established practice.  
[See <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Singular%20Leaders%20in%20the%20Bible.pdf>]

Renowned biblical scholar W.E. Vine described the departure from the New Testament plan for church leadership as follows:

The course of departure from apostolic teaching and precept is easily traceable. Human pride and rivalry, a struggle for ascendancy and power, early produced a class of ecclesiastical officials who obtained their position in a manner very different from what is set forth in Scripture. The case of Diotrephes (3 John 9) provides an illustration.

The method was adopted, too, of electing church officials by vote. Hence the popular or the strong man obtained the coveted position. Dependence on the Spirit of God and the recognition of the evidences of His operation gave place to officialism and formality. The evil spread gradually but surely, and eventually became general.”

[*The Church and the Churches*, chp. 11, at <http://awildernessvoice.com/Church&Churches-Chapt11.html> ]

Remarkably, Christians through the centuries have either ignored or overlooked biblical teaching that focuses on the pattern of New Testament (1<sup>st</sup> century) church leadership. As a result, a flawed leadership model based primarily on tradition instead of biblical truth has been perpetuated.

## **ANSWERS TO COMMON QUESTIONS AND OBJECTIONS TO NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH LEADERSHIP**

Those accepting the concept of a sole human leader over a church assume that its theological and historical roots are grounded in Scripture. They sometimes point to Bible passages to support their claim. The arguments they make, however, fail on many fronts. [*Some of these arguments follow, along with biblically based refutations, courtesy of Bo Salisbury who wrote the following in an elders' internet forum in the late 1990's. The following was also part of Apologetic on Biblical Eldership, a work by Mr. Salisbury that is no longer in print.*]

**Question** – Isn't it probable that the plural references to elders in the New Testament refer to individual leaders of house churches in a city or region and not to multiple leaders in a single church?

- When the New Testament writers address believers in cities, they refer to them as “the church,” but when addressing saints in a region they refer to “the churches.” In both cases, the elders are addressed in the plural. When the apostles referred to believers in a city, no matter how large or small or with any number of house churches, this group was regarded as one church. You read of the “church at Rome” or the “church at Ephesus,” not the “churches at Rome” or the “churches at Ephesus.” Acts 14:23 provides an example of Paul and Barnabas appointing multiple elders in each church (each city). [*Acts 14:23, When they had appointed elders for them in every church, having prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*]

**Statement** – James at Jerusalem is an example of a church under the leadership of a single pastor or overseer. At the council of Jerusalem, he gave his judgment, proving that he had the authority to do so.

- James is never identified as the monarchical overseer or senior pastor of the church in Jerusalem, so any such designation would be speculative. It is also interesting to note that almost every mention of James in the book of Acts mentions him in the company of the elders.
- If the Jerusalem church was made up of house-churches, each having its own pastors and elders, then James, like Timothy and Titus, would be more like a Roman Catholic bishop than a modern pastor.
- Many scholars think that James was one of the leading men at Jerusalem because of his wisdom and piety. But, he was still a member of the presbytery (the elders) with no special title or office.

Another example of this condition is the apostle Peter. He was seemingly the leading apostle at that time, but he never received an honorific title or exercised any hierarchical authority over the twelve. The twelve are a good example of oversight by a plurality. Peter was on such equal footing with the rest of the apostles that Paul withstood him to his face when he was in error. [*Galatians 2:11, But when Cephas came to Antioch, I opposed him to his face, because he stood condemned.*]

- James was presiding over the council at Jerusalem, and he summarized the arguments and proposed the solution which those in attendance considered best. If his pronouncement was based on the authority of his office at Jerusalem, then he was truly out of order because there were apostles present. The context makes it clear that James's judgment was not based on his authority but, instead, was a summation of what had been said during the council.

Many churches governed by a plurality of elders today have one elder who, for the sake of order, is the spokesman for the group under certain circumstances. This is as plausible an explanation for the ministry of James at the Council of Jerusalem as any.

