



BANNER of *Love* MINISTRIES

What is Biblical Church Government?

By PJ Hanley

Introduction

Church government is a hotly debated subject in certain segments of the body of Christ. Some feel that unless the church embraces what it deems to be Biblical Church Government, she cannot truly be prepared for the days ahead. Proponents of this view place a great deal of emphasis on the restoration of the "Five-Fold" ministries mentioned in Ephesians 4, with specific emphasis on the ministry of apostles. It is believed that when these "New Testament Apostles" emerge or are recognised, the church will enter a golden age of restoration, resulting in the return of Christ Himself. Within this group are others who believe that the predominant practice of Senior Pastor-led churches is unbiblical and even worldly. They insist that the local church should be governed by a group of men who, though different in gifting, are collegial* and equal in the leadership and decision-making process of a local church. This, they claim, is the way it was in the New Testament, and unless it is restored as the practice throughout the body of Christ today, the church will not be equipped or prepared to fulfil her destiny. It is with this issue of what is "Biblical Church Government" that this paper concerns itself. Although not intended to be definitive, it is presented as an honest and scholarly treatment of the subject from a Biblical and cultural perspective, as well as a probing of the Lord's heart as to what He values in the leadership of His church.

Origins of New Testament Leadership Definitions

Leadership in Jerusalem

Any serious discussion of New Testament leadership must begin with the teaching of Jesus and not the writings of Paul or the book of Acts. However, we find Jesus had little to say about the structure of leadership. The founder of the church had no seminars on church structure or the role of elders, senior pastors, bishops or deacons. Neither did he address the role of apostles and prophets and the "five-fold" ministry, things considered vital to church planters today. How astonishing! I am not implying that these subjects are not important, but we must accept the fact that the author and perfecter of the faith did not address the issue of church structure. He did, however, have much to say on the qualities and heart attitude of a leader, a fact that we will consider later. But why was he so silent on the structure of leadership? Furthermore, His apostles had little to say on it. One could argue that the subject is addressed in the New Testament, but although there are references to leaders and ministries, the issue of structure is not specifically defined. In other words, the answer as to whether the local church is led by a Senior Pastor or by a Collegial Eldership is not found in a specific text.

There is no passage that says how churches are to be governed, how pastors are to be installed, or ministries raised up. For instance, the Ten Commandments tell us, "Thou shall not steal", but there is no New Testament text that says, "Churches must have a Senior Pastor," or "Churches may not have a Senior Pastor." Neither is there a passage that defines what apostles are and how they function. What we do find are titles referenced in a functional manner, (such as; "Paul, an Apostle" rather than "The Apostle Paul") and a record of what they did and said. The Acts of the Apostles does not contain teaching on the structure of the leadership of the church at Jerusalem or Antioch, but merely the "Acts" of these apostles and churches. Certainly, the terms elder, apostle, teacher, and prophet are referenced, but they are not defined. When there is a reference to "the apostles and elders" in Jerusalem, such as in Acts 15, we are not told what their eldership structure was. In fact, we are often surprised that they had elders at all, since we know that Jesus chose twelve apostles and they were all in Jerusalem at this juncture. Why then did they have elders? Were the apostles not elders? Certainly they were, but they are mentioned specifically because they are the twelve apostles chosen by Jesus and are honoured as such.

However, the term elder is used in a generic sense, much like we use the term leader today. If I said that there was a meeting of all the leaders of the church in Seattle, who would conclude that I had said anything unusual or that I was promoting a collegial form of church government or that Seattle had no Senior Pastors? Likewise, we cannot draw any conclusions from the statement that there were "elders" in Jerusalem or that the apostles appointed "elders." It is fair to say that whenever elders are mentioned in the New Testament, they are plural (more than one), but this in itself does not suggest that there were no leading elders among them. On the contrary, as far as the account in Acts 15 is concerned, at least, Peter continues his role as an authoritative spokesman for the apostles and James, being the only elder mentioned by name, sums up the matter in an equally authoritative fashion.

Cultural Context

One of the cardinal rules of Scripture interpretation is the consideration of context, and a significant aspect of context is culture. Let me state clearly, context matters and culture matters. So many erroneous conclusions have been drawn when people divorce a verse or passage from its context. However, similar errors are made when Biblical culture is ignored. For example, if we read Paul's words to Timothy that leaders should be the husband of only one wife, without any cultural context, we could be persuaded to think he was being "wishy washy" with the issue of polygamy. Why did he only say this to leaders and not all Christian men? Why did he not simply condemn polygamy and call all polygamists to repentance, as we certainly would do today in North America? But Paul did not take this approach. He did not call polygamists to repentance. Polygamy was accepted in that culture and was common. If Paul had commanded them to put away all their wives except one, he would have risked dishonouring marriage by promoting divorce, not to mention all the pain and suffering it would have brought to those people at that time. Instead, by wisely requiring that leaders be monogamous, God's clear intent for marriage, Paul was elevating monogamy and ensuring that the practice of polygamy would be abandoned. As a result, polygamy was eliminated as a practice not only in the church, but also in all of Western Culture. Indeed, the very thought of it is repulsive to us today. Therefore, when we read the words of Paul to Timothy in Scripture, we are not free to interpret them through the lens of our modern culture or practice, but careful consideration must be given to the cultural context in which they were written. The same is true for all consideration of Biblical leadership titles and roles.

