



Jesus Christ is Head of His Church

Thus far, this series has presented biblical teaching on church leaders and leadership plans in order to address misconceptions and differing viewpoints about church leadership.

- Part 1 presented 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 and showed when and how the singular leader concept was introduced to the church.

In this article, we will focus on the most important aspect of church leadership. This pinnacle truth is . . . The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of His Church.

Colossians 1:18, 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.

[Verses used in this Church Leadership series are from the New American Standard Version of the Bible.]

In doctrine and teaching, the truth of Christ's headship is unquestioned. As one pastor observed, "The fundamental principle from which church leadership and organization develop is this: Jesus Christ is the Head of the church."¹ On the other hand, this foundational belief is not always demonstrated in the practical expressions of a church's life and ministry. Since followers of Christ are to do everything to exalt the Head and to do nothing that would diminish this reality, one must ask, does a church's leadership plan reflect this truth?

CORPORATE MANAGEMENT AND CHURCH LEADERSHIP

Believers consistently proclaim that they follow King Jesus and that He is the Head of His Church. In many churches, however, this allegiance is visibly undermined by the use of a corporate management structure for leadership and ministry purposes.

If you ask those in various churches to explain their leadership structure, most would show you a flow chart that emphasizes an "over-under" relationship involving people and ministries. This flow chart would not be appreciably different from any business or corporate management structure in the world except the words in authority positions would be different. Instead of *president or chairman of the board*, you might see the title *senior pastor, bishop, or superintendent*. Instead of *vice-presidents or foremen*, you might see *elder board, council, or pastoral staff*. Other church members with leadership responsibilities in specific ministries are one level below these upper level positions. The remaining church members—who comprise the largest group on the flow chart—have no specifically stated ministry or leadership responsibilities and are relegated to the bottom level of the flow chart if they appear at all.

As a concession to the fact that Jesus is the Head of His Church, you will often see the words "God" or "Jesus" in a position above the top level of human authority in a church's flow chart.

A chain of command flow chart is a useful management tool in a business corporation where there are leaders with recognized authority over other employees. The use of such a chart, however, can lead a church to adopt a plan of ministry that Jesus warned about — "over-under" positional relationships in the Body (Matthew 20:25-28; Luke 22:25-26).

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.²⁶ It is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant,²⁷ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be your slave;²⁸ just as the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Luke 22:25-26, And He said to them, “The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called ‘Benefactors.’²⁶ But *it is* not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant.

In addition, using a management flow chart to acknowledge the Lordship of Christ can introduce confusion. For example, if every believer in a church reports to and hears from his immediate “superior,” then a flow chart highlights the unbiblical perspective that an upper level singular leader (superintendent, senior pastor, or bishop), reports to Jesus and hears directly from Him for the rest of the church. If a church rigidly follows such a flow chart style of ministry, those on lower levels of the flow chart could only learn of the Lord’s direction for the church as well as their own lives and ministries through fellow believers higher in the “chain of command.”

BODY LIFE

When a church and its leaders believe and rely on the headship of Christ, that church can move away from corporate management techniques and enter into authentic Body life. As a result, church leaders will minister as faithful servants instead of authoritative bosses (Matthew 23:10-12).

Matthew 23:10-12, Do not be called leaders; for One is your Leader, *that is*, Christ.¹¹ But the greatest among you shall be your servant.¹² Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted.

Where there is authentic Body life, members of the Body come alongside fellow believers and lovingly encourage one another to grow in Christ and reach unbelievers for Christ. According to Scripture, godly servant leaders and spiritually gifted members are mutually interactive, and all are integral to a church’s spiritual health and ministry effectiveness.

Does this mean that there is no organization in a church? Of course not. In the New Testament, the Body of Christ is favorably compared to the human body, a model of organization. In fact, one of the spiritual gifts provided to some believers for the common good is “administration” or “governments” (1 Corinthians 12:28).

