

Authority Inversion: The Subversion of Pastoral Leadership

© 2013 [Tony Garland](#)¹

A troubling situation many pastors find themselves in today is that of occupying a place of apparent leadership, but lacking true authority. The office of pastor, which scripture establishes as the source of leadership and authority within a local fellowship, can be hindered and even subverted by church practices which have more in common with cultural expectations than the teaching of the New Testament.² The unfortunate result is that the person or persons expecting to be entrusted with the role of spiritual leadership and authority within the church find themselves under the restrictive control of those whom they purportedly lead. This represents an inversion of the authority structure established by the New Testament and contributes to the subversion of pastoral leadership within the church.

Examples

Although there are numerous situations which contribute to the inversion of pastoral authority, consideration of a few representative scenarios can help to illustrate what is meant by “authority inversion” and pave the way for identifying some of the root causes of this unbiblical practice.

Congregational Rule

One of the more obvious church practices which subverts pastoral authority is that of *congregational rule*. By its very name, a *congregational-ruled* church, places ultimate authority in the hands of the congregation. This church governmental structure is particularly popular in the West since it aligns with the expectations of the untaught within a congregation that biblical government would naturally follow democratic principles. After all, if the Bible teaches that men are predisposed toward evil, isn't congregational rule the safest and wisest approach rather than centralization of authority within the hands of a few men—or even one man?

Within the congregational-ruled church, decisions are made by popular vote. Although the pastor or pastors within a congregational church may have considerable influence upon the decision-making process, ultimately they have no more authority than any other voting member within the church. Thus, authority ultimately lies with the sheep rather than the shepherds and authority is *inverted*.

It is mainly in our American democratic society where the churches feel it is their right to vote on almost every issue, from the selection of the pastor down to the color of the church bus! The sheep are then in charge, and not the leadership

1 This article was written for an upcoming edition of: Christopher Cone, ed., *Practical Aspects of Pastoral Authority* (Fort Worth, TX: Tyndale Seminary Press, 2009).

2 Throughout this article I use “church” (lowercase) to denote an individual local fellowship whereas “Church” (uppercase ‘C’) denotes the body of believers at large: the universal body of Christ.

and the shepherds that God wants in place in an assembly!³

Pastor Search Committee

Another situation where authority inversion frequently occurs is the case of a long-term fellowship of believers which seeks to obtain a pastor by way of a pastoral search committee. Concluding they lack viable candidates within the fellowship, the committee searches for an external candidate suitable for the figurehead role as pastor.

In many cases, the process is triggered by the departure of the previous pastor requiring that the search takes place during a period of ministry by multiple itinerant pastors during which the church lacks committed long-term spiritual guidance. The fellowship itself may have a long history—often owning the church building, property and other resources—such that the continuation of the fellowship and its assets continues over multiple generations while individual pastors come and go.

Typically, the lack of any remaining pastor(s), the longevity of the fellowship within the local community, and the practice of bringing in an external “unknown” pastor lead to an authority problem: the local fellowship is unwilling to take the risk of investing their new pastor with true biblical authority. It takes time to get to know someone and to build real trust. An external candidate, no matter how carefully examined, remains a significant unknown—a risk. The problem is often compounded by a lack of a plural pastorate because important biblical checks and balances are not in place to safeguard the process of bringing in and establishing a new pastor.

The result is predictable: the new pastor occupies a position only as a figurehead, but lacks true authority—often regarded simply as an employee who can be fired as easily as he was hired. The authority of the pastor only extends to matters and decisions which are implicitly endorsed by key members of the congregation. In other situations, pastoral authority is subverted.

Governing Board

The real authority within the fellowship continues to reside with a search committee or governing board, most often referred to as “the elder board.” While this may seem to approximate what the New Testament prescribes for a biblical fellowship, the problem is often that the persons which make up this board are not true elders because they lack the biblical qualifications which the New Testament sets forth for such individuals—men who are of godly character possessing an intimate knowledge of scripture coupled with the ability to teach and refute false teachers.

According to Paul’s required qualifications for eldership, a prospective elder must have enough knowledge of the Bible to be able to refute false teachers . . . [Tit.