The Five-Fold Ministry

Having understood the importance of culture in Biblical interpretation, we will now take a look at the leadership terms used in the New Testament. There are different terms applied to leaders, many of which are applied to function rather than governmental authority. For example, the so-called "five-fold" ministries (apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors and teachers) are terms that seem to define a specific call or function rather than a governmental office. This is not to say that those who had these ministries were not governmental; they undoubtedly were, but the terms themselves are not necessarily governmental. They are terms that define a specific role in equipping the church rather than a positional, authoritative role. Simply put, apostles are those who are "sent with a mission", prophets are those who speak for God, evangelists are those who preach the gospel, pastors (Lit. "shepherds") are those who care for the flock, and teachers are those who teach and open up the Scriptures. I realise that these are simple definitions; yet, there is a tendency in the modern church to overcomplicate these terms. This is specifically true with the term apostle that seems to have no limit in regard to exaggeration and glorification. However, the New Testament focuses more on the function of these terms than on the particular ministers. Again, there is the issue of culture, which is essential to understanding the use of these terms. The Jews had a different way of thinking than the Greeks. Jews were more emotive in their thinking, whereas Greeks placed more emphasis on logic and reasoning. In our Western culture, we think as Greeks and not as the early Jews. This is why we use the term "the five-fold ministry" and think that each ministry is completely different and separate. We like to define everything clearly and put it in nice, neat boxes.

However, the New Testament, although written in Greek, was written by Jews, and terms are not as clearly and neatly defined as we would like. For instance, Paul is an apostle to the Gentiles, specifically chosen by Jesus Himself, but he is also referred to as a prophet or a teacher (Acts

13:1). Besides, who would doubt that Paul was a pastor (shepherd), an evangelist or a teacher? Timothy is called an apostle, but Paul told him to do the work of an evangelist (2 Tim 4:5). James, who was a prominent elder in the Jerusalem church, is listed among the apostles (Gal 1:19) even though he is not particularly noted for his travelling ministry. Also, the Greek word "apostolos", from which we get the word "apostle," does not originate in the New Testament. Jesus chose to call His Twelve "apostles", but it was not a new term as many suppose. Consider the following passage:

Because of this, God in his wisdom said, 'I will send them prophets and apostles, some of whom they will kill and others they will persecute.' Therefore this generation will be held responsible for the blood of all the prophets that has been shed since the beginning of the world, from the blood of Abel to the blood of Zechariah, who was killed between the altar and the sanctuary. Yes, I tell you, this generation will be held responsible for it all.

Luke 11:49-51 NIV

Here, Jesus uses the term "apostle" (Gr. "apostolos") with regard to the various messengers God sent the Israelites and is undoubtedly referencing 2 Chronicles 36:15. The Jews who translated this verse (2 Chronicles 36:15) into the Greek Septuagint two centuries before Jesus used the same word. Also, "apostolos" is deliberately not translated "apostle" in our modern translations in at least two places (Phil 2:25, 2 Cor 8:23).

*But I thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus, my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, who is also your **messenger** (GR. "apostolos") and minister to my need...*

Phil 2:25 NASU

The context of the above verse is the reason the translators did not use the word "apostle", presumably because they are uncomfortable using this term to refer to messengers.

*As for Titus, he is my partner and fellow worker among you; as for our brethren, they are **messengers** (GR. apostolos) of the churches, a glory to Christ.*

2 Cor 8:23 NASU

In this verse also, the translators seem uncomfortable using the word apostle. Perhaps this is because the context is about the delivery of funds collected from the churches, and they feel that this would compromise a more grandiose meaning of the word. But Paul does not seem uncomfortable using the term that way. The NIV tries to compensate for this in 2 Corinthians 8:23 by translating the word "representative." Thus, they avoid using the term apostle while making Paul's companions a little more dignified than messengers. After all, a representative is closer to our modern view of the term than a "messenger." But why did the NIV not translate the word "apostolos" in Phil 2:25 as "representative" rather than "messenger"? Probably because the word "representative" would be obviously out of place in the text and would even create more problems. But why not use the term apostle each time the Greek word "apostolos" is translated?

