

Objections to Pastoral Elderships

by David A. Huston

This paper is presented as a response to some of the objections that have been raised against plural pastoral oversight of the local assembly by biblically qualified elders.

So when they had appointed elders in every church.... Acts 14:23

MANY CHRISTIANS LEADERS CONTEND that plural pastoral oversight in a local assembly is unscriptural and cannot work. They believe that one man must be the primary preacher, teacher, administrator, and, most important of all, decision-maker. Often this man's name appears in the church bulletin and on the sign in front of the building as if it were somehow his church. Those who think this way would agree with C. Peter Wagner, who writes:

The local church is like a company with one company commander, the pastor, who gets his orders from the Commander-in-Chief [Jesus]. The company commander has lieutenants and sergeants under him for consultation and implementation, but the final responsibility of his decisions is that of the company commander, and he must answer to the Commander-in-Chief...the pastor has the power in a growing church.¹

If the pastor has the power as Wagner asserts, it is interesting that neither Paul nor any other Bible writer ever mentioned it, even once. The truth is, plural pastoral oversight is only unworkable when one of two situations exists: 1) One man, due to fear and/or pride, succumbs to the belief that he is greater, wiser, or more qualified than all others and therefore must be in charge; or 2) The man who presently serves as pastor is unwilling to get off his throne due to the power, recognition, and/or financial benefits that come with it. In other words, he really likes being the monarchical leader and does not want to give up the status, power, and prestige of his title and office.

These are not the only reasons why an eldership cannot or should not be established at a particular assembly; they are simply the only reasons that could ultimately prevent an eldership from working. For example, an eldership cannot function the way God intends when a man such as Diotrephes is in a leadership

role. When one man loves having the preeminence among his fellows and has been granted the final authority in matters of leadership, an eldership cannot and will not work. Conversely, when all participating leaders have the attitude of Paul, who considered himself less than the least of all the saints, and admonished, Let nothing be done through selfish ambition or conceit, but in lowliness of mind let each esteem others better than himself, an eldership can and will work (Ephesians 3:8; Philippians 2:3).

Other objections to the concept of plural, collegial oversight in a local assembly are:

1. Wasn't Moses a type of the New Testament pastor ?'

As the deliverer, law-giver, and leader of the people of God, Moses is a type of Jesus Christ in His function as the Head of His body. In 1 Corinthians 10 Moses and Jesus are presented as parallel figures. Verse 2 says, All were baptized into Moses in the cloud and in the sea. Israel crossing the Red Sea is a well-accepted type of New Testament baptism; yet Paul described it as a baptism into Moses. In 1 Corinthians 1:13 Paul wrote, Is Christ divided? Was Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul? Under the terms of the New Testament, we are not baptized into the name of an apostle or a pastor, but into the name of Jesus (Acts 2:38). Moses was the head of Israel, the church in the wilderness ;" but Jesus is the Head of His body, Church of the New Testament.

Moses and Jesus are also paralleled in Hebrews 3:1-2, which says, Consider the Apostle and High Priest of our confession, Christ Jesus, who was faithful to Him who appointed Him, as Moses also was faithful in all His house. Verse 5-6 says, And Moses indeed was faithful in all His house as a servant,...but Christ as a Son over His own house. Moses was a temporary head over the house of God, but Christ is the permanent Head, since it is His house.

In the polity of Israel, there was one leader, Moses, and one high priest, Aaron. Both men were types of Jesus Christ. Under Aaron there was a whole company of priests which served as a type of the entire Church as God's holy priesthood (1 Peter 2:5). Under Moses there were seventy elders who assisted him in leading the assembly. In Numbers 11 God instructed Moses to gather the seventy elders together, telling him, I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone. In the New Testament, the elders of an assembly are anointed by the same Spirit that was upon Jesus to carry the burden of caring for His people. The number 70 represents completeness, implying that the number of elders in any assembly depends largely on how many elders are needed to complete the work (and of course how many qualified men are available).²

2. Wasn't James the highest official of the Jerusalem church?

To be sure, James was a leading figure in the Jerusalem church. Being a wise and mature man who was known to be the half-brother of Jesus, he was obviously highly regarded. But there is not a single verse of Scripture declaring that James had positional authority over any of the apostles or elders of Jerusalem. Let us look at what the Bible actually says.

