

# 15

## "Appoint Elders In Every Town"

- Tit 1:5

Some churches are ruled by a single man (pastor, pope, or archbishop); perhaps such churches could be pigeonholed as benign "dictatorships." Other churches are controlled by the ultimate authority of congregational vote; these could be referred to as "democracies." Finally, many churches operate under the guidance of a plurality of elders. Which system is the one God designed for his body?

It is an odd fact that the NT does not expressly command any particular form of government for the church! However, there are some definite patterns of government evident in the Scriptures. One's view of the importance of such patterns obviously comes into play at this point. For instance, Fee and Stuart in *How To Read The Bible For All It's Worth* assume that "unless Scripture explicitly tells us we must do something, what is merely narrated or described can never function in a normative way" (97). The problem with this assumption is that the Bible explicitly tells us that we *must* follow apostolic patterns, examples, and traditions (1 Co 4:16-17; 11:1-2; Php 3:17; 4:9; 2 Th 2:15). What then is the NT pattern for polity?

All are agreed that the Lord Jesus is the head of the church (Col 1:15-20). Thus, the church ultimately is a dictatorship (or theocracy) ruled by Christ through His written word and the influence of the Holy Spirit (Jn 14:25-27; 16:12-15; Ac 2:42; Eph 2:19-22; 1 Ti 3:14-15). Once we follow the organizational flow chart down from the head, where does the line of authority go?

In speaking to the "elders" of the Ephesian church (Ac 20:17), Paul said, "Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which He bought with His own blood" (20:28). The presence of the terms "overseers" and "shepherds" certainly suggests a supervisory position. When writing to Timothy about the qualifications for an elder, Paul asked, "If anyone does not know how to manage his own family, how can he take care of God's church?" (1 Tm 3:5). This again implies a management role for elders. Peter asked the elders to "be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers" (1 Pe 5:2); once more elders are painted in a leadership mode. 1 Ti 5:17 refers to elders who "direct the affairs of the church well." 1 Th 5:12 asks the brothers to respect those "who are over you in the Lord and who admonish you." Heb 13:7 commands, "Remember your leaders." Heb 13:17 reads, "Obey your leaders and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must give an account." All of this indicates that there are to be human "leaders" in the church. These leaders are most often referred to as "elders" or "overseers."

As to the difference between an elder, overseer ("bishop" in the KJV), and pastor (shepherd), an examination of Ac 20:17, 28-30; Tit 1:5-7; and 1 Pe 5:1-3 will show the synonymous usage of the words. All three refer to the same office. Any modern distinction between them is purely artificial and without Scriptural warrant.

Is there then to be one elder per church, several elders per church, or several churches per elder? In Ac 14:23, Paul and Barnabas "appointed elders in each church" (Jas 5:14). The biblical evidence

seems to support a plurality of elders in every church. However, a bit of confusion arises over the NT pattern of having a plurality of elders per church. From the NT perspective there is only one church per city! Ac 8:1 mentions "the church at Jerusalem," Paul wrote to "the church of God in Corinth" (1 Co 1:2) and to "the church of the Thessalonians" (1 Th 1:1). Jesus told John to write to "the" church of God in Corinth (1 Co 1:2) and to "the" church in Ephesus, "the" church in Smyrna, "the" church in Pergamum, etc. (Re 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). Thus, Scripturally speaking, there is but one church in Atlanta, one in Chicago, one in Kansas City, etc.

As a subset of the city-wide church there were the churches that met in various homes within each city (Ro 16:5; 1 Co 16:19; Phm 2; Col 4:15). In *The Normal Christian Church Life*, Watchman Nee observed, "in the Word of God we see no church that extends beyond the area of a city" (48). When referring to large geographical areas, the Bible uses the word "church" in the plural. For example, "He went through Syria and Cilia, strengthening the churches" (Ac 15:41), "the churches in the provinces of Asia" (1 Co 16:19), "the Macedonian churches" (1 Co 8:1), "the churches of Galatia" (Ga 1:1), "the churches of Judea" (Ga 1:22), etc. Thus, there is no such thing in the NT as a national church, or a regional church; there are simply city churches and house-churches. The only reason for division among churches is geographic location. Mention is made, of course, of the universal church (Eph 1:22-23; 3:10, 21; 5:23-32; Co 1:18) to which all believers of all time belong, but the universal church is invisible and spiritual, with no universal earthly organization. An examination of the NT will reveal that, though all churches were united under Christ as head, there was no outward ecclesiastical organization uniting them. Though cooperating voluntarily together, each church was autonomous. There was a strong inward bond, a spiritual oneness of life in the Lord. Though independent of outward government, they were *interdependent* in responsibility to one another (see 2 Co 8-9).

So, did the plurality of elders lead the city-wide church as a whole, or only individual house churches? That elders worked together is clear from 1 Tm 4:14, but no indication is given as to the geographic extent of their authority. Php 1:1 and Tit 1:5 hint of a city-wide presbytery, but this is not conclusive. As Scripture is vague about this, there seems to be liberty to create the plurality from whatever combination is necessary (within each house church or city-wide). Either way, the NT focus is against any "one man show" and in favor of a body of brothers leading the church, depending upon one another, accountable to one another, submitting to one another, and living out a mutuality in ministry.