Another example of this bias is the translation of the Greek word "poimenas" as pastors. In every other place in the New Testament, it is translated "shepherd" except here (Ephesians 4:11). Why? Perhaps the word "shepherd" doesn't fit into the clerical understanding of a "minister"? What other reason can there be? Please understand! I am not suggesting that the translators were being deliberately misleading. Not at all! But they do seem to have a bias in the way they translate the words "apostolos" and "poimenas." This bias is not intentional, but it does illustrate how we can come to wrong conclusions when we are protecting an understanding that we have. It also illustrates the difficulty the church currently has with leadership terms and roles. This difficulty is not present in the New Testament or in New Testament experience, rather it is the result of centuries of church failures and abuses. I am not suggesting that the ministries listed in Ephesians 4:11 are not important or that the terms have no significance. Indeed they do! Rather, I am attempting to illustrate the importance of understanding Biblical terms in their proper context and usage. What these terms meant to the New Testament writers should determine what they mean to us. However, we are often guilty of imposing our modern usage and understanding onto the pages of Scripture, thereby changing the intended meaning of the words.

While stating that the Ephesians 4:11 ministry terms are not in themselves governmental terms (though leaders undoubtedly function in them), there is one exception that must be pointed out. That is the term apostle as it is specifically applied to the 11 apostles chosen by the Lord and the successor of Judas chosen by the 11. The 12 apostles of the Lamb were called and chosen as unique leaders in the New Testament church. This is an eternal truth. They are and will always be The Apostles. Their revelation of the Lord, together with that of The Prophets of Israel, is the very foundation of the church.

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God's people and members of God's household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone.
Eph 2:19-20 NIV

Many have interpreted this verse as saying that apostolic and prophetic ministries are the foundation of the church. There is no doubt that modern-day apostles and prophets do lay the foundation (which is Jesus Himself), but this verse is not referring to modern prophetic or apostolic ministries. It does not say that the church is built on the foundation of apostles and prophets, but on the foundation of The Apostles and Prophets. It's the specific apostles and prophets. The prophets are the Prophets of Israel who brought the revelation of the Messiah and His kingdom, and the apostles are the Apostles of the Lamb. It is the revelation of Christ brought by the Apostles and the Prophets upon which the church is established. Therefore, the apostles are unique leaders in the New Testament because they were specifically chosen by Jesus and were eyewitnesses of His resurrection. They had a unique governmental position in the early church. This is why they are mentioned together with the elders in Jerusalem, even though they themselves were also elders.

New Testament Governmental Terms

Our English translations of the Bible contain the following governmental terms that were used in the early church: elders, presbyters, overseers, bishops and deacons. We will now briefly examine each of these terms as to their definition and function.

The Greek word "PRESBUTEROS" is translated "ELDERS" or "PRESBYTERS."

The Greek word "EPISKOPOS" is translated "OVERSEERS" or "BISHOPS" ("BISHOP" is a transliteration of "EPISKOPOS").

The Greek word "POIMEN" is translated "PASTOR" or "SHEPHERD" (It is actually translated "PASTOR" only one time in the NT in Ephesians 4:11).

The Greek word "DIAKONOS" is translated "DEACON" or "SERVANT."

Above, we have noted four Greek words. However, three of them are used interchangeably and are in fact one and the same. This leaves us with two terms, elders and deacons, as is illustrated in the following verse.

To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons:
Phil 1:1 NASU

Elders, overseers and pastors all refer to the same people and consequently are one leadership ministry. This is clear in Paul's admonition to the "ELDERS" at Ephesus.

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called to him the elders of the church. Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood. Acts 20:17,28 NASU

Here we see Paul addressing the "ELDERS" (PRESBUTEROS) and telling them to "PASTOR" Or "SHEPHERD" (POIMEN) the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you "OVERSEERS" OR "BISHOPS"(EPISKOPOS). Thus, we see that the terms ELDER, PASTOR, OVERSEER, and BISHOP are synonymous. Another example of this is the following verse:

Therefore, I exhort the elders 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 the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

1 Peter 5:1-3 NASU

Again, as in Acts 20, the ELDERS are told to "PASTOR" (SHEPHERD) the flock, exercising OVERSIGHT (OVERSEERS). These terms, ELDERS, OVERSEERS, and PASTORS, are general terms similar to the term leader, which we use regularly today. "ELDER" is a title referring to stature, whereas, OVERSEER and PASTOR (SHEPHERD) both refer to function. In other words, ELDERS were called to OVERSEE and SHEPHERD (PASTOR) the church. Consequently, ELDER is the only governmental title used in the New Testament, and it is a general term for a leader of recognised stature. This same term was applied to THE TWELVE APOSTLES also, as is clear in the verse above, Peter refers to himself as a "FELLOW ELDER". When THE TWELVE are included in the text with the Elders in the book of Acts, they are given an honorable mention (The Apostles) because of their stature and role as the TWELVE chosen directly by Jesus as His apostles.

The Greek word "DIAKONOS," from which we get the word deacon, simply means servant. However, its usage in the New Testament implies that those who were called deacons had been given a specific responsibility in serving other ministries, such as in Acts 6. Otherwise, why would Paul address the church in Philippi, specifically mentioning the "overseers and deacons?" Also, he would not have listed character qualifications for deacons (Tim 3:8-12) if he were merely referring to all saints who are called to be servants, including elders. Deacons, then, were servants who had a specific sphere of responsibility and authority under the oversight of elders.