Galatians 1:19 says that James was an apostle. In Galatians 2:9, Paul wrote that James, Cephas, and John seemed to be pillars. A pillar holds up a house; it does not control or dominate it. Moreover, James is described in exactly the same terms as Peter and John without any suggestion that he exercised authority over them.

After Peter was miraculously delivered from prison in Acts 12, he told his comrades, Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren (Acts 12:17). Even though James is singled out, to presume that this means he held a position of authority over the rest of the brethren is adding to this verse what is not there.

In Acts 15, when Paul and Barnabas arrived in Jerusalem, they were received by the church and the apostles and the elders (v.4). During the ensuing discussion about the Gentile converts, after Paul and Barnabas had given their report, James answered, saying, Men and brethren, listen to me.... Again, there is no indication that James had some sort of positional authority over these men, simply that he was an articulate and influential man. After making his suggestion as to what needed to be done, the Bible says, Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas (v.22). James did not issue a command as to what to do. He made a suggestion that the others agreed with. The letter they composed began, The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, to the brethren who are of the Gentiles... (v.23). It included these words, It seemed good to us, being assembled with one accord, and, For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit, and to us (v.28). The letter was not signed by James but was sent in the name of the entire Jerusalem assembly.

On another occasion when Paul returned from one of his missions, the Bible says, Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present (Acts 21:18). The implication is that James was a leading figure, an apostle. But there is no information in this verse that tells us he exercised authority over either the other apostles or the elders. This is all we know of James from the Scriptures. The popular proposition that he was the head of the Jerusalem church is a tradition that has no scriptural basis.

3. Wasn't Timothy the sole pastor in Ephesus?

Timothy was a member of an apostolic team of church planters who accompanied Paul on many of his missionary journeys (Acts 16:1-4; 18:5; 20:4). In certain circumstances, it was Paul's practice to leave members of his team at various assemblies to provide on-going oversight until such time as elders could be appointed and become fully functional. This was the situation when Paul wrote his letters to Timothy and Titus. Although these men temporarily exercised certain apostolic authority as extensions of the founding apostolic-prophetic team, they were not the pastors, elders, or bishops of any particular assembly. This is why Paul rehearsed the qualities required for those who would be appointed as elders in his letters to both of these men. Their assignment was to identify and appoint elders so they could move on or rejoin Paul. The specific assignment given to Timothy by Paul was: "Remain in Ephesus that you may charge some that they teach no other doctrine" (1 Timothy 1:3). The word "charge" means "to convey a message" (*Strong's* #G3853). There is nothing in this word to suggest that Timothy was wielding any sort of positional authority in the Ephesian assembly. His authority was limited to his temporary purpose.

4. Aren't the "angels of the churches" in Revelation pastors?

The salutation of the book of Revelation begins with these words: "John, to the seven churches which are in Asia: Grace to you and peace from Him who is and who was and who is to come, and from the seven Spirits who are before His throne..." (1:4). This book was being sent to all the believers in all seven of the Asian churches and is said to be from both God and the "seven Spirits who are before His throne. These seven spirits are seven angels, because angels are ministering spirits sent forth to minister for those who will inherit salvation" (Hebrews 1:14). In Revelation 4:5 John says that "seven lamps of fire were burning before the throne, which are the seven Spirits of God. In Revelation 8:2 John says, "And I saw the seven angels who stand before God..."