**Statement** – Titus and Timothy are examples of a pastor overseeing a congregation.

- We are never told in scripture that either Timothy or Titus were senior pastors. The descriptions we have of their

travels with Paul and his special assignments for each of them suggest a much different ministry than what we have come to know as a senior pastor. Many commentators believe that they fit into the category of evangelist. Indeed, Paul exhorts Timothy to “do the work of an evangelist” (2 Timothy 4:5), but probably the most accurate description is that of Paul’s representative. This conclusion is based on their authority to perform certain duties for the apostle in different cities and regions. [2 Timothy 4:5, *But you, be sober in all things, endure hardship, do the work of an evangelist, fulfill your ministry.*]

- Titus was left in Crete to set in order the churches in every city there. He was not sent to a single church but to many. If Titus was occupying the office of overseer or senior pastor, he more closely resembled the Roman Catholic bishop or archbishop than a senior pastor in a local congregation. The same is true of Timothy in Ephesus. If Ephesus was made up of a number of house-churches which were governed by a single pastor or overseer, then Timothy was clearly not anything like the twentieth century pastor but, instead, was at the top of the hierarchical pyramid in Ephesus.
- Paul tells Timothy that elders who rule well are to be given material assistance from the church (1 Timothy 5:17). If Timothy was the pastor of a single church, then this passage raises some real problems. First, if elders are simply advisers to the pastor who governs the congregation, then why were elders ruling, preaching, and teaching? Secondly, the idea of an elder receiving wages when there is a “full-time” pastor in the congregation is completely foreign to our modern concept of the pastor. [1 Timothy 5:17, *The elders who rule well are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching.*]
- If Titus and Timothy were “senior pastors” or overseers of a local congregation, then it would seem very curious for Paul to be concerned about appointing qualified men who desired the office of overseer. If there was only one pastor or overseer of a congregation, then the position had already been filled by Titus in his fellowship and Timothy in his.

**Statement** – Ephesians 4:11 states there is an office of pastor-teacher. [Ephesians 4:11, *And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers.*]

- Nowhere in the New Testament is there an account of the apostles appointing a pastor-teacher. There are no epistles or instructions addressed to anyone holding the office of pastor-teacher. This particular verse is more concerned with the gifted individuals given by God for the establishment and growth of the church. Some Bible students believe that a “pastor-teacher” is actually an elder, since elders are admonished in a number of passages to shepherd (pastor), to be able to teach, and to protect the church from false teachers.

**Statement** – When reference is made to elders (plural) in the New Testament, it is referring to single leaders of house churches in a city or region. Each church had three orders of church officers — an overseer (bishop or “senior pastor”), a group of elders who acted as his advisers, and deacons.

- This notion is speculative since there are no statements in the New Testament that indicate such was the case. The New Testament never teaches the existence of a form of church leadership often described as a “monarchical episcopacy” (a primary overseer, or “senior pastor” with elders who functioned as his advisers).
- The original language doesn’t allow us to make the assumption that many independent house-churches are being addressed in apostolic correspondence. Any conclusion that Paul is addressing more than one body of believers in an area would be speculative.

When Paul wrote to the church at Philippi, he only recognized two groups of ministry leaders, deacons and overseers. If there was a third order, elders who acted as advisers to the overseers (“senior pastors”), we should expect Paul to greet them as well. But, there were clearly only two groups of ministry leaders that he addressed.

Church history substantiates this observation when, after the turn of the first century, Polycarp wrote to the church (singular again) at Philippi and made no mention at all of a primary overseer or “senior pastor.” He only knows of deacons and elders. So, like Paul, he seems to understand that “overseer” was the same as elder. It is also interesting to note that Polycarp, the disciple of the apostle John, did not consider himself a monarchical bishop (a “senior pastor”) but, instead, described himself as a member of the presbytery (one of the elders).

