



Singular Leaders in the Bible

This series deals with New Testament church leadership. The New Testament leadership plan can be described as a plurality of elders or, with similar accuracy, a plurality of overseers/bishops or a plurality of shepherds/pastors. As Part 2 of this series indicated, the words for overseer/bishop (*episkopos*), elder (*presbuteros*), and shepherd/pastor (*poimen*) are used interchangeably in the New Testament to describe the same group of church leaders.

If you have read through Parts 1-3 of this series, you may have some questions. These usually relate to a primary church leader and how a plurality of elders impacts that leadership practice. This article will address that subject by focusing on singular leaders in Scripture, both in concept and by specific examples.

In this study we will:

- summarize Parts 1-3 in this series.
- examine when and how a “singular leader” concept was introduced in the Church.
- review the reasons singular leaders became prominent, especially in the Old Testament.
- discover the characteristic that singular leaders in the Old and New Testament have in common with church leaders today.

In studying any aspect of a church’s life and ministry, we recognize the Bible as the all-sufficient authority for all matters of faith and conduct. [*Verses in each article of the Church Leadership series are from the New American Standard Version of the Bible.*]

Psalm 19:7–11, The law of the LORD is perfect, restoring the soul; The testimony of the LORD is sure, making wise the simple.⁸ The precepts of the LORD are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the LORD is pure, enlightening the eyes.⁹ The fear of the LORD is clean, enduring forever; the judgments of the LORD are true; they are righteous altogether.¹⁰ They are more desirable than gold, yes, than much fine gold; sweeter also than honey and the drippings of the honeycomb.¹¹ Moreover, by them your servant is warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

Psalm 138:2, I will bow down toward Your holy temple and give thanks to Your name for Your lovingkindness and Your truth; for You have magnified Your word according to all Your name.

Psalm 119:160, The sum of Your word is truth, and every one of Your righteous ordinances is everlasting.

2 Timothy 3:16–17, All Scripture is inspired by God and profitable for teaching, for reproof, for correction, for training in righteousness;¹⁷ so that the man of God may be adequate, equipped for every good work.

Hebrews 4:12, For the word of God is living and active and sharper than any two-edged sword, and piercing as far as the division of soul and spirit, of both joints and marrow, and able to judge the thoughts and intentions of the heart.

2 Peter 1:2-4, Grace and peace be multiplied to you in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord;³ seeing that His divine power has granted to us everything pertaining to life and godliness, through the true knowledge of Him who called us by His own glory and excellence.⁴ For by these He has granted to us His precious and magnificent promises, so that by them you may become partakers of *the* divine nature, having escaped the corruption that is in the world by lust.

As believers, we must adhere to Scripture, no matter how difficult it may initially seem to be. Maintaining this perspective fosters Christ-like growth in a church family and leads believers to reject cultural practices and traditions that are not based on scriptural truth.

SUMMARIES OF PARTS 1-3 OF THIS SERIES

Part 1 presented an overview of various types of church leadership plans (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/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.

THE INTRODUCTION OF THE “SINGULAR LEADER” CONCEPT OF CHURCH LEADERSHIP

The concept of a singular church leader is well-known and has been widely accepted as the normal pattern of leadership for approximately 1,700 years (for example: Pope, denominational superintendent, senior pastor, chief elder, chairman of the board). However, a singular church leader with ultimate authority over all church matters does not have its roots in Scripture and, according to church history, was not normative over the first few centuries of church life.

The pattern established for leadership in the first century church was a plurality of elders. There is no scriptural evidence that a first century church or a group of church leaders agreed to elevate one of its leaders to a position of singular authority over a body of believers.

Various New Testament leaders were, however, occasionally used by God to be solitary heralds or were sovereignly appointed for a specific ministry task. However, none of the first century church leaders used by God in a powerful, singular fashion ever became a tenured primary leader over the body of Christ in general or a local church family in particular.

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.

Ignatius, while traveling from Antioch toward his expected martyrdom in Rome, wrote to a number of city churches. In those letters, he favorably referenced a primary leader (bishop) in the local church. Since this viewpoint has no biblical support, it is believed that Ignatius elevated himself to a position of sole church authority (“the bishop”) in order to address division in the church family in which he ministered. His writings were the first to emphasize a “monarchical system” of church leadership (bishop, “senior pastor”) as a replacement for a plurality of elders. It is believed that Ignatius was the first to separate the New Testament terms for church leaders into separate offices with one man over all others. According to Ignatius, a “bishop” (*the* pastor) was over the “elders” who, in turn, were over the deacons.

Although Ignatius espoused his viewpoint of a “monarchical bishop” (senior pastor) as a viable pattern of church leadership, his idea was not immediately embraced in the church world nor did it become normative practice for at least another century.