The above references to rule by a plurality of overseers could, if taken in isolation, easily lead to a wrong view of how elder rule should operate. There is more to the equation. Consider the steps of church discipline in Mt 18:15-17 as it relates to a church's decision making process (see also 1 Co 5:1-5; Ga 6:1). Notice that the whole congregation seems to be involved in the decision to exercise discipline. Notice also that the leaders are not especially singled out to screen the cases before they reach the open meeting nor to carry out the disciplining. It is a corporate decision.

This corporate process is also glimpsed in Ac 1:15-26. The apostle Peter placed the burden for finding a replacement for Judas upon the church as a whole. In Ac 6:1-6, the apostles turned to "all the disciples" (6:2) and asked them to choose administrators for the church's welfare system. Both these examples point to congregational involvement.

Paul wrote to "all" (1:7) the saints in Rome, and made no special mention of the elders. The letters to the Corinthians were addressed to the entire "church" (1 Co 1:2, and 2 Co 1:1). Again there was no emphasis on the overseers. The greeting in Ga 1:2 focuses on the "churches" in Galatia. The message

was not first filtered through the leaders. The "Saints in Ephesus" (1:1) were the recipients of that letter. In Php 1:1 the saints were given equal billing with the overseers and deacons. In Col 1:2 the salutation went to "the holy and faithful brothers in Christ." All of this implies that the elders were themselves also sheep. The elders were a subset of the church as a whole. There was no clergy/laity distinction.

This lack of emphasis on the leadership is also seen in 1 Th 1:1; 2 Th 1:1; Jas 1:1; 1 Pe 1:1; 2 Pe 1:1; 1 Jn 2:1, 7, and Jude 1:1. In fact, the book of Hebrews was written to a sub-group of believers and it was not until the very last chapter that the author asked them to "greet all your leaders" (13:24). He did not even greet the leaders directly!

In Heb 13:17, believers are encouraged to "obey" church leaders. Interestingly, the Greek behind "obey" is not the regular Greek word for "obey." Instead, *peitho* is used, which literally means "to persuade" or "to convince." Thus, Heb 13:17 should be rendered "let yourselves be persuaded by." This same verse also instructs believers to "submit" to the authority of their church leaders. As with "obey," the common Greek word for "submit" is not used. Instead, *hupeiko* was chosen by the author, a word meaning "to give in, to yield."

Thus, God's flock is to be open to being "persuaded by" (*peitho*) its shepherds. In the course of on-going discussion and teaching the flock is to be "convinced by" (*peitho*) its leaders. Mindless military obedience is not the relationship pictured in the NT between elders and the church. Of course, there will be those times when some in the flock can't be completely persuaded of something and an impasse will arise. When necessary to break the gridlock, the congregation is to "give in to, to yield to" (*hupeiko*) the wisdom of its leaders.

Much may be gleaned from the way that NT writers made appeals directly to entire churches. They went to great lengths to influence ordinary "rank and file" believers. The apostles did not simply bark orders and issue injunctions (as a military commander might do). Instead, they treated other believers as equals and appealed directly to them as such. No doubt local church leaders led in much the same way. Their primary authority lay in their ability to influence. The respect they were given was honestly earned. It was the opposite of military authority wherein soldiers respect the rank but not necessarily the man.

Heb 13:7 reflects the fact that the leadership "style" employed by church leaders is primarily one of direction by example: "Remember your leaders . . . Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith." Along this same line, 1 Th 5:12-13 reveals that leaders are to be respected, not because of automatically inferred authority of rank, but because of the value of their service-"Hold them in highest regard in love because of their work." Jesus said, "You know that the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wants to be first must be your slave" (Mt 20:25-28).

Regarding false teachers, the elders must still "refute" those who oppose sound doctrine (Tit 1:9), but even this should ultimately follow the check and balance process of Mt 18:15-35 (Christian discipline). Elders must not be guilty of "lording it over those entrusted" to their care, but instead be "examples to the flock" (1 Pe 5:3). Having a plurality of elders (all of whom have equal authority) also tends to prevent any modern Diotrophes from arising (3 Jn 9-10). However, despite any church's best efforts, we need to realize that "even from your own number men will arise and distort the truth in order to draw away disciples after them. So be on your guard!" (Ac 20:30-31).

How should elders be appointed? Paul required all potential overseers to be able to meet a lengthy list of requirements (1 Ti 3:1-7; Tit 1:5-9). That a man is willing and able to be an elder is obviously the work of the Holy Spirit (Ac 20:28). Once these prerequisites are met, the would-be elder is then appointed. In Ac 14:23 Paul and Barnabas apparently did the appointing, and Titus was left in Crete by Paul to appoint elders (Tit 1:5). As Nee observed, "they merely established as elders those whom the Holy Spirit had already made overseers in the church" (41). After the apostles (missionaries) appointed elders and moved on, there is virtual silence as to how subsequent elders were chosen. Operating from the principle of Ac 1:15-26, and 6:1-6, one could be led to conclude that elders were chosen by the whole congregation (following the requirements laid out in 1 Ti 3:1-7).

In conclusion, the word "church" in the NT is used to refer to the universal church, city-wide churches, and house churches. No organized church is any bigger than a single city, and has no official jurisdiction or authority over any other church (though there naturally will be inter-church cooperation and assistance). Each church is ideally to be guided by a plurality of leaders. Each elder is equal in authority to all the other elders (there is no "senior" pastor). Their primary authority is based on their ability to persuade with the truth. They are to lead by example, not "lording it over" the church. Church polity is thus a dynamic process of interaction, persuasion, and right timing between the shepherds and the sheep.

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