3 Mal Couch, ed., *A Pastor’s Manual on Doing Church* (Springfield, MO: 21st Century Press, 2002), 133.

1:5,6,9] . . . Unlike modern board elders, all New Testament elders were required to be "able to teach" (1Tim. 3:2) . . . it is a scriptural requirement that an elder "be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict" (Tit. 1:9)⁴

Church Discipline

The subversion of pastoral authority is problematic and stressful when it affects day-to-day operational decisions within the church, but becomes egregious when it compromises spiritually important activities which are critical to the health of the fellowship, such as church discipline.

Church Discipline. The very words strike terror in the heart of most pastors. Their hands sweat, their mouths go dry, . . . What are we to do? To obey God may very well threaten our ministry, our security, our hopes and dreams, not to mention wreaking havoc and strife among the people we love and have devoted our lives to serve. But to disobey God due to our fears and apprehensions is to dishonor Him and abandon the field of spiritual warfare at precisely the wrong moment. . . . Many a pastor has found himself marginalized, or even removed from his ministry, for daring to obey the Word in relation to a family member of a well-connected church leader.⁵

Causes

Before turning to scripture for solutions to this ailment, it is helpful to consider factors which lead to authority inversion.

Cultural Expectations

The history of the Christian Church is one of periods of varying acceptance by its surrounding culture. At times when the Church undergoes rejection and persecution its form and practice tend toward faithfulness to scripture. Conversely, in times of acceptance, the church often incorporates elements of the culture which are foreign to scripture. The latter situation characterizes much of the history of the Christian church in the West resulting in numerous churches which are patterned after cultural expectations and practices rather than New Testament truth. Two common cultural influences upon church practices are the *democratic model* and *business model* of government. Both of these influences contribute to an inversion of authority within the church which ultimately subverts biblical pastoral leadership.

One of the examples given earlier was that of a *congregational-rule church*. Such a church is patterned after democratic ideals rather than New Testament principles: the spiritual leaders

4 Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 18-23.

5 Cone, 211,218.

have no authority except what derives from approval by congregational vote.⁶ Congregational church government misinterprets the advisory role which the assembly exercised in the New Testament as being authoritative and binding upon the leadership.⁷ *Congregational-elder rule* is a variation of this democratic version of church government where the congregation elects elders and deacons but remains involved to varying degrees (by vote) in governing the church. This may be the most popular system within evangelicalism.⁸ Although the elders and deacons are vested with decision-making authority, their authority is on a tether—subject to pleasing the majority of the congregation since retaining the office of elder or deacon is dependent upon the vote of the assembly.

One can generally identify *de facto* congregational rule, even within churches which do not claim to be congregational. A clue can be found in the importance which attends requirements for church membership: the church constitution will place great emphasis upon church membership—establishing a clear line between attendees who are “members” versus those who are not. This follows when one considers that the congregational *vote* is where authority lies. Hence, those with authority (the congregation) need to carefully control where such authority is extended. Becoming a member of such a church is generally conditioned upon acceptance by being voted in by the existing members of the congregation. This emphasis upon membership, because of the all-important voting privilege which ensues, compounds problems by distorting the biblical definition of a local fellowship.

Apparently the New Testament did not have a formal church membership or inauguration into the fellowship of the congregation. . . . It would seem biblical that those wishing to fellowship in a church would be admitted based on their profession of faith only. The apostles do not give any specific criteria for joining the group.⁹

Formal membership further compromises spiritual decision-making because some members may not be true believers while others who are true believers may not be members. Decisions may not only be in the hands of the congregation, but to varying degree in the hands of *unbelievers*. This departs from the teaching of the New Testament which emphasizes membership in the body of Christ by an act of God rather than membership in a local fellowship by an act of men.

The most biblical way of dealing with membership would be that the church would have no hard and fast guidelines for membership, except certainly,

6 “. . . to the extreme, the congregation votes on almost every issue. The sheep have full control, with the shepherds only following directions.” [Couch, 37.]

7 “The congregation may have a say in choosing missionaries (Acts 15:19-29), and the setting forth of candidates for the office of deacon (Acts 6:11-7). However, the elders are spiritually responsible for the way they manage and take care of the church of God (1 Tim. 3:5).” [Couch, 37.]

8 Couch, 37.

9 Couch, 35.

confession of faith. Strong elders are the “keepers” of the truth for the church, and should be able to deal with any problems that might cause conflict in the local church body.¹⁰

As the importance of official church membership is elevated, so too unbiblical distinctions among believers come into play. If only members can vote, should non-members be allowed to serve? To teach? To administer communion? This results in a serious distortion of what it means to be a member of the body of Christ. A believer who may have attended the fellowship for some time, but is not a member, is allowed to *take* communion, but not *administer* communion. Such a believer is then essentially prohibited from exercising their God-given gifting: all because of man-made criteria which is not found within the New Testament.