Do Titles Matter?

Today, a great deal of emphasis is placed on the correct use of titles. But is this really the proof that we are being "Biblical" or "New Testament"? Does the use of the term "elders" rather than "pastors" make us more "Biblical"? I think not. We may sound more "Biblical", but we are only truly "Biblical" when we adopt the heart and intentions of the New Testament. Remember, Jesus had much to say about the attitude of a leader and little to say about titles. In fact, the only comment He made about titles was also in relation to our attitude in the use of them. He warned us not to flaunt them around as badges of honour, calling each other by these terms, but to walk with humility, recognising that God the Father is the real leader and we are all servants. When we operate this way, we will truly be "New Testament".

Another important consideration in the use of titles today is what they mean in our culture. The word "elder" was well understood in the culture of the New Testament. Everybody knew what an "elder" was. However, that is not true today. Most people have no clue what an "elder" or a "shepherd" is. In one church, being an "elder" means something totally different than another. And the picture does not get any clearer if we use the term "overseer" or "bishop." These latter terms are used today of clerics who oversee groups of pastors and churches. The one term that is understood today is "pastor." Everyone knows what "pastors" (shepherds) are, although not all know what they should be doing. But since the term is so widely accepted and understood in our culture, it is wiser, in my opinion, to use it since it embodies the intent of what church leadership is all about and is understood by our modern culture. After all, if the terms we use convey the wrong message to our culture, then it is not beneficial to use them. We would be better off using terms that people can understand. Otherwise, they come across as grandiose, "religious" titles that no one can relate to and that actually can misrepresent the intent of the Scripture and the simplicity we see in the New Testament. However, if you feel that you are best representing Christ using a different title, then by all means use it.

This brings us to the issue of "collegiality" or "equality" of government and function, which we will attempt to answer in the next section. Is there supposed to be a "Senior Pastor" in the church? Although we could just examine this issue in the New Testament, as many do, we must realise that the form of government used by the First Century Church did not originate with them but was the result of centuries of Biblical Jewish tradition.

Origin of the Term Elders

As we have clearly established in the previous section, there is one governmental term used in the New Testament Church, and that is the term "elder." At no time do we see Jesus or the disciples teaching or giving a definition of this term. The reason is clear. There was no need. For as long as the nation of Israel had existed, there had been elders. In fact, since the beginning of time itself. If you look up the word "elders" in a concordance of the New Testament, you will discover it occurs most in the gospels with reference to the "chief priests and the elders" of Israel. The only reason we need teaching on the subject is because the church has divorced the New Testament from the Old Testament and from Jewish culture. This has led to many erroneous conclusions about the origins and functions of an "elder." Indeed, we have so glorified the idea of "New Testament Elders" in the church that we have begun to think of it as an "office" or role introduced by Jesus and The Apostles. However, once we understand that the disciples were merely doing what Israel had always done, much of the confusion around the term goes away.

The Apostles and early Jewish believers did not reinvent the wheel regarding elders, and neither did the Gentile believers at Antioch, despite what many have said. I have frequently heard the suggestion among leaders that the church in Antioch was more "mature" and "New Testament" than the church in Jerusalem. Antioch is usually looked to as the model of leadership and church, especially by those who teach "equality" of eldership, presumably because all that is known about the church is that they had "prophets and teachers" and there is no mention of anyone who was "senior." Also, they sent out the apostles Barnabas and Paul as a "collegial team." I suppose I should also add that the church in Antioch is perceived as being Gentile and less "religious" than Jewish Jerusalem and therefore more likely to have adopted the leadership plan of the Holy Spirit. On the other hand, whenever one hears of the Jerusalem church, James is usually mentioned. In fact, it is very difficult to argue that James was not viewed as the "Senior Elder" (Pastor) when one considers how the church and even the apostles spoke of him. Consider the following:

All the people kept silent, and they were listening to Barnabas and Paul as they were relating what signs and wonders God had done through them among the Gentiles. After they had stopped speaking, James answered, saying, "Brethren, listen to me. Acts 15:12-13 NASU

And the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. Acts 21:18 NASU

Then three years later I went up to Jerusalem to become acquainted with Cephas, and stayed with him fifteen days. But I did not see any other of the apostles except James, the Lord's brother. Gal 1:18-19 NASU

But on the contrary, seeing that I had been entrusted with the gospel to the uncircumcised, just as Peter had been to the circumcised (for He who effectually worked for Peter in his apostleship to the circumcised effectually worked for me also to the Gentiles), and recognizing the grace that had been given to me, James and Cephas and John, who were reputed to be pillars, gave to me and Barnabas the right hand of fellowship, so that we might go to the Gentiles and they to the circumcised. Gal 2:7-9 NASU