- There are no New Testament records of a monarchical bishop or “senior pastor” appointed over a church. There are no letters or instructions related to any leadership position that would approximate a monarchical bishop. There are no biblical qualifications given for a “senior pastor” who is over a group of elders. There are qualifications given for an overseer, but in Titus and Acts the word translated “overseer” is used interchangeably with the word for “elder.” On the other hand, there are numerous references to a plurality of elders in a single church in the New Testament.

**Statement** – Elders are always spoken of in the plural and overseers in the singular, so they denote separate offices.

- Scripture uses these two words interchangeably. The use of the singular form of the word translated as “overseer” is thought to be generic when listing the qualifications for anyone desiring the office and not referring to one overseer

ruling a church. Paul uses the generic singular in the same letter (1 Timothy) to describe a woman who is “a widow indeed” (5:5), but we wouldn’t conclude that there can only be one widow per congregation simply because Paul goes from the plural to the singular. The fact that the monarchical episcopacy (bishop or “senior pastor” style of leadership) did not come into existence until long after Paul’s death also makes it improbable that Paul is referring to a single bishop/overseer ruling a congregation. [1 Timothy 5:5, *Now she who is a widow indeed and who has been left alone, has fixed her hope on God and continues in entreaties and prayers night and day.*]

- In his epistle to the Philippians, Paul greets the overseers (plural). These are the same officers whom Polycarp addresses decades later as elders in his letter to the church at Philippi.

**Statement** – Rule by a plurality of elders doesn’t work. It’s not practical.

- The same can be said of any form of church government, including oversight by a single pastor. We all know of churches and denominations which hold a variety of forms of government, and they have experienced liberal tendencies, schisms, and all manner of problems. The fact is there have been quite a large number of churches throughout history which have been led by a plurality of elders and have been quite successful.

To summarize – The sole leader concept is a well-established practice in today’s churches. In spite of its use over many centuries, however, this leadership model is not based on New Testament teaching but, instead, demonstrates that tradition has triumphed over New Testament teaching and early church practices.

### **REASON FOR MAINTAINING A HIERARCHICAL LEADERSHIP STRUCTURE: INSTITUTION OVER ORGANISM**

Another factor that has influenced the practice of having one human leader over a church is the church’s primary characteristic. Is it an organism or an institution?

In determining whether your church family is more like a spiritual organism or corporate institution, note the following from **Church – Do You Know What It Means?**

[See <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Church-Do%20You%20Know%20What%20It%20Means.pdf>]

The word translated *church* comes from *ekklesia* (transliterated from the Greek language) and is phonetically pronounced *ek-klay-see'-ah*. This word is formed from two Greek words: *ek* (meaning “from” or “out of”) coupled with a derivative of *ka-leo* (which means “to call, invite, or name”). Thus, the basic meaning of *ekklesia* is “to call out of” or, with relation to a group of people, the “called out ones.” It is understandable that *ekklesia* has been translated as “congregation” or “assembly” or “company” although these words dilute the core meaning that *ekklesia* (*church*) has a greater emphasis on people being “called out” by God instead of their meeting together.

Even though *ekklesia* can refer to any “called out” group assembled for a specific purpose, a New Testament *church* differs from all other assemblies, groups, or gatherings. What is the distinction? It is this—A New Testament *church* is a divinely birthed **organism** (emphasizing life, growth, love, relationships) that is fundamentally different from a humanly formed **organization** (emphasizing structure, authority, goals, accomplishments). This critical distinction is often blurred in today’s church world.

A scriptural church is a spiritual organism, and Jesus Christ is the unquestioned Head of His church. On the other hand, a church whose life and ministry more closely parallels that of a modern day corporation typically has an “over-under” authority structure that is dependent on a single human leader. The practice of one believer exercising inherent authority over other believers, however, is a violation of our Lord’s instructions to His disciples in Matthew 20:25-28.

**Matthew 20:25-28**, But Jesus called them to Himself and said, “You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and *their* great men exercise authority over them.<sup>26</sup> It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,<sup>27</sup> and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;<sup>28</sup> just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many.”