. . . our being a member of the church, of the body of Christ, of one another, has absolutely nothing to do with human voting or the will of man. It has everything to do with what God has accomplished within that person through the new birth. God is the one who makes a person a member, not us. And for us to say that someone is not a member and use that terminology, I believe is a denial of spiritual reality based upon a man-made criteria. . . . to refuse someone their place within the body, to refuse them the work that God not only endowed them for but called them to because of a human institution or criteria that I can't even find in scripture, to me is a fearful thing. It's almost a denial of the work of God in that person's life.¹¹

Proponents of placing great importance on church membership—most often because of its relationship to voting—sometimes counter that formal church membership is a measure of spiritual commitment to the church. If a believer attends the fellowship regularly, why wouldn't they simply become a member and get on with serving? One reason could be that they can find no scriptural mandate for the practice. Or perhaps they have seen its abuse in situations where the preponderance of voting members are unbelievers. In any case, formal membership, which is so important to democratic forms of church government, has proven to be an unreliable measure of spiritual commitment.

I am convinced that voted membership is not a valid measure of a person's spiritual commitment either to the church or to Jesus Christ. It is certainly not a biblical one. I have known voted members who were quite treacherous in their commitment to the body of Jesus. And I have known non-voted members who have been exceptionally responsive to the will of God. True measures of spiritual commitment are biblically defined. Not humanly defined. And they are such things as love, and servant-hood, and giving, and faithfulness, and prayer, and time in the word, and there are a number of things, but not voted membership.

10 Couch, 36.

11 Greg Summers, *The Nature of the Church - Part 1*, (Camano Island, WA: Mabana Chapel, 2006), p. 5. <http://www.mabanachapel.org/teaching/topics/20060430_nature_of_church_1.pdf> accessed July 23, 2010.

It's not an accurate measure of spiritual commitment.¹²

Another cultural expression of church government which subverts pastoral authority follows modern business practices. In this form of church government, typically a single pastor occupies the role of "visionary" or "executive" corresponding to the business role of a CEO. He may also have a supporting staff which is under his authority, however, as in a corporation, he and his staff is subject to a board of directors who essentially hire and fire them as employees. His performance as pastor may even be formally evaluated by comparison with a detailed job description including specifications for frequency of home and hospital visits, pulpit performance, formal reporting of activities, and more.

Often, this model of church government also embraces secular ideas of what it means to be a leader with the attendant belief that the services of a special, formally-trained professional are needed in order to specialize ministry and bring about church growth.¹³ Rather than being raised up locally—in conjunction with other similarly gifted individuals— into a position of true authority, the pastor is viewed as a solitary and unique individual: a "hired holy man." Typically the expectations for his performance and influence upon the fellowship are unrealistically high yet he is not granted corresponding authority because final authority (and his remuneration) rests with the board—which is often made up of members lacking in Biblical qualification (see below).

Since the pastoral leader is the hired professional, he is often viewed as the main person responsible for carrying out the work of the ministry. Instead of equipping the saints for the task, his role becomes that of *doing* most of the ministry. Spiritual work which could and should be done by the wider congregation is left to the professional.¹⁴

Unbiblical Elders

Leadership authority can also be subverted within churches by an unbiblical understanding of how the New Testament defines the office of "pastor" or "elder."

Problems occur when churches differentiate between the office of "pastor" and "elder." Most frequently, the man who regularly teaches from the pulpit is known as the "pastor" whereas another group of men, usually members of a governing board, are distinguished from the

12 Summers, 6.

13 "Lesslie Newbigin goes so far as to question whether the church ought to encourage the concept of leadership, so difficult it is to use without being misled by its non-Christian counterpart. The church needs saints and servants, not "leaders," and if we forget the priority of service, the entire idea of leadership training becomes dangerous. Leadership training must still follow the pattern our Lord used with His twelve." [J. Oswald Sanders, *Spiritual Leadership* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1994), 148.]