For prior to the coming of certain men from James, he used to eat with the Gentiles; but when they came, he began to withdraw and hold himself aloof, fearing the party of the circumcision. Gal 2:12 NASU

There is no question that there was an issue in the early church regarding Kosher laws and sensitivity among Jews and Gentiles, as is seen in the above verse. However, this cannot be construed to suggest that the church in Antioch was healthier than Jerusalem and the model for church government. On the contrary, the church in Antioch viewed the church in Jerusalem as the model, as did all the churches in Gentile cities. This is clearly illustrated by the fact that the controversy regarding circumcision arose in Antioch and was taken to Jerusalem for settlement. Paul and Barnabas were sent to Jerusalem to resolve this matter (Acts 15:2). All of the apostles of

the Lord were residing in Jerusalem, and to suggest that the church in Antioch was more "advanced" or "free" than that in Jerusalem is to cast aspersions on the The Apostles themselves. Besides, the churches in the Gentile world accepted the decision of the Jerusalem church leadership and rejoiced in it. Paul himself went up to Jerusalem to make sure his understanding and revelation was correct (Gal 2:2). Why would he have done this had he not related to them as being more senior or mature? This fact escapes the notice of some who use Paul's words in Galatians 2 to suggest that he did not revere The Apostles or Jerusalem elders. However, the opposite is true. Paul affirms the Jerusalem elders and their wise counsel. His main point in the passage is that he did not receive the gospel from men, but from God, and that the elders in Jerusalem had borne witness to this.

Another fact that needs to be considered when comparing Antioch to Jerusalem is that the leadership of the Antioch church was predominantly Jewish, having come from Jerusalem. To suggest that they had formed some sort of leadership structure that was different from Jerusalem is not believable or necessary, and there is nothing in the Scripture to support such an idea. In fact, all the church leadership of that time was predominantly Jewish, as the Jewishness of the New Testament attests. Thus, they would all have followed the tradition of the Jews with regard to leadership. The church today speaks of Paul as though he were a Gentile. Paul, though he was the great apostle to the Gentiles, was not a Gentile himself. In his own words, he was a "Hebrew of Hebrews." There is no indication that he dispensed with the leadership structure and culture of his upbringing and training, and established elderships in the churches that were different or "New Testament." So when he and Barnabas "appointed elders in every church", they were merely recognising the leading men among the group and charging them to shepherd the flock. Because the elders are mentioned as a plural group, it does not necessarily mean that there were no "seniors" among them, any more than a reference to the elders in Jerusalem suggests that. Indeed, the expression "the elders of Israel" ("the elders of the people") was common throughout the history of the nation and never did it suggest that they were equal in authority, and there were no "seniors" among them. Also, Paul and Barnabas were sent out as a team, but who would doubt that Paul was not the team leader? Who would suggest that Barnabas was charged in the same way as Paul when he was blinded, knocked off his horse and chosen as the apostle to the Gentiles. Indeed, there is no testimony of Barnabas having been chosen in such a dramatic fashion, but that he was sent out by the Holy Spirit together with Paul. He was chosen and sent out with the same mission (this is the meaning of the term apostle) as Paul in Acts 13, but this does not mean that his call was as significant as Paul's. Neither does it mean that his ministry was unimportant. Perhaps he was chosen to be a comfort and encouragement to Paul on his very difficult mission to the Gentiles. The two separated over Barnabas's desire to bring John Mark along for the second time after he had deserted them on the first trip. Many assume that Paul was the one at fault here, but it was more likely Barnabas who missed it. He seemed to be so intent on having John Mark on the team that he formed his own ministry team and sailed off to Cyprus. But the Holy Spirit did not say, "separate unto me Barnabas and John Mark", but rather, Barnabas and Saul. Paul seemed to have no alternative but to choose Silas and carry on his mission. What became of the Barnabas and John Mark team, no one really knows for sure (John Mark served with Paul later), but it is safe to say they did not impact the Gentile nations, as did Paul and his team. Therefore, the sending of the Paul and Barnabas team from Antioch in no way testifies to the "collegiality" or "equality" of New Testament leadership. If that was the intention, it seems neither Paul nor Barnabas got it, since leadership of the team was the issue that separated them. Indeed, the incident only serves to illustrate the fact that every team needs a leader.

Another fact that must be pointed out is that Gentiles coming into the church would hardly have added more equality to leadership function. On the contrary, Gentiles, being used to an authoritarian structure of domination, would have had more of a tendency toward dominating church leaders, a fact that history seems to bear out. By the middle of the Second Century, the church and the Jewish Synagogue having completely separated, we see the rise of authority structures that place more emphasis on "bishops" and "elders" than the New Testament leaders would ever have been comfortable with.