The reference to "lamps of fire" suggests that these angels were agents of divine revelation, charged with imparting the revelation of Jesus Christ to the churches of Asia. In Chapters 2 and 3, each angel is given an instruction. For example, Revelation 2:1 says, "To the angel of the church of Ephesus write.... This is not a salutation to a person in Ephesus, but an instruction from the Lord Jesus to John to write down something for the angel. The phrase "the angel of the church" cannot refer to a single leader/pastor of the Ephesian church because Acts 20:17 says that Paul sent to Ephesus and called for "the elders of the church. The church in Ephesus was led by a group of men, not a single leader/pastor. In fact, the Lord commended this assembly because they hated the "deeds of the

Nicolaitans, who were leaders who sought to dominate the people of God.³ There is no biblical basis for concluding that the angels of the seven churches of Asia are anything other than angels.

5. I don't think a biblical eldership can work.

To attempt to establish a biblical doctrine based on a human perception of whether or not it will work is a prescription for error. The job of the student of the Word is not to determine what will or will not work, but to determine what God has instructed us to do. In his rational mind, Moses may not have believed that stretching forth his rod would cause the Red Sea to open up. But his responsibility was not to pass judgment on God's Word; it was to obey it. Based on observation it would be easy to conclude that marriage doesn't work. But that observation alone is not sufficient to abandon marriage as a biblical principle. Those who have dismissed the concept of plural pastoral oversight on the basis that it cannot work should ask themselves *why* it cannot work. Why shouldn't five or six humble, godly men be able to seek the Lord together and come to a mutual agreement? Why shouldn't they be able to say, 'It seems good to the Holy Spirit and to us...?'

6. Won't a biblical eldership weaken pastoral authority?

We should note that in the New Testament, authority is not connected to a title, position, or office, which are fixtures of the world's system. Unlike worldly authority, pastoral authority comes from God and exists whether anyone recognizes it and submits to it or not. In the apostolic church, authority is connected to the work that needs to be done and to the character and gifts of those doing the work. Hence, just as a shepherd has authority to lead and care for his sheep, those charged with shepherding a local assembly have authority to lead and care for the people. This is not because they hold an office and carry a title, but because they have the gifts and responsibility to shepherd the flock. When pastoral authority is invested in several men rather than one, it is not weakened but expanded, accruing many advantages to both the men serving as elders and the assembly as a whole.

7. Isn't an eldership just another form of hierarchy?

A hierarchy is a pyramidal system of oversight where the final authority rests in the hands of a single individual who occupies a place of prominence in the assembly. In a true biblical eldership, the one with final authority and the only one in the place of prominence is Jesus Christ. This is not just a theological concept but an

operational reality. In an eldership, the elder-overseers are not the final authority, but are seekers together of the will of Him who has the final authority. By functioning as a collegial group, they are able to confirm to one another the will of God and protect the assembly from human error.

TO THE READER: *If you have other biblically-based objections to the concept of local church polity presented on this website, please present your objections to the author.*

Endnotes:

1. C. Peter Wagner, *Your Church Can Grow* (Ventura, CA: Regal Books, 1984), p.65.
2. In Hebrew, the number *sheba* (seven) comes from the root *shaba*, which means "to be complete" (*Strong's* #H7650). The root meaning of the number *eser* (ten) is "an accumulation" (*Strong's* #H6235). Seven tens (seventy) suggests the idea of a full or complete accumulation. In the Bible, seventy days completed the official period of mourning (Genesis 50:3); seventy years is presented as a complete lifetime (Psalms 90:10); seventy years completed Israel's captivity in Babylon (Jeremiah 25:11-12); seventy weeks were determined to complete God's plan for Israel (Daniel 9:24).
3. John Walvoord, *The Revelation of Jesus Christ* (Chicago, IL: Moody Press, 1966), p. 58.; Chris Foster, *Biblical Authority* (article in *The Apostolic Writers Digest*, November 1999); Jack DeHart, *o You Want to Serve* (Hazelwood, MO: General Home Missions Division, 1990), p. 34.

Note to the reader:

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Rosh Pinnah means Chief Cornerstone in Hebrew.