1 Corinthians 12:28, And God has appointed in the church, first apostles, second prophets, third teachers, then miracles, then gifts of healings, helps, administrations, *various* kinds of tongues [underlining added].

God has also placed gifted servant leaders in the Body to help equip fellow believers for effective service (Ephesians 4:11-13).

Ephesians 4:11-13, And He gave some *as* apostles, and some *as* prophets, and some *as* evangelists, and some *as* pastors and teachers,¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ;¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.

Since there should be no “over-under” relationships among believers in the Body of Christ, a corporate management flow chart cannot adequately indicate how the Body of Christ ministers for the common good and the glory of God. When the Body of Christ functions as it should, each member in the Body is linked to fellow believers and all are united with the Head, Jesus Christ. In addition, all believers are members of a chosen race and are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, and God’s own possession (1 Peter 2:9-10). They all are to minister with fellow believers for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7) and help to build up the Body in love (Ephesians 4:14-16) for the glory of God (1 Peter 4:10-12).

1 Peter 2:9-10, But you are A CHOSEN RACE, A ROYAL PRIESTHOOD, A HOLY NATION, A PEOPLE FOR *God’s* OWN POSSESSION, so that you may proclaim the excellencies of Him who has called you out of darkness into His marvelous light;¹⁰ for you once were NOT A PEOPLE, but now you are THE PEOPLE OF GOD; you had NOT RECEIVED MERCY, but now you have RECEIVED MERCY.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.⁵ And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.⁶ There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*.⁷ But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Ephesians 4:14-16, As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

1 Peter 4:10-12, As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. 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.

A human body does not function according to a flow chart, and neither does the Body of Christ. May God's people trust His plan for a church's life and ministry instead of following a corporate management structure that has been birthed solely by human device and ingenuity.

Note: When a church decides to incorporate under governmental guidelines, a flow chart can accurately depict communication lines and positional responsibilities of corporate officers with one another and governmental authorities. Since a church based on biblical guidelines is not a corporate entity but, instead, is the Body of Christ, such flow charts cannot accurately depict its leadership or ministries.

THE REAL SENIOR PASTOR

Not only does a corporate management structure hinder the development and effectiveness of ministry in a church, but a "singular leader" who has positional authority over a church distorts the reality of the headship of Christ.

Who hasn't heard of a church identified by the name of a well-known pastor? For example, "I am a member of Pastor Smith's church" or "I visited Charles Spurgeon's church when I visited London." This identification is understood but, biblically speaking, is misleading and actually erroneous. Not realizing this error, those who identify a "church" as a "possession" of a pastor are demeaning Jesus. The error of mistaken identity is evidenced by reviewing Matthew 16:13-18, the passage in which the word "church" is first mentioned in the New Testament.

Matthew 16:13-18, Now when Jesus came into the district of Caesarea Philippi, He was asking His disciples, "Who do people say that the Son of Man is?" ¹⁴ And they said, "Some *say* John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; but still others, Jeremiah, or one of the prophets." ¹⁵ He said to them, "But who do you say that I am?" ¹⁶ Simon Peter answered, "You are the Christ, the Son of the living God." ¹⁷ And Jesus said to him, "Blessed are you, Simon Barjona, because flesh and blood did not reveal *this* to you, but My Father who is in heaven. 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. [*bold emphasis added*]

Jesus said the church is His possession, and He will build it. He accomplishes this, because He is the Head of the Church. Even when this spiritual reality is recognized, a church family will face significant challenges in making leadership adjustments so that a singular human leader will not be recognized as "the leader of the church."

One of the erroneous assumptions that can accompany a departure from a "singular leader" corporate leadership model is that "no one is in charge." Such an assumption, however, denies the Headship of Jesus Christ over His Church (Ephesians 1:22-23).

Ephesians 1:22-23, And He put all things in subjection under His feet, and gave Him as head over all things to the church, ²³ which is His body, the fullness of Him who fills all in all.

