**BIBLICAL CHURCH LEADERSHIP – An Analysis**

The New Testament places a high priority on leadership of the church. The Biblical emphasis on leadership is because what the leadership of the church is determines what the church will be. A weak, spiritually powerless leadership will produce a weak, spiritually powerless membership body. The New Testament gives more instruction regarding church leadership than on such important church subjects as the Lord’s Supper, baptism, and spiritual gifts. Because the church is people and the leadership of the church is the leadership of people, it makes the uncontested point that GOD’s paramount concern is not with buildings or programs but with the moral and spiritual character of those who lead and care for His people. A church views its leadership with less concern to its peril. Godly leadership makes the true, spiritual difference in the local church.

Scripture gives very specific qualifications for those who GOD will allow to lead His people. These requirements cannot be violated or compromised. Placing unqualified and unfit people into the church’s leadership structure is a crucial part of Satan’s ongoing strategy to make useless and defeated churches. Selection of leaders, as the Bible configures them, must be the only acceptable leadership structure and the top priority of an assembly of believers. On this issue there can be no compromise without long-term, disastrous consequences.

The Head of the Church:

The church is “*the church of the living GOD*” (I Timothy 3:14-15). It does not belong to a leader. It is not Pastor John’s church. While there is a valid sense in which we talk about “our church,” it does not belong to the membership. No person can rightfully say “my church” in any sense of ownership or possession. It belongs by creation, purchase, and calling to GOD Himself.

GOD has made His Son head of the church. There is only one flock and one Pastor (Shepherd) (John 10:16); one body and one Head (Colossians 1:18); one holy priesthood and one Great High Priest (Hebrews 4:14); one brotherhood and one Elder Brother (Romans 8:29); one building and one Cornerstone (I Peter 2:5ff); one Mediator; and one LORD. Jesus Christ is the only “Senior Pastor.” All other leaders are His undershepherds … subordinate overseers … subordinate elders.

Terminology:

The New Testament knows only two offices in the church, “elder” and “deacon.” Elders are interchangeably called “elders” and “overseers.” Elders has Jewish roots and overseers Greek but both convey the same concept. Peter, in I Peter 5, tells the elders of the churches to exercise oversight and shepherd (pastor) the believers placed in their care.

We must understand that the terminology we use to describe our leaders must harmonize with our Biblical beliefs regarding the nature of the local church as GOD orders it. Obviously, titles like priest, lord, ruler, king, and father are unacceptable to describe leaders of a Christian congregation. The reason is that those titles are contrary to the attitude leaders are to have and the position they are to hold in the church, as GOD requires. Additionally, improper use of titles causes confusion and conflict between those holding positions, even when the titles are those Scripture uses. Further, the world around is confused and misled by failure to properly name and position church leadership. When it sees creativity and disregard for Biblical parameters and terminology in the working of a church’s leadership structure, it questions its veracity in adherence to other Biblical commands and principles. Churches dare not misuse titles or design or invent titles and boards and leadership structures of their own imagination. Church leaders and assemblies must insist that the terminology used represents, as accurately as possible, the original, Biblical terms and concepts of a New Testament eldership and deaconate.

“Elders”:

The leaders titled “elders” in the local church are, as the word itself indicates, church overseers responsible for the overall supervision, protection, management, and care of people in the local congregation (Acts 20:17,28; Titus 1:5-7; I Peter 5:1-2; I Timothy 3:1-13; 5:17-25). Under the direction of the Holy Spirit, Paul and Peter charged the elders to shepherd and oversee the local church. To no other group or individual does the New Testament give the mandate or allowance to shepherd and oversee the assembly.

There are no sacred, preferential, clerical, or hierarchical connotations to the words “elder” or “overseer.” The New Testament knows nothing of a distinction or delineation between a “laity” and a “clergy.” The elders were equals in authority and title. Some elders were self-supported. Some were church-supported, especially those who diligently labored at teaching and preaching the Word. But, Scripture knows nothing of a separate “professional” ordained clergy.