*[You are invited to learn more about Ignatius and the development and subsequent adoption of a solitary leader over a church by referencing **Who was Ignatius of Antioch?** at <http://www.gotquestions.org/Ignatius-of-Antioch.html> and **Ignatius of Antioch and the “Monarchical Bishop”** at <http://www.lessononline.info/Ignatius.htm> and **The Rise of the Clergy** at <http://tgulcm.tripod.com/ohc/clergy.html>]*

Renowned biblical scholar W.E. Vine mentioned the departure from the New Testament plan for church leadership by saying, “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.”^A

*[You can access the insight of W.E. Vine concerning **The Church and The Churches** at <http://awildernessvoice.com/Church&Churches.html#toc>]*

There was one key time in history when the biblical basis for church leadership could have been closely examined and possibly brought back to the New Testament pattern of a plurality of elders. This opportunity occurred during and shortly after the Protestant Reformation. Even though church leaders in that era debated and decided key doctrinal issues, they overlooked the lack of biblical support for the “singular leader” concept that was firmly entrenched in the church world at that time.

The Reformers rightly emphasized the “priesthood of all believers,” a major doctrinal point. They did not, however, take the next logical step of doing away with the ecclesiastical priesthood (the “singular leader” concept) in order to reestablish the New Testament leadership pattern of a plurality of elders. When they missed this opportunity to make a key leadership adjustment, the Reformers quite possibly helped to perpetuate the unbiblical perspective that a primary human leader was the recognized authority in a church family.

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.

SINGULAR LEADERS IN THE OLD AND NEW TESTAMENTS

Although not biblically sound, one of the more persuasive arguments for a single leader to have ultimate authority in a church is an appeal to the example of solitary leaders in Scripture. You may have heard the quote: "When God wants something done, He chooses a leader." On the surface, that may seem accurate; but it overlooks other scriptural aspects that accompany this observation.

For example, Part 3 in this series pointed out: "It is revealing to observe the context in which references are made to the singular ministry of leaders in the New Testament. When a singular leader is described as making positive contributions to the cause of Christ, it is within the context of being a member of a group of leaders." The first century church leaders' mutual accountability, unanimity in decision-making, and submission to one another are often not mentioned by those espousing the singular leader concept.

Not surprisingly, many Old Testament leaders are spotlighted to buttress the argument for a singular leader in each church today. However, using Old Testament singular leaders (before Christ) to try to legitimize a singular leader church leadership plan (after Christ) is an incomplete comparison.

For example, during the Old Testament era, the Holy Spirit did not indwell God's people as He does today (John 14:16-17; Romans 8:9-11), nor permanently gift them for service (1 Corinthians 12:4-11), nor be available to teach and guide them continually into all truth (John 14:26, 16:13).

John 14:16-17, I will ask the Father, and He will give you another Helper, that He may be with you forever; ¹⁷ *that is* the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive, because it does not see Him or know Him, *but* you know Him because He abides with you and will be in you.

Romans 8:9-11, However, you are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if indeed the Spirit of God dwells in you. But if anyone does not have the Spirit of Christ, he does not belong to Him. ¹⁰ If Christ is in you, though the body is dead because of sin, yet the spirit is alive because of righteousness. ¹¹ But if the Spirit of Him who raised Jesus from the dead dwells in you, He who raised Christ Jesus from the dead will also give life to your mortal bodies through His Spirit who dwells in you.

1 Corinthians 12:4-11, 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. ⁸ For to one is given the word of wisdom through the Spirit, and to another the word of knowledge according to the same Spirit; ⁹ to another faith by the same Spirit, and to another gifts of healing by the one Spirit, ¹⁰ and to another the effecting of miracles, and to another prophecy, and to another the distinguishing of spirits, to another *various* kinds of tongues, and to another the interpretation of tongues. ¹¹ But one and the same Spirit works all these things, distributing to each one individually just as He wills.

John 14:26, But the Helper, the Holy Spirit, whom the Father will send in My name, He will teach you all things, and bring to your remembrance all that I said to you.

John 16:13, But when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and He will disclose to you what is to come.

In the Old Testament era, God's presence dwelt in the Temple. Today, however, a believer's body is the temple of the Holy Spirit (1 Corinthians 6:19).

1 Corinthians 6:19, Or do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit who is in you, whom you have from God, and that you are not your own?

In Old Testament times, there was a designated priesthood that approached God for the people. Now, all believers are priests (1 Peter 2:9) and have access to God through the ministry of our great High Priest, Jesus Christ (Hebrews 4:14-16).

1 Peter 2:9, 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

Hebrews 4:14-16, Therefore, since we have a great high priest who has passed through the heavens, Jesus the Son of God, let us hold fast our confession.¹⁵ 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.

In addition to differences between Old and New Testament economies, other aspects of Old Testament leadership are often overlooked. For example, the most well-known king of Israel (David) was a man after God's own heart (Acts 13:22).

Acts 13:22, After He had removed him [Saul], He raised up David to be their king, concerning whom He also testified and said, "I have found David the son of Jesse, a man after my heart, who will do all My will." [Insert added]

It was not God's original plan, however, for the people to have a king (a singular human leader). God's original plan was for His people to acknowledge His Lordship and follow Him.