Jesus is the one and only singular leader in the global Body of Christ as well as in a local church family. This is not merely a doctrinal point; it is a practical reality. The Lord Jesus Christ is the only leader to whom the title of Senior Pastor or Chief Shepherd is rightfully attributed, as 1 Peter 5:4 attests.

1 Peter 5:4, And when the Chief Shepherd (*Senior Pastor*) appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. (*explanation added*)

Does acknowledging Jesus as the true Senior Pastor in a church mean that there are no human leaders? Of course not. God has ordained that there be "under shepherds" (elders/pastors/overseers), but as in all the New Testament churches, no human leader is to have singular authority over a church family. The Lord Jesus Christ rightly possesses and fills that role given to Him by His heavenly Father (see Ephesians 1:22 above).

God's plan for church leadership is that multiple servant leaders minister under the headship of Christ and His ultimate authority. Each elder (under shepherd) is to watch over the Lord's flock with fellow elders (1 Peter 5:1-4), recognizing that the flock is the possession of the Lord Jesus Christ (John 10:11, 14).

1 Peter 5:1-4, Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of God*; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock. ⁴ And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory.

John 10:11, 14, I am the good shepherd; the good shepherd lays down His life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd, and I know My own and My own know Me.

As Scripture states, every person in the family of God (every sheep in the flock) can communicate with God Almighty (Matthew 7:7-11; Philippians 4:6-7), and each believer is a recipient of divine care (Hebrews 4:15-16).

Matthew 7:7-11, Ask, and it will be given to you; seek, and you will find; knock, and it will be opened to you. ⁸ For everyone who asks receives, and he who seeks finds, and to him who knocks it will be opened. ⁹ Or what man is there among you who, when his son asks for a loaf, will give him a stone? ¹⁰ Or if he asks for a fish, he will not give him a snake, will he? ¹¹ If you then, being evil, know how to give good gifts to your children, how much more will your Father who is in heaven give what is good to those who ask Him!

Philippians 4:6-7, Be anxious for nothing, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. ⁷ And the peace of God, which surpasses all comprehension, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Hebrews 4:15-16, For we do not have a high priest who cannot sympathize with our weaknesses, but One who has been tempted in all things as *we are*, yet without sin. ¹⁶ Therefore let us draw near with confidence to the throne of grace, so that we may receive mercy and find grace to help in time of need.

Along with the elders' responsibility of spiritual oversight, each elder is to minister (like all believers) according to his spiritual giftedness (1 Peter 4:10) in a cooperative fashion with other believers (Ephesians 4:15-16). Elders are also members of the flock and are not to lord over other believers their position of spiritual oversight (Mark 10:42-44; 1 Peter 5:1-3). As stated earlier, a church's leaders are to serve fellow believers (1 Peter 5:4-6), as all believers are to do in obedience to Christ (Philippians 2:1-4).

1 Peter 4:10, As each one has received a *special* gift, employ it in serving one another as good stewards of the manifold grace of God.

Ephesians 4:15-16, but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ, ¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

Mark 10:42-44, Calling them to Himself, Jesus said to them, "You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. ⁴³ But it is not this way among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; ⁴⁴ and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all.

1 Peter 5:1-3, Therefore, I exhort the elders among you, as *your* fellow elder and witness of the sufferings of Christ, and a partaker also of the glory that is to be revealed, ² shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to *the will of* God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; ³ nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

1 Peter 5:4-6, And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. ⁵ You younger men, likewise, be subject to *your* elders; and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for GOD IS OPPOSED TO THE PROUD, BUT GIVES GRACE TO THE HUMBLE. ⁶ Therefore humble yourselves under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time,

Philippians 2:1-4, Therefore if there is any encouragement in Christ, if there is any consolation of love, if there is any fellowship of the Spirit, if any affection and compassion, ² make my joy complete by being of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose. ³ Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves; ⁴ do not *merely* look out for your own personal interests, but also for the interests of others.