The leadership of the elders is to be submitted to by the membership of the local church.

According to the New Testament, elders lead the church, teach and preach the Word, protect the church from false teachers (sound Bible instruction and modeling), exhort and admonish the saints in sound doctrine and practice (loving pastoral care and discipline), visit the sick and pray, and judge doctrinal issues (strong leadership). They are to be humble, sacrificial examples of Christian living. In Biblical terminology, elders shepherd, oversee, lead, and care for the local church.

There are five features of a New Testament, Christian eldership: pastoral leadership, shared leadership, male leadership, qualified leadership, and servant leadership.

* *Pastoral leadership*: elders are pastorally involved in the lives of the people. This includes counsel, exhortation, protection of the church (Acts 20:17,28-29; 15:6ff), leading (I Peter 5:1-2; I Timothy 5:17; I Timothy 3:5; Acts 11:30; I Timothy 4:14; James 5:14; Titus 1:7), prayer (I Timothy 1), and, most of all, teaching the church (I Timothy 5:17-18; Titus 1:5,9; I Timothy 3:2). True New Testament eldership forms the pastoral body of the local church.
* *Shared leadership*: The leadership of local assemblies is always plural in Scripture (I Timothy 5:17-18; I Peter 5:1-2; Philippians 1:1; Acts 20:18,28). The model throughout is a pastoral body or council of elders that oversees the whole church. This, as the plurality of deacons, provides internal accountability among members that provides protection from sin of leaders, protection of the spiritual character of the church, and protection of the testimony of the LORD’s name. It also provides mutual support, counsel, and shared wisdom. The only occurrence of elder or overseer in the singular – one person – is in I Peter in reference to Christ.
* *Male leadership*: (I Timothy; Titus) The leadership of churches as GOD requires it is to be spiritual men.
* *Qualified leadership*: (I Timothy; Titus) There is no allowance in the New Testament for anything less than complete conformity to the qualifications Paul lists by the inspiration of GOD.
* *Servant leadership*: (I Peter 5) Elders are not to “lord it over” the believers they are entrusted to care for but to humbly, faithfully serve them. (Matthew 23:1-12; Mark 9:30-35; 10:35-45; Luke 22:24-27)

Every evidence is that, except for unique circumstances of appointment by an apostle, elders were placed in leadership from their own congregations and the councils of elders were self-perpetuating, appointing additional members and successors. The Bible knows nothing of church business meetings and congregational votes. Decisions are always seen as being made by spiritual male leadership.

In Acts 6, the Apostles, acting as the pastoral body of the first church, knew the value of involving the whole congregation in solving the problem. They could have acted on their own without the assembly but, they didn’t. Involving the membership treated the congregation as brothers and sisters in Christ who were indwelt by the Holy Spirit, acknowledged that the money belonged to the people and the neglected widows were the people’s responsibility, and protected the Apostles from any potential charges or questions regarding money and power.

“Pastor”:

The function of pastoring, or shepherding, is assigned to the elders of a local church (I Peter 5:1-2). Their primary responsibility is prayer and ministry of the Word (I Timothy 1 and 3 and, by model, Acts 6). The care and leading and teaching and correcting and coaching involved in that term/title are the responsibility of the body of elders who oversee the church. The New Testament always presents a plurality of leaders overseeing and shepherding the church. Those leaders are called elders. “Pastoring” is a function of leadership within the church. There are no clerical, sacred, preferential, or hierarchical connotations to the title elder or function of pastoring/shepherding. The concept of a division or distinction between “clergy” and “laity” cannot be found in the New Testament.

While pastoral ministry is assigned to the elders of the church, Ephesians 4 talks about men who are unique gifts from GOD to churches. It is there that Paul writes, “And He gave some … pastors …” It appears that GOD specifically gifts churches with unique individuals who are specially equipped to do pastoral ministry. Some have described these as having a “pastor’s heart” … a special love for people, ability to work with them, and love for ministry. The number given to any one church is nowhere indicated. These are elders, but unique among elders, as gifts from GOD to churches. The Apostle John, in Acts, appears to have been a leader among the elders in Jerusalem. Though an equal among the elders, he was the key contact or spokesman for the church. He may be an example of this type of gift man. It could be said that all pastors are elders but not all elders are men given as GOD’s gift of pastor.