The main point of what I am saying is this: the eldership in the church of the New Testament was clearly not formed by some new rule or principle. It was merely a continuation of a leadership form that had existed throughout the history of the Jewish nation and was adopted quite naturally by a Jewish remnant of believers in Jesus, the Jewish Messiah. Thus, there is no reason

whatsoever to assume that it is different in its form or practice, and the silence of the New Testament regarding the structure of the eldership does not lend any support to the idea that they were viewed as equal or that none were regarded as "senior." The term elder was used throughout the Bible as a generic term, much like the term leader, and was similarly used that way in the New Testament, as is illustrated by Peter's words in the following passage:

To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers—not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money, but eager to serve; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

1 Peter 5:1-4 NIV

I once considered this a proof text for "collegial eldership" since Peter, the apostle of the Lord, referred to himself as a "fellow elder." I made that mistake because I removed the verse from its cultural context and interpreted it according to my own understanding of what an elder was. I was so convinced that elders were to function equally in the government of the church and that there were no "senior elders," that I was sure Peter was saying the same thing by using the term "fellow elder." However, the passage doesn't suggest this at all. In fact, Peter goes on to point out and exert his unique influence as one who had witnessed the sufferings of Jesus. He is not using the term "fellow elder" as an expression of his submission to them as equals whom he needed to approve of his ministry. He is merely using it in its normal general usage, since all the apostles and elders were referred to as elders. If we substitute the word leader or pastor then the meaning is clear. What he is saying could be paraphrased like this: *"To the leaders among you, I appeal as a fellow leader, one who witnessed the sufferings of Christ... be careful how you shepherd God's people..."*

The Character and Function of New Testament Leadership

Were the Twelve Apostles Collegial?

Some suggest that because Jesus chose twelve apostles, He must have believed the church should have collegial leadership. However, there is no basis for this conclusion. It is true that New Testament leadership is plural rather than singular. The Master sent them out two by two. It is always preferable to have more than one leader, and any growing church will have plenty of leaders. However, plural does not necessarily mean equal. If Jesus wanted His team to understand that church leadership was to be collegial, then He had plenty of opportunity to say so. The disciples often quarrelled about who was the greatest among them, even during the Last Supper.

And there arose also a dispute among them as to which one of them was regarded to be greatest. And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant."

Luke 22:24-26 NASU

What a perfect opportunity for Jesus to put the issue to bed. Then this paper would not be necessary. But if you read the text carefully, you will see that He did. He did not say that there was no one greater than another among His disciples. In fact, He didn't even say that it was wrong to be or want to be greater. His response was the same as it always was when the subject of leadership came up. He addressed the heart of a leader and not the structure of leadership. Jesus understood very well that there were some who had more stature and leadership ability than others. Nowhere did He speak against or stifle those who took the lead. On the contrary, one could conclude from His words that He fully expected some to be greater and more significant than others. What he did do every time was challenge the motive of our hearts. Consider His response on another occasion:

But the greatest among you shall be your servant. Whoever exalts himself shall be humbled; and whoever humbles himself shall be exalted. Matt 23:11-12 NASU

If Jesus taught that all of the apostles were to be equal in church government, it certainly does not appear in His words. In fact, in the above passage, he admits that there will be some greater than others. What he does do is define greatness and the pathway to great leadership. What He said was, that those who humble themselves, those who serve others, those who lay their lives down for the flock will be great and will be exalted in the church. This was hardly a statement of the collegial nature of church government.

Another reality about Jesus' team, one that seems obvious, is that it was not collegial. It had very clear leadership, namely, Jesus. I realise that those who believe in Collegial Church Government would say that this proves Jesus is the only one who should be "chief" in any team or church today. But if this were true, surely Jesus would not have allowed Peter to continually speak for the others and even single him out as He did in Matthew 16 by saying he would give him the "keys of the kingdom" and making a comment about "building His church on this rock", which we still have difficulty explaining today. Also, why did he seem to favour Peter, James and John in a special way wanting them with Him on special occasions and excluding the others (Mt 17:1, Mt 26:37, Mk 5:37)? If Jesus wanted His team to be collegial after His ascension and never wanted a "Senior Pastor" in any church, why did He not give them this example while he walked among them? Couldn't he have been more sensitive to what He was promoting, not only by His silence on the subject, but also by elevating some of His team above the others? If Jesus did not set this example with His own team, what evidence is there to suggest He wanted it practised by the elders of local churches? I suggest the answer is simple. Jesus did not intend for His church to be collegial in government, no more than God has ever chosen a collegial body to govern.

Leadership is Natural

Whenever a group of people come together, there will always be leaders in their midst. This is true of any group anywhere. Whenever there is a sense of purpose and need, there will be those who rise to leadership, and others will follow. It is true of families, rock bands, people in prison, and those stranded on desert islands. The next time you attend a holiday party or event with your friends, look around the room, and you will surely see some who are leading and others who are following. Some people are simply "natural born leaders", and this leadership ability always brings them to the fore. This fact is undeniable. It is a God-given gift resident in the person, which will often emerge in a time of crisis. From the beginning of time, it has always been this way. Another fact that is undeniable is that people will follow those with leadership gifting. In other words, true leaders will always have a following. Those who have no following are not leaders, no matter how many Bible schools they have attended or who has laid hands on them.

