

Rethinking New Testament Church Polity

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One of the issues that continues to plague some of our churches is disagreement about church polity. This controversy has been percolating forever, but with special fervor since my seminary days. Wherever it pops up, it is nearly always with a view to downgrading the pastoral office. This is mischievous, and my hope in this article is to cast a little better light on the subject.

The primary debate is whether or not the NT portrays a form of church government that amounts to a 'plurality of elders'. The term, 'plurality of elders,' usually means a polity where the ruling body of the church is neither the congregation nor the pastor and his staff (as differentiated from 'elders'), but a fraternity of unordained, 'lay' elders, elected by the congregation, who share the teaching and the governing responsibilities.

A corollary issue in this controversy is whether or not a 'plurality of elders' model admits of the operation of a hierarchical principle within the paradigm. Or, does it by definition exclude it? That is, in a plurality scheme must elders operate in a strictly egalitarian mode whereby all elders are exactly equal in leadership and authority? If the answer to the latter is affirmative, then this means the elder body should be a headless, leaderless, authority-less collective where no one voice counts (or should count) any more than any other.

Champions of this plurality model frequently claim that 'pastors' represent an unbiblical layer of church leadership imposed by tradition. As such, pastors allegedly usurp the leadership role that the NT churches reserved for elders.

These views, I hold, are substantially misinformed.

As for the notion that the pastoral office, as we know it, is a relic of more modern tradition, I demur. In fact, I contend, the real aberration from NT polity is the very opposite of the one alleged above.

The real departure from NT polity is not that churches today recognize a class of officers called 'pastors' *who are above the elders*, but that they somehow have gotten into the habit of *creating elders who are less than pastors*.

Already we are in a 'fog' zone, discussion-wise, because we are bandying terms about that have no stipulated definitions. In other words, we are caught in a situation where the disputants in this debate use language in equivocal senses, that is, use the same terms, but not necessarily with the same meanings. Consequently we often wind up talking past one another because our semantic frames of reference are inconsistent. We do

not always mean the same thing by the same words. It is easier to warn about this complication in understanding than to find a fix for it.

For any under the illusion that 'pastors' and 'elders' are two different ecclesiastical entities, let me disabuse you of that notion. In the NT, 'pastors' and 'elders' are not mutually exclusive terms. They are one and the same.

Moreover, it is my belief that the mature, seasoned, time-tested pastors of modern local churches are, in NT terms, those leaders who most nearly correspond to NT elders. For it is they who experience the 'call of God' in the more technical biblical sense of people set apart or called away from secular vocations to be supported financially by the churches and whose qualifications for office are measured the most rigorously by scriptural standards for biblical elders.

As for the idea that NT churches were governed by a plurality of elders who governed the local bodies by committee in an egalitarian fashion with no one in particular in charge or more equal, so to speak, than the others, this I consider a piece of mythology. Not only is the notion, I believe, at variance with the NT picture of church polity, but also the very principle applied to human organizations runs counter to both human nature and common sense. Besides, it has no history of success. It won't work even in a simple social organism like the home and, to my knowledge, it has never worked anywhere.

For the sake of trackability, let me outline in advance the turns in my argument. I will argue as follows:

- 1) that, contrary to what is often suggested, the pastoral office is **not** unbiblical, but is in fact just another name for the elder function;
- 2) that the real problem is not the existence of an unscriptural layer of pastors *who are more than elders*, but a tradition of choosing 'elders' *who generally function as less than pastors*;
- 3) that pastors, by virtue of their special calling and fuller qualifications, constitute the most authentic elders of any local church;
- 4) that, although this tradition of less than pastor-qualified and divinely set-apart ("called") elders is unprecedented in NT descriptions of church polity, a case can be made (from biblical precedent) that what is described in this case may not necessarily be prescribed for all time;
- 5) that 'elder rule' in the NT moreover was never strictly egalitarian in operation, but always followed (at the very least) a *primus inter pares* (first among equals) principle;

6) that the pure egalitarian `ideal' is not only contrary to the biblical paradigm, but is in fact at variance with the leadership models of all divine institutions from time immemorial;

7) that where this egalitarian mode is alleged to work, closer scrutiny will either contradict that testimony or show that the model is myth, that is, a legal fiction where practice is inconsistent with profession.

8) that not only was the principle of *primus inter pares* operative in the NT, but we even see evidence of a primitive *chain of command*.

9) that a hierarchical polity, which recognizes leadership endowments and admits the use of authority in church governance, far from being incompatible, as often alleged, is in fact quite agreeable with the servant spirit inculcated by Jesus.

10) that the argument that power tends to corrupt is no objection to the recognition of leadership nor the exercise of authority in church governance.

First Premise:

My position is, contrary to what is often alleged, the pastoral office is **not** an unbiblical add-on created by tradition, but the pastoral functions are simply another name for the elder functions.

The pastoral office is clearly established in the NT record.

If there are no "pastors" in the NT church, why does Paul say in Ephesians 4:11 that, among the gifted men Christ bestowed upon the Church, "He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists and some as *pastors* (*poimenas* = plural of **poimen**) and teachers [the last two nouns coupled together in Greek as one entity with two aspects]. Obviously if the first three functions are offices, so is the last duo.