In light of the above passages, a modified flow chart can present a church's Body Life, as Ray Stedman notes:

"The structure of the church is 'horizontal' in nature. This means that there is one Head, Jesus Christ and everyone reports to Him. So we have Christ on one level and the rest of the Body getting their orders from the Head on the next level using their gifts that the Holy Spirit has given them in their respective ministries where the Lord has placed them. And then the Leaders and Elders who are 'the servants of all' are in essence under the members of the Body if one was drawing an organizational chart. This is completely backwards to the world's way of doing things. In the world, the bosses above make the program and then the workers below carry out the plan. In many churches this is no different as the Sr. Pastor comes up with the plan and Lords it over everyone to get the plan and program implemented.

“In the Lord's church it is different. The ministries are determined by Him with the members of His Body carrying out the ministry where He has placed them. The job of an Elder is to walk alongside these people and ministries as a counselor/ advisor, someone to bounce ideas off of and someone who cares and will pray for the people involved and their ministry. It is not as a Boss ... as Elders are actually underneath the Body serving.”²

In contrast to a flow chart, the New Testament uses the term “body” to illustrate how Jesus Christ, members of the body, and servant leaders work together. Jesus is the Head, the sole leader of the Body. Each member of the Body is linked to fellow members, and all members are linked to the Head and in direct communication with Him. Servant leaders are sovereignly placed throughout the Body to equip and encourage fellow members to minister, and all members are to minister according to individual giftedness.

Since the church is commonly pictured as a body, key aspects of leadership surface:

1. Jesus Christ is the Head and no human leader can assume that position,
2. Servant leaders (pastors/elders/bishops) do not congregate in the “neck area” in order to deliver the Head’s directives to members of His body but, instead,
3. Servant leaders are placed throughout the body to shepherd (teach and tend) members of the flock of God in accordance with His Word.

Due to each elder’s spiritual giftedness, some elders may be quite visible in their servant roles. For example, one elder with the gift of teaching may be the primary teacher in church gatherings. Another elder may be more visible in administration due to his giftedness. Other elders may be more prominent in counseling or visiting those in need because of being gifted in exhortation or mercy. Visibility is not the issue in ministry because those with on-going ministries will be visible. Yet, visibility in ministry does not bring with it a position of spiritual authority over fellow believers.

As has already been indicated in this leadership series, a plurality of elders allows the Body of Christ to realize the never-changed leadership structure that God designed for His people. By observing God’s use of singular leaders in the Old and New Testament (*see Part 3 in this series*), one can conclude that God’s use of singular human leaders was integral to, but a small part of, His revealed plan to accomplish His will through His people. God’s plan of leadership was for His people to live under a divine monarchy, following Almighty God. God’s plan of leadership for His people remains a divine monarchy; and our Lord is King Jesus, the Head of His Church.

Today, we cannot see Jesus visibly so we follow Him spiritually by faith. One day, however, we will worship Him visibly as the whole world recognizes He is King of kings and Lord of lords (Philippians 2:8-12; 1 Timothy 6:13-16).

Philippians 2:8-12, Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. ⁹ For this reason also, God highly exalted Him, and bestowed on Him the name which is above every name, ¹⁰ so that at the name of Jesus EVERY KNEE WILL BOW, of those who are in heaven and on earth and under the earth, ¹¹ and that every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. ¹² So then, my beloved, just as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your salvation with fear and trembling;

1 Timothy 6:13-16, I charge you in the presence of God, who gives life to all things, and of Christ Jesus, who testified the good confession before Pontius Pilate, ¹⁴ that you keep the commandment without stain or reproach until the appearing of our Lord Jesus Christ, ¹⁵ which He will bring about at the proper time—He who is the blessed and only Sovereign, the King of kings and Lord of lords, ¹⁶ who alone possesses immortality and dwells in unapproachable light, whom no man has seen or can see. To Him *be* honor and eternal dominion! Amen.