As the above passage indicates, great leaders in God’s eyes are not those exercising authority through a hierarchical position but, instead, are those who have a practice of serving. These humble disciples of Christ are those who consistently encourage others to grow in Christ by obedience to God’s Word. These servants minister in accordance with the Holy Spirit’s guidance and power. These servants live to bring honor and glory to the Lord Jesus Christ. These servants are integral to the realization of authentic Body Life. These servants are the models to follow with regard to church leadership in the Body of Christ.

**In Church – Up Close and Personal** [<http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Church-Up%20Close%20and%20Personal.pdf>] we are reminded of the spiritual life resident in the church, the body of Christ.

When describing the church, the New Testament often uses the metaphor of the body. The church is the body of Christ. Jesus is the head of that Body. As the head, Christ is the source of the church’s strength and life. He sustains the church,

and He causes her to grow. He controls her movements and provides all that the body needs to function harmoniously.

In Matthew 16:18, Jesus said the church is His possession, and He will build it.

**Matthew 16:18**, “I also say to you that you are Peter, and upon this rock I will build My church; and the gates of Hades will not overpower it.” *[Underlining added for emphasis]*

He accomplishes this because He is the Head of the body, as Colossians 1:18 states, “He is also head of the body, the church; and He is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that He Himself will come to have first place in everything.” *[Underlining added]*

Since a church is a spiritual body, it is organized. That organization, however, depends on biblically obedient believers who minister in accordance with their spiritual giftedness and in cooperation with other believers. In performing various tasks and ministries, gifted leaders will often serve with fellow believers to obtain appropriate results. **Church Leadership – Part 4** explained it this way:

There will be times in the life of a church today when a particular elder in the elder leadership team assumes a singular leadership role for a specific task or ministry. When various ministry opportunities arise, different elders may exercise appropriate singular leadership roles in light of each one’s interest and spiritual giftedness related to a particular ministry or challenge. However, no one elder is to be an authority over other elders or the church family. The Lord Jesus Christ holds that sovereign position. *[See page 5 of <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Singular%20Leaders%20in%20the%20Bible.pdf>]*

It is important to remember that every member of the Body of Christ is to be led and empowered by the Holy Spirit, who indwells every believer. There is no position in the Body of Christ that carries with it the unique privilege to receive divine guidance for all aspects of a church’s life and ministries. Aware of this reality, servant leaders are to minister in accordance with their spiritual giftedness for the common good with no desire or responsibility to exercise spiritual authority over fellow believers. Referring again to **Church Leadership – Part 4** (page 3), remember:

Even though the concept and practice of having a singular leader over a local church does not have adequate biblical support, one should not assume that those ministering in these positions (past or present) can be characterized as prideful or unqualified to serve in a leadership capacity. Many, if not most, of these leaders are known to love the Lord dearly, to be spiritually mature, and to be committed to the authority of God’s Word. However, a structure of church leadership is not validated by the life or spiritual commitment of one holding a leadership position nor is it validated by its extended use over many centuries. Leadership positions in a church family must be defined and established by the Word of God.

The vast majority of leaders in the first century church experienced the joyous freedom of spiritual ministry that was not linked to spiritual authority over fellow believers. It has been centuries, however, since the prominent view of church leadership emphasized servant leaders who encourage and walk beside fellow believers in ministry while, simultaneously, refusing a position of authority that is reserved for Jesus Christ alone. With God’s glory in mind, may we return to that era of servant leadership.

*[See also **Jesus IS Lord** at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Jesus%20IS%20Lord.pdf> and **Teamwork: Body Building with Divine Purposes** at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Teamwork.pdf>]*

## **CHALLENGES WITH REGARD TO CHANGE**

The conclusion of **Church Leadership – Part 4** stated:

There is no question that adapting to a plurality of elders form of church leadership from a singular leadership plan is a challenge. Even though such a leadership adjustment is biblically based, it can be difficult to understand and implement. It should be obvious that taking time to study what the Bible says about church leadership is integral for a church family to grow in Christ together. Praying together for God’s direction and timing is also a necessity.