When we consider leadership in the Bible, we must understand that there are two forms of leadership that appear. There is the natural leadership of a family or a tribe, such as the Patriarchs, who emerge in leadership because of their God-given abilities and wisdom, and there are those who are specifically chosen by God for a leadership task. In most cases, if not all, those specifically chosen by God and singled out for a unique mission also possessed this natural leadership ability. It is important to understand that God backs up those in authority, regardless of how they got it. This does not mean that those who usurp authority or are godless will go unpunished or that God approves of them, but we do not ever have the right to be disrespectful of authority. Sometimes we must obey God rather than men, but that is not to say we should ever be disrespectful to those in authority. However, it seems that God, throughout the Bible, honors and supports leaders who emerge in families and tribes, although sometimes He intervenes and chooses a specific person for a unique task.

We see these two forms of government in the New Testament as well. In the gospels, we hear of the "chief priests and the elders." The chief priests represent those specifically chosen by God for the priestly ministry, whereas the elders were those men of stature who emerged among the people. Both forms of government were valid and honoured by God. The same is true of the early church. In Jerusalem, there were "the apostles and the elders." The apostles, although also elders, were specifically chosen by Christ, while the elders were those leaders who had emerged among the people. Throughout Israel's history, there were those chosen by divine intervention,

such as Moses, the Priesthood, Joshua, the Judges, the Kings and of course, the Prophets. At no time in Biblical history did God ever choose a collegial group of people to govern or perform a task for Him. Someone correctly noted that when God wants something, He does not form a committee. This is very true. God always chose a person to lead. Those who seek to understand Biblical Church Government cannot overlook this fact. Neither can the choices of individual leadership in the Bible be simply explained away as merely "types of Messiah" and therefore not applicable to understanding God's desire for leadership in the church. The fact that God has not chosen a committee or a collegiality of men is a powerful statement of His views on leadership.

Elders and Fathers

Leadership in the very beginning was naturally parental and patriarchal. Abraham, Isaac and Jacob were fathers, and they were the ones chosen by God to be the fathers of the faith. In Abraham, God promised to bless all the nations. This is no mere coincidence; it is God's choice. The first leaders on planet Earth were parents. Adam and Eve were commanded to have dominion over all the earth and to rule together. Therefore, the very essence of Biblical leadership is parenting, and fathers are uniquely called to represent God, who is The Father of us all. There are other titles, such as king and priest, but fatherhood is at the core of leadership both in the nation of Israel and the church. Jacob was a father who loved his children and passed on to them a commission to love and serve God. The commission of Moses was to go and tell the elders of Israel that the "God of your fathers has sent me to you." The elders of Israel were the leaders of the tribes or families. Indeed, the very term "elder" preserves this meaning since it was used to refer to an older man with stature among the people, a father. Though it is true that the term became more formal, this understanding of leadership as equivalent to fatherhood was not forgotten. The church is primarily a family, and those who would lead a congregation must, of necessity, be parents. Paul, who was a father to the churches, said this to the Corinthian church:

"If you were to have countless tutors in Christ, yet you would not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father through the gospel."

1 Cor 4:15 NASU

The Corinthians had many teachers and prophets who ministered to them, but Paul was able to say, "I am your father." Those who would argue with the term "Senior Pastor" need to consider this verse. Did the Corinthians have pastors? They certainly did. Was Paul just another pastor, or was he the Senior Pastor? If he wasn't, he sure didn't seem to know it. He admonished them, correcting their doctrine and practice and promised to take on any who opposed him (2Cor 10:6). This sounds like the Senior Pastor to me. All of the apostles were fathers who felt that they were to act as such toward local churches. Consider John's words regarding the "control freak" Diotrephes (3 John 9). Those who say that travelling apostles can be fathers to churches and correct and admonish them, but that local church leadership must be collegial, are inconsistent in their teaching and are in direct conflict with the practice of Paul and the other apostles. Furthermore, they are suggesting that churches can have fathers so long as they travel about and do not reside in the church. But we can't have a father who stays at home. And what can we possibly call a pastor or an apostle who is a father to a local congregation? What is wrong with the term "senior"? Is it "ok" to acknowledge someone as a "father" in the church but not a "senior pastor"? The very term "senior", like the term "elder", merely suggests that the person is older and wiser and in a position of authority over the others.

Every Family Needs a Father

There is not a single family alive that came into being without a father. Yet, there are many fatherless families. Unfortunately, there are also many fatherless churches. A fatherless church is a leaderless church. As a father, grandfather and a father to my own church, I can attest to the fact that children look to their parents for leadership. This is true of spiritual children just the same as natural children. Fathers are uniquely called to establish the identity of their children, and those who have identity issues invariably have father issues. What is true for families is true for local churches as well, unless we accept that churches are corporations and not families.