14 "Clericalism does not represent biblical, apostolic Christianity. Indeed, the real error to be contended with is not simply that one man provides leadership for the congregation, but that one person in the holy brotherhood has been sacralized apart from the brotherhood to an unscriptural status. In practice, the ordained clergyman—the minister, the reverend—is *the Protestant priest.*" [Strauch, 113.]

pastor having the title of “elders,” or “lay elders.” Sometimes the terms “pastor” and “elder” are used to differentiate those who are paid (pastors) from those who are not (elders). The pastor is often a hired full-time employee subject to a governing board made up of elders—who are typically elected by the congregation and may or may not be paid.

There are at least two problems with such an arrangement. (1) the pastor, being an employee of the board, is effectively under the authority of the elders. He may occupy a position of authority in the eyes of the congregation, but ultimately his opinion must bow to the elder board or he risks termination as their employee. (2) As we discuss later, the scriptures do not differentiate between the office of pastor and elder—the terms merely emphasize different aspects of the same position of service.

Where the terms “pastor” and “elder” are used to denote differences in function there is also the attendant danger of understanding them to denote a difference in the biblical qualifications of the individuals to which they apply. Since the pastor occupies the pulpit and has great spiritual visibility within the assembly, he is generally subject to the biblical qualifications which scripture sets forth for such an individual. However, since the elders do not occupy the pulpit—and may not even teach—they are often pragmatic business leaders with influence and connections within the community, but lacking the biblical qualifications required by an elder. Even though the New Testament says otherwise, this practice of differentiating between the purpose and qualifications of “pastor” vs. “elder” has become so widespread that it has made it difficult to use the biblical term “elder” as an alternate appellation for the pastor.

Although the term *elder* is the predominate New Testament term used to describe local church leaders and is especially suited to the nature of the new Testament churches, it conveys to the overwhelming majority of Christians and non-Christians today ideas that are different from those found in the new Testament. People today think of church elders as lay, church-board members who are separate and distinct from the professional, ordained pastor (or clergyman). I refer to these elders as “board elders;” they are not true New Testament, Christian elders. They are advisers, committee men, executives, and directors. A true biblical eldership is not a businesslike committee. It’s a biblically qualified council of men that jointly pastors the local church.¹⁵

Even where the pastor is included as a member of the “elder board,” pastoral authority is subverted because decisions are subject to the majority rule of the elder board which is comprised of individuals who lack the biblical qualifications of a true elder. Thus, pastoral decisions are subverted through the influence of men critically lacking in spiritual orientation and priorities.

15 Strauch, 31.

Lack of Longevity

Another contributor to authority inversion is the relatively short period of time which characterizes many pastoral tenures. When a pastor occupies a position within a local fellowship for a relatively short period of time, it becomes impossible for the congregation to really get to know him and vice versa. Add to that the concern by the congregation that the pastor may not be committed to the fellowship for the long haul and it is easy to see why the biblical model of placing authority in the hands of the pastorate is not readily followed.

The reasons why many pastoral positions are short-lived are varied. In some cases, short tenure is simply a symptom of the inability of leadership within the fellowship to get along because of conflict—often in regard to the exercise of authority. Another common contributor is ambitious pastors who view their role within the body of Christ much like a secular career in which one of their goals is that of promotion to ever more influential and larger pastorates—with an attendant increase in remuneration.¹⁶ In churches whose government emulates a business model, pastoral tenure may be short because the pastor, as CEO, fails to bring about the required growth in numbers or ministries sought by the board so his employment is terminated in favor of a replacement. In other cases, the pastorate may be subject to imposed limits on length of service established by his denomination. Lastly, we are living in an increasingly mobile society where family associations, businesses, and living arrangements seem to be changing more frequently than ever—adding yet another challenge to the commitment to long-term ministry in a community.

Regardless of the cause, short-term pastoral tenure adversely affects the development of transparency and trust between those who would minister as pastors and the sheep which God has given them. This is unfortunate as history and experience show that truly fruitful ministry takes place most often when pastors serve within the same fellowship for an extended period.¹⁷

Familiarity

Yet another contributor to the subversion of pastoral authority is the reluctance to raise up pastoral leadership from the midst of an established fellowship. Here again, the issue is risk: *whenever a fellowship attains a spiritual leader from an outside source there is greater risk due to the lack of intimate familiarity between the fellowship and the new leader.* The idea of bringing in a relatively unknown person and investing them with authority over the fellowship

16 “The word *ambition* comes from a Latin word meaning “campaigning for promotion.” The phrase suggests a variety of elements: social visibility and approval, popularity, peer recognition, the exercise of authority over others. Ambitious people, in this sense, enjoy the power that comes with money and authority. Jesus had no time for such ego-driven ambitions. The true spiritual leader will never ‘campaign for promotion.’” [Sanders, 15.]