Timothy and Titus seem to be positioned in unique leadership. The Apostle Paul placed them as leaders in their respective churches to take specific actions and handle specific problems in those existing churches. However, they were instructed to put elders in place to be leaders of the churches. Except for the unique placing of such men by apostles it was normal for elders, including these, GOD’s gifts, to be men of the local assembly who, upon examination and qualification, were made overseers (elders) in their own churches.

Since councils of elders are self-perpetuating, these men would logically be recognized and placed by the elders of a church. Financial provision to support elders uniquely gifted and involved in preaching and teaching is directed by GOD and allows them to give full time and attention to these functions (I Timothy 5:17-18).

“Deacon”:

The title “deacon” is a transliteration of the Greek word “diakonas.” It, by definition, means servant. That is precisely what the New Testament defines as the deacon’s function. These are church officials, leaders in official positions, who work alongside the elders to carry out and model their teaching in the everyday, practical, nuts and bolts working of the church. In both places where “deacon” appears as an official title in the New Testament, it is inextricably associated with the elders of the churches. The deacons are a distinct body of church officials with a separate but complimentary ministry to that of the elders. In the New Testament, deacons are always seen as subordinate to the elders.

If Acts 6 is a pattern for the relationship of elders and deacons, the deacons are placed in their office by the elders. There it says the apostles, functioning in the position of elders, instructed the assembly to choose from among themselves seven qualified men “whom we may appoint over this business.” The action of the congregation was a nomination of seven men for the elders to install to the work of the church’s welfare ministry to needy widows. These men were installed in a public way by the laying on of hands by the apostles (elders), a symbol of transfer of authority to do the work they were being assigned.

The installation of these seven was for the purpose of freeing the elders from tasks that would draw them away from their priorities of the Word and prayer. Overseers/shepherds/elders can perform all of the functions of deacons, but deacons do not perform all of the functions of elders. Unlike deacons, shepherds are responsible for the overall leadership, supervision, and teaching of the assembly. The overseers, overseeing the whole church, therefore oversee the deacons. The shepherds need to define and routinely clarify what the duties of the deacons are to be.

Many churches, particularly in Baptist circles, have wrongly made deacons a ruling board of the church. In Many churches, deacons are more like corporation executives than ministering servants. This is in direct contradiction to the explicit teaching of the New Testament and the very meaning of the name “deacon.”

The overseers govern and teach; the deacons help to meet the many practical issues of needy people.

GOD has given deacons a privileged ministry of service, mercy, and love to needy people. Theirs is the work of food programs, hospital visits, care for the sick, meeting the needs of the poor, handling finances, counseling … life-stuff. Through them the church’s charitable activities are effectively centralized and lead.

Like elders, there is no specified number. A church may have as many as it needs and as are qualified. Like elders they have to be qualified according to the Scriptural requirements. While dealing with temporal things and practical life-work, the qualifications for deacons are not financial or managerial or physical; they are all spiritual. Like an elder, a deacon remains in office until he no longer desires the work or is disqualified by failure to meet the Biblical demands of moral and spiritual character.

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| **Deacons**  Dignity  Not double-tongued  Not addicted to much wine  Not fond of sordid gain  Holding the mystery of the faith with a clear  conscience  Above reproach  Husband of one wife  Good manager of his children and household | Overseers  Not addicted to wine  Not fond of sordid gain  Above reproach  Husband of one wife  Manages his household well  Temperate  Prudent  Respectable  Hospitable  Able to teach  Not confrontational/argumentative  Gentle  Not contentious  Not a new convert  Has a good reputation with those outside the  church  Not self-willed  Not quick-tempered  Lover of what is good  Just  Devout  Self-controlled  Holds fast to the faithful Word |