GOD’S GIFTS TO A CHURCH FAMILY . . . A PLURALITY OF SERVANT LEADERS TO PROVIDE OVERSIGHT

Ministry tasks that are ordained by the Lord are accomplished through supernatural means, not mere natural abilities. In the Old Testament, when Moses went before Pharaoh, God empowered him (Exodus, chapters 7-11). When Joshua was appointed by God to lead the people into the Promised Land, God empowered him (Joshua 1:1-9). When Elijah withstood Ahab and Jezebel, God empowered him (1 Kings 18:17-40). In the New Testament, when Philip was brought before the Ethiopian eunuch, God empowered him (Acts 8:26-40). When Stephen ministered and taught in such a manner that he was martyred, God empowered him (Acts 6:8 - 7:60). Numerous other examples illustrate the joining of God’s power to a singular leader to accomplish a task.

Supernatural empowerment, however, is not reserved only for singular leaders. Every believer is empowered for Christ-like growth through the Holy Spirit (Galatians 5:17, 25), yet every believer may minister differently. Each believer

is spiritually gifted for the common good (1 Corinthians 12:4-7), and each is gifted uniquely by God's sovereign design (Romans 12:6-8, 1 Corinthians 12:11). Basically, a believer's spiritual gift (or gifts) determines what ministry/service one will do. Members of the Body of Christ rely on supernatural empowerment, and as they minister in a cooperative manner, the entire Body is built up in love (Ephesians 4:15-16).

Galatians 5:17, 25, For the flesh sets its desire against the Spirit, and the Spirit against the flesh; for these are in opposition to one another, so that you may not do the things that you please . . . If we live by the Spirit, let us also walk by the Spirit.

1 Corinthians 12:4-7, Now there are varieties of gifts, but the same Spirit.⁵ And there are varieties of ministries, and the same Lord.⁶ There are varieties of effects, but the same God who works all things in all *persons*.⁷ But to each one is given the manifestation of the Spirit for the common good.

Romans 12:6-8, Since we have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us, *each of us is to exercise them accordingly*: if prophecy, according to the proportion of his faith;⁷ if service, in his serving; or he who teaches, in his teaching;⁸ or he who exhorts, in his exhortation; he who gives, with liberality; he who leads, with diligence; he who shows mercy, with cheerfulness.

1 Corinthians 12:11, But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

Ephesians 4:15-16, but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all *aspects* into Him who is the head, *even* Christ,¹⁶ from whom the whole body, being fitted and held together by what every joint supplies, according to the proper working of each individual part, causes the growth of the body for the building up of itself in love.

If you are wondering how spiritual giftedness in general relates to church leaders in particular, let's examine

Ephesians 4:11-15 which states:

“And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers,¹² for the equipping of the saints for the work of service, to the building up of the body of Christ¹³ until we all attain to the unity of the faith, and of the knowledge of the Son of God, to a mature man, to the measure of the stature which belongs to the fullness of Christ.¹⁴ As a result, we are no longer to be children, tossed here and there by waves and carried about by every wind of doctrine, by the trickery of men, by craftiness in deceitful scheming;¹⁵ but speaking the truth in love, we are to grow up in all aspects into Him who is the head, even Christ.”

In the above passage, the servant leaders who are God's gifts to the church are apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers. Because of the focus of this study, let's draw our attention to the group of leaders known as “pastors and teachers.” Due to the sentence construction in the original language, many commentators believe that “pastors and teachers” are one group of leaders. Before determining who these “pastor-teachers” are, let's review.

The word for “pastor” (Greek: *poimen*) in the New Testament is the identical word for “shepherd.” In fact, except for Ephesians 4:11, all other passages using *poimen* translate it as “shepherd.” As Part 2 of this series pointed out, the word for “shepherd” in the New Testament—when used in a leadership context—can be interchanged with “overseer/bishop” and “elder” to signify the same group of men.

Furthermore, “teaching” is one of the spiritual qualifications for an elder mentioned in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:9.

