

A Word in Support of Leadership

by David Huston and Jim McKinley

This article is presented to encourage those believers who have rejected local church leadership to be introspective and to reconsider their views.

WE BELIEVE THAT THE LOCAL ASSEMBLIES established by the apostles were placed under the leadership of a multi-pastor team of gifted and qualified men. This form of church leadership is called biblical eldership, or sometimes collegial eldership. The word “eldership” is a translation of the Greek word *presbiterion*, which means a council of mature men. The word “biblical” is added to distinguish this system from the type of eldership found in many modern churches, which is usually an advisory board either assisting the senior pastor or merely rubber stamping his decisions. The word “collegial” is sometimes added to emphasize the shared authority of the elders, no single elder being senior over the others.

Some who do not understand this kind of shared leadership have called it “leadership by committee.” Some have said they do not believe in “board-run churches.” Others have suggested that it is the absence of leadership altogether. But none of these assessments are accurate. Rather than diminishing leadership, a properly functioning biblical eldership strengthens and expands leadership.

The discussion we have raised is not over whether or not there should be leadership in a church; it concerns the nature and character of the leadership. We are opposed to the autocratic authoritarian style of leadership practiced by isolated, unaccountable men. Instead, we believe churches should be led by a team of humble servants who are working together in accountable relationships.

Today there are many believers who have been wounded deeply by abusive leaders who have gone way beyond their God-given authority. Some of these damaged people have turned away from leadership altogether and suggested that all local church leadership is wrong, dangerous, and unbiblical. We reject this assessment just as much as we reject the notion that churches must have a single “the-buck-stops-here”-style pastor.

Some of those who have rejected all leadership point out that when Hebrews 13:17 admonishes believers to obey and submit to their spiritual leaders, the real meaning

of the words “obey” and “submit” are far less demanding in the Greek. We agree that this verse is poorly translated in many versions of the Bible and has been misused for years by authoritarian leaders. Others say that the concept of the “local church” never applies to the usual Sunday morning service in a building with a steeple and a pastor with a tie. They say that such a thing did not exist in the New Testament. We do not argue that point either; nevertheless, we do believe in strong, authoritative (not authoritarian) leadership. The reason we believe this is because it is a biblical concept, strongly upheld by the Word of God.

Concerning those who have rejected all authoritative leadership in the church, Andrew Strom writes:

The New Testament does not know any Christianity apart from that which is lived out in close relationship within a real “body of believers.” It is impossible to find any Christianity except “body Christianity” in the Bible. Not only that, there is a huge amount of evidence throughout the New Testament that the elders and fivefold ministries carried quite a bit of actual authority, and God expected them to use it. If we look closely at Acts and the rest of the New Testament, we find that God did very little at all without leaders. Apostles, evangelists, elders, etc.—they were all absolutely necessary, and the believers of that time needed to respect and heed them or the early church would have been simply unable to function. If we read Paul’s writings about elders and also his instructions to Timothy, we see how strongly the apostles placed an emphasis on good leadership (see 1 Timothy 3).

What does all this do to George Barna’s contention that it is OK to live out a kind of “body-less” Christianity without real leaders? In my view it utterly destroys it. There is simply no other conclusion that can be reached.

Now please be aware that I am not opposing “house churches” in this. What I am really targeting is the “loner” mentality—the individualistic “just-me-and-God” type of thinking that seems to be encouraged in parts of Barna’s book (see note below). I have been around these kinds of deeply “out-of-church” believers now for many years, and I have observed that because of their anti-body and anti-leader tendencies, they often cannot take part in real “church life” at all. And I know that I was exactly the same when I myself was “out-of-church.”

So what conclusion am I coming to here? Simply that the entire loner, out-of-church movement is utterly undone by these two New Testament facts:

1. That you must have a “body.”
2. That this body must have “real” leaders.

Anything less is totally anti-New Testament. Scripture shows us again and again that it is simply impossible to have any real Christian expression in the earth without these two things. And thus the entire out-of-church scene is totally without foundation. I know that sounds strong, but it is a fact that we need to face up to.

I was an out-of-church loner myself for a number of years. And for 20 years now I have been around these kinds of people. I have observed that quite a few of them have serious hang-ups (just like I had) that will largely exclude them from true body life as well as true revival. The reality is, they have a problem with the body and they have a problem with leadership. But they usually cannot admit that the problem is theirs. And thus they tend to become troublemakers. They cannot seem to help themselves, and they do not realize that there are strongholds inside them that are causing many of these problems. Some of their complaints are valid, but others are caused by these strongholds. I was exactly the same myself, and all I can say is, please my friends, deeply renounce these strongholds until they are gone.

Personally, I had to go through a massive overhaul in my life to even see what was wrong with me in the out-of-church scene. It happened over a 3-day period in 1993. God led me into a time of deeply renouncing things like pride, rebellion, hurt, rejection, self-righteousness, a critical spirit, etc. The transformation was immediate and powerful. Suddenly I could see how much of my “God doesn’t need leaders” theory had come from a place of rebellion within me. Much of my anti-body, anti-leader rhetoric died that day. As I deeply renounced all of these strongholds out of my life, the glory and love of God flooded in.

The only advice I can give to today’s loner Christians is to get in a room with God and renounce these things until they are gone. You will notice a huge transformation in every part of your being. I was teaching on this topic a few weeks ago, and a young man experienced a tremendous breakthrough the following week by renouncing the things that had been causing him a lot of spiritual problems. It does work and you need to do it today. It is like expunging them out of you, from the depth of your being in Jesus’ name.

In summary, I would like to come back to the main points I have made here. There is inarguable evidence throughout the New Testament that any expression of true Christianity needs these two things: a real body functioning as a body and real leaders functioning as leaders. Without these two things, we have no legitimate expression of Christianity at all. I believe these are undeniable truths.

Note from the authors: We do not know Andrew Strom and do not vouch for his beliefs. We have quoted him only because we felt that this particular citation accurately responds to the matter this article is addressing. The book he mentions by George Barna is called *Revolution*. Another popular Christian writer named Gene Edwards also tends to reject leadership, and we caution our readers to be skeptical of his writings. Like Barna he has done some good work, but he is also a proponent of the “open church movement” which we believe to be an over-reaction to abusive leadership and established on unbiblical principles.

Note to the reader:

If you would like to comment on the contents of this paper, please contact us through our website at www.GloriousChurch.com. We welcome and appreciate all honest comments, questions, and criticisms.

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