17 Examples of fruitful long-term ministries include those of Alistair Begg, James Boice, and John MacArthur.

is fraught with difficulty. The result is predictable: the externally-obtained leader is immediately given a title, position, and responsibility, but various means are employed to avoid vesting him with the necessary biblical authority to be truly successful in his role. Once again, authority inversion is the unhappy result.

If filling pastoral roles with relatively unknown external candidates is so risky, why is it so common? There are numerous factors which contribute to this practice.

First, there is often the belief that a pastor must be a trained professional—preferably a seminary graduate. While it is possible to become better prepared and trained to pastor, training alone is not the primary measure of whether a person is suitable or effective as a pastor—much less whether they are called to this office by God. Consider those whom Jesus and Paul raised up as leaders and from where they were drawn. With the notable exception of the Apostle Paul, they were not formally trained in the scriptures. The New Testament gives priority to character and faithfulness over formal training (John 7:15; Acts 4:13; 2Ti. 2:2). This misplaced belief in the need of a trained professional automatically rules out consideration of men within the fellowship who God would raise up to become pastors and who are intimately known and trusted, having a long and demonstrated involvement in the church.

Second, there may be an emphasis on a clergy-laity distinction—a distinction foreign to the New Testament. Similarly to how Jesus remarked that “a prophet is not without honor except in his home town and in his own household” (Mat. 13:57), the local fellowship may seek an external individual whom they assume is of great spirituality for a leader rather than recognize the true spirituality of one in their midst. Therefore, there may also be an unwillingness to elevate someone who is called of God, but presently “only a deacon or sheep,” into a position as a spiritual leader because it entails submitting to his leadership—which requires trust in God and great humility. There may also be the perception that in order to function effectively as a spiritual leader, the pastor must occupy the role of a uniquely gifted and separated person who can never really become a part of the congregation, but must distance himself from the sheep.¹⁸ Such expectations rule out consideration of called and gifted individuals within the fellowship since they are already an intimate part of the assembly.

Third, the fellowship may have set up goals which they perceive as ruling out the consideration of internal candidates. Such goals can bias the selection of a new pastor because the characteristics of the pastor most important to the fellowship are seen to be related to ministry goals rather than biblical qualifications. For example, the fellowship may have an older, mature individual who meets biblical qualifications for consideration as a pastor, but the pastoral search committee or similar group has established guidelines which call for a young, dynamic individual—perhaps with an evangelistic emphasis and suitably “hip” style which will appeal to the younger generation. Or perhaps the internal individual has a relatively low-key personality

¹⁸ “The concept of the pastor as the lonely, trained professional—the sacred person over the church who can never really become a part of the congregation—is utterly unscriptural. Not only is this concept unscriptural, it is psychologically and spiritually unhealthy.” [Strauch, 43.]

whereas the search committee is looking for a “vision caster” more akin to a dynamic business CEO. There may also be undo concern that an older individual may not continue in the position as long as desired.¹⁹ In short, ministry goals are allowed to supersede biblical qualifications such that spiritual development of leadership from within is precluded.

In each case, the fellowship places itself on the horns of a dilemma: the difficult task of bringing in a relatively unknown outsider while investing that individual with true biblical authority over the fellowship. Predictably, the transfer of authority is generally compromised.

Scriptural Guidance

Having considered examples of the inversion of authority and examined some of the causes, we now turn to the scriptures for guidance. Since the Church and its function are defined by scripture, we can be confident that applying biblically sound practices will alleviate or greatly reduce the problem of the subversion of pastoral authority.