1 Timothy 3:2, An overseer, then, must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, (*underlining added*)

Titus 1:7-9, For the overseer must be above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, not fond of sordid gain,⁸ but hospitable, loving what is good, sensible, just, devout, self-controlled,⁹ holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, so that he will be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict. (*underlining added*)

Since “shepherd” is used in the New Testament to refer to an elder and since the ability to teach God's Word is one of the elder qualifications, the group of leaders in Ephesians 4:11 known as “pastor-teachers” have the same function as “elders” and are probably one and the same. On the other hand, even if the “pastors” (“shepherds”) and “teachers” are considered as two distinct groups, elders are still integral to both groups. Remember that “shepherding” is a primary function of an elder (*see part 2 in this series*) and “teaching” is one of the qualifications for an elder (1 Timothy 3:2).

To conclude that elders are the same group of gifted leaders as the “pastors and teachers” mentioned in Ephesians 4:11 does not negate the fact that there could be others in the Body who are gifted in shepherding (pastoring) but are not

elders. Christ-like shepherding is simply “tending” or “caring for” the flock. Nor does this conclusion indicate that elders are the only teachers in a church, since there could be many gifted teachers (men and women) in a church family who are not elders.

Regardless whether “pastor-teachers” are the elders in a church family or not, all of these leaders in Ephesians 4:11 are given for a purpose. This purpose is to “equip the saints for the work of the ministry” and, as a result, believers continue to grow in Christ (Ephesians 4:11-15, printed above).

Note also in Ephesians 4:11 that gifted leaders are listed in the plural. Throughout the first century, there were multiple apostles, multiple prophets, multiple evangelists, and multiple pastor-teachers who were in ministry simultaneously. However, none of these recognized church leaders worked in isolation as a single leader. All worked in a cooperative fashion with other leaders and fellow believers to build up the Body of Christ, not only in general but also in individual churches (*please see Part 3 of this series*).

This cooperative leadership structure in the first century should have been the pattern for church leaders to follow from then until now. It takes a number of spiritually gifted individuals in leadership to provide oversight for everyone in a church family to mature spiritually. No one fellow-believer, no matter how gifted or how zealous, is singularly equipped for such a task. Furthermore, from a practical and spiritual perspective, no one person is gifted sufficiently to oversee all ministries and to handle every situation that arises in a church family. To do so would require a singular leader to have most, if not all, of the gifts of the Spirit, an assumption that is not supported by Scripture.

In addition, it is futile to expect a single leader (“senior pastor”) to equip all the saints for ministry so that all mature in Christ. Considering only the practical implications, the modern-day concept of a “senior pastor” has both organizational drawbacks for a church family and personal drawbacks for the person trying to fulfill that role.

Yet, the position of “senior pastor” (a singular leader “over” the church) is prominent in churches throughout the world. How is this possible? Consider the following . . .

- A “senior pastor” concept is possible when the biblical purpose of a “pastor-teacher” is changed to other purposes instead of teaching the Word of God and tending to and caring for *all* the sheep under his care. *Ask yourself: Are today’s “senior pastors” readily available to each member of the flock or are they, by necessity, largely inaccessible to many in the flock? Is the time of today’s ‘senior pastor’ consumed by meetings and administrative details of a corporation instead of tending to the spiritual needs of all the sheep in the flock?*
- A “senior pastor” concept is possible when there is a lack of understanding of the workings of the Body of Christ. *Are today’s churches marked by 100% of professing Christians being in ministry for the common good or is it more accurate to say, “20% of the people in a church family do 80% of the work.”*
- A “senior pastor” concept is possible when believers avoid their biblical responsibilities to the Lord and one another. *Are all professing believers known for their faithfulness in worship, generosity in giving, consistency in evangelism, zealous desire for ministry, and sacrificial care for one another?*
- A “senior pastor” concept is possible when the church is modeled after modern-day corporate structures instead of functioning as the Body of Christ. *Are most ministries of a church family based in buildings and operated as programs under the overall supervision of a “senior pastor” or is ministry in and from the Body of Christ visible daily in the community as normal outgrowths of believers’ lives?*
- A “senior pastor” concept is possible as long as gifted leaders believe that losing their titled position is equivalent to losing spiritual effectiveness or supposed spiritual authority. *Are leaders in the church primarily acknowledged as such because of their appointed/elected office or because of their spiritual maturity and proven service to and sacrifice for fellow-believers?*
- A “senior pastor” concept is possible when the truth and practical application of the priesthood of all believers is overlooked. *Are there “religious duties” reserved only for the “clergy” or are all believers encouraged to participate in any ministry for which they are gifted?*