Another fact about fathers is that whether they are leading their families and caring for their children or are absent, the children will be equally affected for good or for harm. Likewise, the

person who founds a church and establishes it is the father of that church and will determine the DNA of that church. Any pastor who has ever taken over a church knows that this is true. Therefore, a healthy church is one that has been properly parented. It is true, of course, that we are sons of God and our spiritual DNA is from Him. Yet, there is a real truth to spiritual fathering on the human level that cannot be ignored. If God requires all children to honour their parents, and this is a commandment with a penalty and promise, would He not require similar honor and respect for spiritual parents? Consequently, those who father churches today, just as Paul the apostle did many centuries ago, will always be the "Senior Pastor" of that church while they are still able to lead. And when they are no longer able to function in a leadership role, or they have need to pass the responsibility to someone else, they will continue to be parents and grandparents and should be treated with the proper respect.

Senior Pastors are Controlling

One of the arguments that I often used for the benefits of the Collegial Eldership form of church leadership was that it was safe! If I had five pastors instead of one pastor, then surely I would be in better hands; surely I would be better cared for. However, I did not find this to be true. Five or six elders who must all agree before any direction is taken are about as effective in leadership as a town board with no chairman, no matter how spiritual they are or think they are. It is true that there is often a great need to weigh things before decisions are made. But Senior Pastors, who are fathers in churches, also have folks they can call upon for counsel and direction. After all, it is God that needs to be heard and not the elders. Furthermore, the idea that one man is more controlling than six who must agree on everything is absurd. Since when is a board more liberating than an individual who has your best interests at heart? Indeed, no matter how good the men in the eldership are and how sincere, they cannot function as they wish. Churches with Collegial Elderships end up becoming more controlling because of necessity. After all everything has to go before the elders before anyone can act. Consequently, minor details of church life and ministry become the subject of discussion at elders' meetings.

Another reason Collegial Elderships are purported to be safer for the church is that everyone is required to submit. However, submission to the elders is often viewed in the same way as obedience to God, and that is not what is intended by the teaching of submission in the Scripture. Submission is an attitude that exemplifies humility and a willingness to yield to each other for the good of all. It is expected of all Christians, including Senior Pastors. However, if five or six elders must be in agreement for an action to be taken or a word spoken to the church, are they not, in fact, being excused from the principle of submission? After all, an elder who disagrees with a course of action or anything else, simply because he is being obstinate, now has a license to continue in disagreement and stagnate the progress of the church.

Finally, churches that have Collegial Elderships feel they are safer for believers because Senior Pastors can fall into sin and have no one to correct them. I agree that Senior Pastors should have some peers they are accountable to who can speak into their lives. However, if a leader stumbles in sin, it will bring hurt regardless of the structure of the leadership. Leaders are not just board members who can be replaced without any pain; they are people who need help and should be loved and restored back to health if they are repentant. After all, no believer should be expecting leaders to be perfect and take the place of God in their lives. A healthy church should have spiritual people in it who can help in the event of such a failure.

Conclusion

There is much more that could be said about the subject of church government and leadership in the church. However, my main objective has been to address the question of what is Biblical Church Government and whether local churches should have someone who is a "Senior Pastor," or should be governed by a collective body that functions collegially. I will end with my own personal testimony.

I spent a total of twenty years in a church that believed in what we called "Collegial Church Government" and attempted to function in it. There was a significant movement toward this form of church leadership in the late seventies and throughout the eighties. I became a staunch proponent of this teaching and even published books on the subject. However, I have to say with

all respect to the good people who believed and continue to believe as I did, that "Collegial Church Government" is a failed experiment that has not produced good fruit. Though, as in all Christian churches, good things did happen, yet there was a continual stress and lack of leadership that consistently bore division and strife. Most of the churches that were attempting to function in this way when I was a young man, up and down the East Coast of the United States, disintegrated long ago or are now being led by a "Senior Pastor." In fact, I have not seen a single church really prosper that took this principle seriously. Those who have survived still have some fathering in their midst, but even they are not what they could and should be. I realise that this could be said of many churches, but if this is the movement of "church restoration" that its proponents claim, then over the last thirty years, one would expect more fruit. The truth is that most church people have never heard of the concept. Those who practice it are not growing as a body but are, in fact, declining. Some would argue that this in itself proves nothing, but no genuine movement of God throughout history has failed to produce good fruit or impact the course of the church. However, if we examine church history, we will see that it has been tried before by other movements and has always led to stifling control.

It is not my intention to judge any ministry that is attempting to function this way. However, I do want to warn those who are experimenting with it that they are about to waste a good amount of time and energy that could be better spent, not to mention the sorrow they and their people will experience as a direct result. God is a father, and He is the ultimate model of all leadership, especially that of the church and all local churches need fathers!