Elder Rule

First, the scriptures indicate that leadership of the local church is vested in elders and not the congregation.²⁰

The New Testament does not indicate that the congregation governs itself by majority vote, and there is no evidence that God has granted every member one equal vote with every other member. Rather the New Testament congregation is governed by its own congregational elders. The elders, according to the express instruction of the New Testament, have the authority to shepherd the congregation.²¹

In his first letter to Timothy, concerning the qualifications of an elder, Paul states that an elder must rule his own house well in order to properly know how to take care of the church of God (1Ti. 3:5). Paul holds that as a man rules as head of the household so too an elder rules in a way which takes care of the church. Later in the letter, Paul mentions that “elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine” (1Ti. 5:17). Paul instructs the church at Thessalonica “to recognize those who labor among you, and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love for their work’s sake” (1Th. 5:11-12). The ministry of the elders at the church of Thessalonica was a labor of love among the fellowship. Paul said these elders were “over” the flock and were to be esteemed. Peter, having exhorted the elders in their leadership task, enjoins the younger people to “submit yourselves to your elders” (1Pe. 5:5). The writer of Hebrews also makes mention of the leadership role of elders within an assembly: “Remember those who rule

19 The term “elder” (πρεσβυτερος [*presbyteros*]) denotes one who is older and experienced.

20 For a more thorough treatment of elder rule, see Cone, “What is a Pastor?”

21 Strauch, 293.

over you, who have spoken the word of God to you" (Heb. 13:7) and "Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account" (Heb. 13:17).

The unambiguous testimony of the New Testament is that a group of men, known as "elders," are to lead the church. They are to lead by way of sacrificial example, following the pattern of the ultimate Shepherd of the assembly, Jesus (1Pe. 5:2-4).

Plural Elders

Second, the scriptures indicate that each church is ruled by a plurality of elders.²²

The principle of a plurality of elders in each fellowship is an enormous safeguard and provides great benefit to the church. As a safeguard against authority inversion, it allows the vesting of true biblical authority among the elders with a greatly reduced risk of the abuse of authority. A single individual, even a relatively unknown external candidate, may go astray yet the fellowship remains protected from abuse by the multiplicity of elders—most of whom will have a longstanding record of service at the assembly. With a plural eldership in place, the motivation for withholding authority from the elders is greatly reduced.

A Pastor is an Elder is a Pastor

Third, scripture indicates there is no distinction between the role of "pastor" and "elder."

As we have mentioned, the term "pastor" has become the culturally established title of someone who serves as the main preacher within a church whereas the term "elder" is often understood as denoting a different function, or worse: the title used for a pastor within a cult.²³ This common practice of attaching different responsibilities, qualifications, and roles to the terms "pastor" and "elder" is simply not supported by scripture.

The Apostle Peter, having referred to himself as a "fellow elder," enjoins elders to "shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers" (1Pe. 5:2). The function of the elders is that of shepherding (*poimante*, from which the term "pastor" derives) and serving as overseers (*episkopountes*, from which the term "bishop" derives).

Scripture is quite clear that these descriptive titles relate to the same pastoral office. The terms elder and bishop are synonymous in Acts 20:17, Acts 20:28 and Titus 1:5-7. The terms elder, bishop, and shepherd are synonymous in 1 Peter 5:1-2. The leadership role of elders is also evident in the shepherdly activity of James 5:14. As clearly noted by Lightfoot, in biblical times elder and bishop were synonymous terms.²⁴

Overseers and deacons are called to lead the church. As is clear from Acts 20:17,

22 For substantiation of this claim, see the chapter in Cone titled "The Plurality Principle," and the associated article by Garland, "Leadership Limited by Finances or Gifting?"

23 E.g., Mormonism.

Acts 20:28 and Titus 1:5-7, overseer is another term for elder, the most common New Testament name for the office (cf. Acts 11:30; 14:23; 15:2,4,6,23; James 5:14). Elders are also referred to as pastors (or shepherds; Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2), pastor-teachers (Eph 4:11), and bishops (cf. Acts 20:28; 1 Tim 3:2).²⁵

Nor does scripture know anything of a "lay-elder"—someone who functions as an elder, but lacks suitable knowledge of the scriptures to be able to teach (1Ti. 3:2).

According to the New Testament, a pastor is a shepherd is an overseer (bishop) is an elder! Whenever the church makes a distinction between "pastor" and "elder" it has departed from scripture which can only lead to confusion or worse.

In relation to authority inversion, it is not biblical for an "elder board" to exercise authority over a "pastor" since, according to scripture, elders and pastors are one and the same. At the very least, a pastor should be a member of the elder board and have an equal role in decisions. Where a church is governed by a board, the board should be comprised of a group of *biblically qualified* elder-pastors. Specifically, the same qualifications required for a pastor would apply to each board member.²⁶ Adherence to the New Testament precludes populating an elder board with individuals who possess business knowledge or community influence rather than true biblical qualifications. This alone would protect decisions from undue bias by secular rather than spiritual considerations because the men on the elder board are men who are spiritual and biblical in their outlook and goals.