The above list is not exhaustive. For example, other factors leading to a single leader concept include:

- acceptance of secular management techniques instead of biblical principles of leadership,
- the natural tendency to follow a human leader instead of the Lord,

- the comfort of predictability instead of looking to God’s Word and His Spirit for continued direction,
- the ease of giving responsibility to others in personal matters instead of taking spiritual responsibility for one’s own life,
- the assumption that one person is more adept in gaining insight from the Lord than a group of spiritually equipped and biblically qualified leaders,
- goal-setting instead of God-seeking, and
- fear of facing opposition for a new direction of ministry.

Not all of the above elements are evident in every situation in which a single leader concept is practiced. Some of the above elements, however, must be in place for a singular leader to have primary authority over a church.

In light of the well-known practice of having a singular human leader over a church, it will take boldness to review that concept scripturally with an openness to make changes. Believers wanting to express that the Lord Jesus Christ is Head of His Church will embrace the following observation by Alexander Strauch in *Biblical Eldership*.

“Most important, biblical eldership guards and promotes the preeminence and position of Christ over the local church. Jesus left His disciples with the precious promise that ‘where two or three have gathered together in My name, there I am in their midst’ (Matthew 18:20). Because the apostles knew that Jesus Christ, by the Holy Spirit, was uniquely present with them as Ruler, Head, Lord, Pastor, Master, Overseer, High Priest, and King, they chose a form of government that reflected this distinctive, fundamental, Christian truth.

“This truth was not a theoretical idea to the early Christians—it was reality. The first churches were truly Christ centered and Christ dependent. Christ alone provided all they needed in order to be in full fellowship with God and one another. Christ’s person and work was so infinitely great, final, and complete that nothing—even in appearance—could diminish the centrality of His presence among and sufficiency for His people.

“So, during the first century no Christian would have dared to take the position or title of sole ruler, overseer, or pastor of the church. We Christians today, however, are so accustomed to speaking of ‘the pastor’ that we do not stop to realize that the New Testament does not. This fact is profoundly significant, and we must not permit our customary practice to shield our minds from this important truth. There is only one flock and one Pastor (John 10:16), one body and one Head (Colossians 1:18), one holy priesthood and one great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14ff), one brotherhood and one Elder Brother (Romans 8:29), one building and one Cornerstone (1 Peter 2:5ff), one Mediator, and one Lord. Jesus Christ is the “Senior Pastor,” and all others are His undershepherds (1 Peter 5:4).”³

[Part 6 of this series will review key personal and ministry characteristics of church leaders.]

FOOTNOTES

¹[The New Testament Church – Its Leadership](#) by Bob Deffinbaugh

²[Notes on Church Leadership under “Lording it Over”](#)

³[Biblical Eldership](#) by Alexander Strauch under the heading *The Church is Under Christ’s Headship*

FOR FURTHER REFERENCE AND STUDY

[A Pastor’s Authority](#) by Ray Stedman

[The Church and the Churches](#) by W. E. Vine especially chapters 1 and 3

[The New Testament Church – Its Leadership](#) by Bob Deffinbaugh

[The Supremacy of the Person of Christ](#) by J. Hampton Keathley, III

[Why Don’t We Have a Senior Pastor?](#) by Curt Parton