Eventually, the practical implications of making any significant adjustments in church leadership should be prayerfully discussed among fellow believers. They should clearly communicate relevant information, both regarding the Scriptures as well as the needs of the congregation. They must also agree upon specific steps toward potential adjustments.

The timing of making any adjustment is greatly dependent on prayerful cooperation and mutual submission among members of the Body. Speed in making changes is not of paramount importance; after all, any leadership adjustments are deviating from an accepted pattern that has existed for 17 centuries. Patience must be exercised by all believers as each grapples with the process of biblical change that can impact and enhance the church’s life and ministry for years to come.

As believers who are committed to following God’s Word, we can be assured our Lord will empower us as we respond biblically to bring honor to His Name.

Biblically changing a church's structure and ministries presents both individual and group challenges. It takes effort and is often difficult, but it is possible through prayer and obedience to God's Word.

Prayerfully consider the following steps for changing from hierarchical leadership – one person having authority over a church via a pyramidal chain of command – to a plurality of scripturally qualified elders ministering jointly as servants based on their spiritual maturity and giftedness.

#### FIRST STEP . . . self-evaluation

- If you are a church leader, are you ready (even eager) to make whatever personal and ministry adjustments Scripture indicates? If you are, jump to the SECOND STEP below.
- If you are *not* willing to make scriptural changes in your life or ministry, then spend time in prayer and biblical study about being pliable in the Lord's hands for greater Christ-likeness and service in His Name.

#### SECOND STEP . . . study

- Study carefully what the New Testament says about church leadership and ministry.
- As part of your study, critique this Church Leadership series and the cross references listed in each article. In your critique, include specific references from God's Word (listing chapter and verse) that either dispute or support the claims and conclusions of various authors who have written on the subject. If you disagree with these authors, consider writing them with the specifics of your disagreement. Your communication should be for the glory of God with a view to increased maturity in Christ Jesus for all concerned. (*Refer to **Refuting False Teaching ... for God's Glory & Our Protection** at <http://wordtruth.org/PDF/Refuting%20False%20Teaching.pdf>*)

#### THIRD STEP . . . discussion and/or teaching on the subject

- When you recognize biblical changes that should be made in your church leadership practices, consider distributing or recommending this leadership series to others for their consideration. After prayerful study, the members of this group should meet to discuss leadership issues.
- If you are a teacher in your church, consider teaching a series on church leadership and possibly use this series as a companion study.

#### FOURTH STEP . . . more evaluation

- Evaluate your church family with regard to being an organism or an institution. As necessary, list potential adjustments that your church might make to function as a living organism for the glory of God. Also list changes you personally could make to serve as part of a living organism that is directed by its Head, Jesus Christ.
- Evaluate your understanding of the servant leadership Jesus presented to His disciples in Matthew 20:25-28. What specific changes must you make to demonstrate servant leadership in your church family?
- Visit the **Biblical Eldership** website, a site committed solely to biblical eldership. See <http://biblicaleldership.org/what-biblical-eldership-0>.

*For video teaching on various aspects of biblical eldership along with other subjects related to Christian life, see **Biblical Eldership Resources** at <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCdgijCnyjg81e7GpYv5KjFQ>*

#### FIFTH STEP . . . prayerful implementation

When it is apparent that the Lord is guiding you toward biblical eldership in your church, you will find practical guidance on the **Biblical Eldership** website, specifically in the section **Implementing Eldership** at <http://biblicaleldership.org/implement-eldership-0>

#### CONCLUSION

As you implement changes in your life and ministry based on biblical truths presented in this series, keep in mind the following biblical encouragement . . .

**1 Corinthians 10:31**, Whether, then, you eat or drink or whatever you do, do all to the glory of God.

**Colossians 3:17**, Whatever you do in word or deed, *do* all in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks through Him to God the Father.

**1 Peter 4:11**, Whoever speaks, *is to do so* as one who is speaking the utterances of God; whoever serves *is to do so* as one who is serving by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.