We will also search the scriptures in vain for common titles such as "senior pastor" and "associate pastor" which establish one pastor as having formal authority over another. Within scripture, all pastors have equal authority even if some may have greater influence due to greater gifting or experience. Even the Apostle Peter, when exhorting other elders, referred to himself as merely a "fellow elder" (1Pe. 5:1). The equality of pastors set forth by the New Testament works so long as the pastors are spiritually minded, submitted to God, and submitted to one another. The result will be joint decision-making which recognizes the principle of "first among equals."

Failure to understand the concept of "first among equals" (or 1 Tim. 5:17) has caused some elderships to be tragically ineffective in their pastoral care and leadership. Although elders act jointly as a council and share equal authority and responsibility for the leadership of the church, all are not equal in their giftedness, biblical knowledge, leadership ability, experience, or dedication. Therefore, those among the elders who are particularly gifted leaders and/or teachers will naturally stand out among the other elders as leaders and teachers within the leadership body. This is what the Romans called *primus inter pares*, meaning "first among equals," or *primi inter pares*, meaning "first ones among

24 John MacArthur Jr., *Rediscovering Pastoral Ministry* (Dallas: Word Publishing, 1995), 39.

25 John MacArthur, *Philippians* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 2001), 14.

26 For more on the biblical qualifications of a pastor, see the chapter in Cone titled "What is a Pastor?"

equals.²⁷

The decision-making of the plural elders operates much in the same way as gifts within the body of Christ—each elder has differing wisdom, experience, and insight which may bear upon the particular decision being made. This will be recognized among their peers resulting in superior counsel for the benefit of the entire fellowship.

Voting is Advisory

Fourth, scripture indicates that although a wise group of elders will seek to understand the desires and wisdom of the congregation, decision-making is ultimately in the hands of the elders. Although there is nothing wrong with using voting as a means of determining the majority opinion among the assembly, it should serve only as advisory input to the group of elders who are vested with the authority of making any final decision. This pattern was followed in what many consider to be the earliest example of decision-making described in the book of Acts: the selection of deacons (Acts 6:1-7).

What then was the role of the congregation [in Acts 6:1-7]? And how did they respond to what was happening? (1) They “selected” the deacons (v. 3). (2) the deacons found “approval” with the apostles’ words (v. 5). And, (3) they “chose” out seven men (v. 5). Luke says nothing about a casting of lots, which would probably be the method of voting. To choose was not a voting but literally in Greek a calling forth, a form of screening, but not technically a voting. And even this “setting forth” had to be approved by the apostles who were then acting as elders.²⁸

There are only two places in the New Testament where the congregation had an open say on specific issues relating to the direction of the church. However, in both cases this was not a democratic voting as we think of today. The first is mentioned in Acts 6:1-7 in which the apostles, who were acting as elders in the Jerusalem church, told the congregation to “select from among you, brethren, seven men of good reputation, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we may put in charge of this task” of the daily charity and the care of the widows. . . . The second mention of congregational involvement in decisions is the choosing of missionaries [in] (Acts 15:22). In both instances the assemblies had a say about the selection of their deacons and missionaries, but again, this was not a popular vote as we might conceive of today.²⁹

Benefits

What are the benefits which accrue when a church follows New Testament principles so that authority is properly vested in the elders? As we might expect, they are considerable because

27 Strauch, 45.

28 Couch, 51.

29 Couch, 142-143.

of two simple principles in regard to scripture: (1) God's way is always the best way: He simply knows best; (2) God always blesses obedience, even when we don't understand all the reasons for doing things His way.

Decisions made by spiritually-minded men possessing biblical qualifications will follow biblical principles and goals and will resist cultural fads, the desire to tickle ears, and dancing to secular expectations. Such men will make leadership decisions which promote true spiritual growth. The job of governing the church will be more pleasant, rewarding, and efficient since the leadership team are more likely to have similar viewpoints informed by the scriptures such that conflict will be reduced. Leadership will no longer suffer from crippling compromise where spiritual principles are sacrificed in order to appease other interests within the church which wield ultimate authority. The possibility of longer-term leadership involvement and commitment in the fellowship increases since there is less conflict and burnout, where multiple elders are involved, overlapping terms of pastoral service among the group of elders provides consistency even in cases where individual pastors may come and go.



Scan code for
SpiritAndTruth.org