

Plurality of Pastors

After decades of following the normative structure in the Baptist church, the role of pastors and of church leadership became an area of in-depth study at Hope Church. The pastoral staff gave themselves to search the Bible, read and study, and pray together regularly about the biblical role of pastors in leading God's church.

It might well be assumed that the Bible clearly teaches and shows evidence to support each local church being led by a single pastor. However, it is just the opposite. The truth is that throughout the entire Bible there is no reference to a church being led by one pastor alone.

The consistent pattern throughout the New Testament is that each body of believers was shepherded by a plurality of God-ordained pastors/elders. To put it simply, this is the only pattern for church leadership given in the New Testament.

The apostle Paul left Titus in Crete and instructed him to "appoint elders in every city" (Titus 1:5). James instructed his readers to "call for the elders of the church" to pray for those who are sick (James 5:14). When Paul and Barnabas were in Derbe, Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch, they "appointed elders for them in every church" (Acts 14:23). In Paul's first epistle to Timothy, the apostle referred to "the elders who rule well" at the church at Ephesus (1 Tim. 5:17; see also Acts 20:17, where Paul addresses "the elders of the church" at Ephesus). The book of Acts indicates that there were "elders" at the church in Jerusalem (Acts 11:30; 15:2, 4; 21:18).

Again and again, reference is made to a plurality of elders in each of the various churches.

As to the distinction between the terms used in the Bible to refer to the position of church leaders, there are three terms. The words "elder" (presbuteros), "overseer" (episkopos), and "pastor" (poimen) all refer to the same office. In other words, overseers and pastors are not distinct from elders; the terms are simply different ways of identifying the same people.

The qualifications for an overseer (episkopos) in 1 Tim. 3:1-7, and those for an elder (presbuteros) in Titus 1:6-9 are unmistakably parallel. In fact, in Titus 1, Paul uses both terms to refer to the same man (presbuteros in v. 5 and episkopos in v. 7).

All three terms are used interchangeably in Acts 20. In verse 17, Paul assembles all the elders (presbuteros) of the church of Ephesus to give them his farewell message. In verse 28 he says, "Be on guard for yourselves, and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopos), to shepherd (poimaino) the church of God." First Peter 5:1-2 brings all three terms together as well. Peter writes, "Therefore, I exhort the elders (presbuteros) 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, shepherd (poimaino) the flock of God among you, exercising oversight (episkopeo) not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God." The different terms, then, indicate various features of ministry, not varying levels of authority or separate offices, as some churches espouse.

Benefits of Plurality

Much can be said for the benefits of leadership made up of a plurality of godly men. Their combined counsel and wisdom help assure that decisions are not self-willed or self-serving to a single individual (Prov. 11:14). The accountability a plurality affords cannot be discounted. Many times in the past, the lack of checks and balances and accountability has resulted in horrific events in the church. Men, who possessed a type of absolute authority, have allowed sin to reign in their lives and caused much damage to the cause of Christ.

Even with a solid, committed, godly group of pastors, the clear direction of leadership is not always guaranteed, and division in opinions can present itself. If there is division among the pastors in making decisions, all the pastors should study, pray, and seek the will of God together until a consensus is achieved. In this way, the unity and harmony that the Lord desires for the church will begin with those individuals he has appointed to shepherd His flock.

A plurality gives room for and encourages the mixture of non-vocational elders as well as vocational elders. It is clear that God has gifted His church with the necessary leadership to accomplish his kingdom work. The men that are needed to fulfill the role of leadership most likely will come in different capacities.

Where traditional leadership has kept the pastorate at an unapproachable distance to the non-vocational church leader (Bible teachers, deacons, other ministry leaders & coordinators), a plurality of pastors opens up the role of leadership. Godly men, whom God has gifted, are not left on the shelf when it comes to leadership. Instead, they are engaged and encouraged to serve in that capacity.

The diversity of men (vocational and non-vocational) brings a source of strength and depth to the making of decisions and leading of a diverse church.

Qualification of Pastors

The character and effectiveness of any church is directly related to the quality of its leadership. That's why Scripture stresses the importance of qualified church leadership and delineates specific standards for evaluating those who would serve in that sacred position.

The qualifications for pastors are found in 1 Timothy 3:2-7 and Titus 1:6-8. According to these passages, a pastor must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, temperate, prudent, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not addicted to wine, not pugnacious, gentle, uncontentious, free from the love of money, not fond of sordid gain, a good manager of his household, one who has his children under control with dignity, not a new convert, one who has a good reputation outside the church, self-controlled, sensible, able to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict, above reproach as God's steward, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, loving what is good, just, and devout.

The single, overarching qualification of which the rest are supportive is that he is to be "above reproach." That is, he must be a leader who cannot be accused of anything sinful because he has a sustained reputation for blamelessness.

The idea of being above reproach is in reference to a pattern of sin, and not a sinless life. Truly, we all must be aware that we will sin and will continually battle the sinful, human nature. Included in this idea of being above reproach is that, when sin happens, confession and repentance will follow, thus alleviating harmful patterns of sin.

A pastor is to be above reproach in his marital life, his social life, his business life, and his spiritual life. In this way, he is to be a model of godliness so he can legitimately call the congregation to follow his example (Phil. 3:17). All the other qualifications, except perhaps teaching and management skills, only amplify that idea.

In addition, the office of pastor is limited to men. First Timothy 2:11-12 says, "Let a woman quietly receive instruction with entire submissiveness. But I do not allow a woman to teach or exercise authority over a man, but to remain quiet." In the church, women are to be under the authority of the pastors, excluded from teaching men or holding positions of authority over them. That being said, we whole-heartedly view women as vital to the life of the church. Their heart to ministry and giftedness is also something that must be utilized in the church.

Functions of Pastors

As the apostolic era came to a close, (and it did- we have no remaining apostles today) the office of elder/pastor emerged as the highest level of local church leadership. Thus, it carried a great amount of responsibility. There was no higher court of appeal and no greater resource to know the mind and heart of God with regard to issues in the church. The primary responsibility of a pastor is to serve as a manager and caretaker of the church (1 Tim 3:5). That involves a number of specific duties.

As spiritual overseers of the flock, pastors are to determine **church policy** (Acts 15:22); **oversee the church** (Acts 20:28); **ordain others** (1 Tim 4:4); **lead, teach, and preach** (1 Tim 5:17; cf. 1 Thess 5:12; 1 Tim 3:2); **exhort and refute** (Titus 1:9); and **act as shepherds, setting an example for all** (1 Pet 5:1-3). Those responsibilities put pastors at the core of the New Testament church's work.