You may remember how David became king. David was installed as king after the death of Saul, Israel's first king. Prior to Saul's reign, the people of Israel decided they wanted a king so that they could be like all the other nations. Rather than follow God's plan for their governance, however, they clamored for a king so they would have someone both to judge them and to fight their battles (1 Samuel 8:19-20).

1 Samuel 8:19-20, Nevertheless, the people refused to listen to the voice of Samuel, and they said, "No, but there shall be a king over us,²⁰ that we also may be like all the nations, that our king may judge us and go out before us and fight our battles."

As a result of their rejection of Him as their King (1 Samuel 8:7), God directed Samuel to appoint Saul as their king. In other words, the most powerful singular leader among the people of Israel (the king) resulted from the desire of God's people to follow a human leader instead of their sovereign God. The people eventually admitted that their insistence to have a king was evil on their part (1 Samuel 12:19).

1 Samuel 8:7, The LORD said to Samuel, "Listen to the voice of the people in regard to all that they say to you, for they have not rejected you, but they have rejected Me from being king over them."

1 Samuel 12:19, Then all the people said to Samuel, "Pray for your servants to the LORD your God, so that we may not die, for we have added to all our sins *this* evil by asking for ourselves a king."

In addition to following their self-centered ways with regard to desiring a king like the other nations, God's people in the Old Testament had a pattern of rejecting His plan for their lives. Their self-centeredness became the catalyst for judges and prophets (other singular leaders) to become prominent. In these ministry roles, the judges and prophets were used by God for a specific ministry task—to try to turn the people back to following God and His plan for their lives.

If God's people would have followed Him, many well-known individuals (kings, prophets, and judges) in the Old Testament would, in all probability, not be known today. They were not thrust into their singular leader roles because God's people were following His plan. They were, instead, singularly used by God in response to the people of God rejecting His sovereign rule over them.

There were, obviously, some singular leaders who were chosen of God for a particular role that did not correlate with the people's self-centeredness. For example, Abraham was a Gentile who, after being sovereignly chosen by God, became the father of the Jewish people. It is important to note that Abraham's sovereign role was unique in history and will not be repeated.

Moses is the leader often cited as the prime example of a singular leader in the Old Testament. Moses, however, was also sovereignly chosen for a particular task which was to lead the Israelites out of Egyptian captivity to the Promised Land. His sovereign role was also unique in history and will not be repeated.

Joshua is also mentioned as an Old Testament model for modern church leadership. Again, what must not be overlooked was Joshua's unique task of leading the people into the Promised Land. This also was a task that was unique and will not be repeated.

Instead of referring to Old Testament leaders to try to establish the necessity of singular leaders in the Church today, it is helpful to understand the tasks and ministry roles of these “called out” Old Testament saints.

The well-known Old Testament leaders were sovereignly chosen to lead God’s people in never-to-be-repeated situations, or came into power as a result of the people’s sinful desires to follow a human leader instead of the Lord, or were sovereignly chosen for public ministry to warn the people of the consequences of their pronounced sinfulness.

In examining the Old Testament, it *is* accurate to say, “When God wanted something done, He chose a leader.” However, one must look at the overall scriptural picture when God chose a leader. It must also include what God wanted done and why He wanted it done. One can conclude that a singular human leader in the Old Testament, more often than not, was in response to Israel’s departure from God’s original plan for His people to follow Him. Furthermore, out of God’s majestic sovereignty, some of the Old Testament leaders (e.g., Moses, Joshua, Joseph, David) are “types” that point to Jesus Christ instead of establishing a pattern for singular leaders in the Church today.^B

THE COMMON CHARACTERISTIC BETWEEN SINGULAR LEADERS IN SCRIPTURE AND CHURCH LEADERS TODAY

There is a commonality in leadership roles between singular leaders living before Christ (Old Testament) and singular leaders living after Christ (New Testament). That common ground is the characteristic of being chosen by God to complete a specific task. These tasks varied widely in scope as well as the time necessary to complete them. For example, it took Peter but a few minutes to preach his sermon on the Day of Pentecost. It took Paul many months to complete a missionary journey. It took Moses over four decades to complete his leadership role that directed him from Egypt to the border of the Promised Land.

Similar to these examples of a singular leader completing a sovereignly appointed assignment, 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.

IN CONCLUSION

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 to 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.

LOOKING AHEAD

In Part 5 of this series, we will focus on the headship of Jesus Christ and how church leadership reflects that reality.

Footnotes:

^A The Church and the Churches (part 2) at <http://awildernessvoice.com/Church&Churches-Chapt11.html> under The Rise of Clerisy.

^B A “type” represents or symbolizes something or someone else. In theology, a “type” refers to something that prefigures something or someone which appeared later. (source: Funk and Wagnalls Dictionary).