The only way not to see `pastors' in the NT is to be oblivious to the linguistic fact that the Greek noun (and cognate verb to) *poimen* are the terms from which we derive the English noun `pastor' (=shepherd) and its corresponding verbal form, `to pastor' (or to shepherd). *A pastor then is simply a shepherd by another name.*

Now we should have no disagreement, I would hope, about the fact that `shepherding' (or pastoring) describes in a word the work of a biblical elder.

Was not Paul's instruction to the Ephesian elders for them to "shepherd the church of God"? (Acts 20:28) Did not Peter, who as an apostle described himself as a fellow elder, exhort the elders of church in the Diaspora to "shepherd (= pastor) the flock of God among you?" (1 Peter 5:1)

So then, we see clearly that shepherd means pastor and that shepherding is the essence of eldering.

What some people overlook here when they dismiss the `office' of `pastors' in the NT picture is a simple nuance that dissolves the difference: *`pastor' stands for the work; elder speaks of the office.* One is just the flip side of the other.

Second Premise:

My position is that the real aberration is not an unbiblical layer of pastors *who are more than elders*, but a tradition of choosing *`elders' who are generally much less than pastors.*

It is not the case that pastors are usurping the role of elders so much as the case that, in modern churches, we have created a situation where we typically elect elders who default on the role of shepherding. Admittedly, this default is more *structural* than neglectful. That is, it has more to do with the way their lives and our churches are ordered than willful omission.

Nevertheless, it is a fact that the average elder in any given local church neither displays that whole matrix of spiritual gifts that we expect in a pastor nor devotes any significant amount of time to the purely shepherding aspects of the work.

Today, let's frankly admit, we have downsized the meaning of `shepherd'. The standard today is lowered to the point, is it not true, that any credible Christian man qualifies as an `elder'? As welcome as a good testimony is, a true biblical elder is more than that. A genuine biblical elder is somebody reserved by the Spirit for this work (like Paul and Barnabus were set apart by the church at Antioch) and equipped by God with various gift clusters that render him competent for it.

In reality, we all know, don't we, that the vast majority of men who serve as elders in modern churches, however earnest and credible they may be as Christian brothers, however competent in other arenas of life, possess few, if any, of these shepherding gifts. Even if they do, few have much surplus time or energy in their busy lives to devote to the time-consuming and often exhausting work of pastoring.¹

All that translates to the hard fact that, as a rule, modern church elders, however much they may desire to be, are not very functional in a truly shepherding way. We also know, if we are perfectly honest, that church elders today typically spend the larger

¹ In fact, lay elders who have too much time on their hands, unless they are retired or disabled in some way, may, as indicated by that very fact, be saddled with some functional problems in the `real' world that makes their attempts to `shepherd' more of a liability than an asset. Several years ago we had lay elder (no longer here) in that very mode. He was forever stirring up something to relieve his boredom. He loved a `crisis' (which tendency he actually admitted one day when I finally confronted him).

portion of their time on duty discharging church business---that is, acting as trustees. To be sure, that work is important, very important, and their labors are nothing to belittle.

After all, the local church (unlike the Church universal) is a divinely-created *organization*. Of necessity a local church shoulders all the baggage that comes along with that attribute. That is nothing to blush about. The kingdom of God has an outward form as well as an inward one. We just thank God that He provides His churches with able people willing to disencumber pastoral elders who otherwise would be diverted from their more important tasks. At the same time we should not confuse taking care of the business of the church with the shepherding work of the church.

Please don't take me wrong here. My heart is not to disparage in any way those devout and able brethren who give as much as they can of themselves to lead local churches and to support those elders who devote their whole life and being to pastoring.

Advising, encouraging, assisting, supporting and, yes, holding us accountable are necessary and invaluable contributions. Pastors need and benefit immensely from these forms of stewardship of time and talents. These (for lack of a better term) 'lay' elders usually bring to the table secular expertise, experience, knowledge and skills that pastors often lack.

Yet all this, as important as it is in the total equation of Christian leadership, does not add up to being a 'pastor'. Unless we water down what it means to 'pastor' to some sort of meaningless verbal gruel, a truly *biblical* elder cannot function at any lower level than a shepherd.

Now, let us be perfectly realistic here. Being a shepherd does not lend itself real well to an avocation, and certainly not to four to six hours a month in meetings. Pastoring is not just a time-consuming work. It is just a consuming work. It involves teaching, correcting, rebuking, encouraging and, in general, being courageous and taking huge risks with relationships and absorbing the shock of rejection for doing what is right. Few elders, let's just admit, get that involved---or want to.

Yet it is, I am saying, impossible for the typical legal or constitutional elder to do so because 1) God has not set them apart for this work (calling) 2) they do not, in fact, come apart for it 3) even if they did, the majority do not have the gifting for it (evidence of a lack of calling) and 4) because they do not come apart for it, they lack the time and energy to give to it, even when they might appear to have at least some gifting for it. Now that, I contend, is just a fair statement of church reality in our day (and for many days in the past).

Pastors, I repeat, should not be a class **above** elders, but by the same token 'lay' elders cannot, I believe, be considered biblical elders if they function **below** pastoral elders.

Third Premise

Pastors, by virtue of their special calling and fuller qualifications, constitute the most authentic elders of any local church;

The reasons I say this are:

- 1) It is the pastors that are usually measured the most rigorously by the biblical qualifications for elders and held the most accountable for any deviations therefrom;
- 2) It is the pastors who carry (and typically are the only ones available to carry) most of the shepherding load in any given church;
- 3) It is the pastors who generally devote long, hard years of their lives to qualify themselves in terms of their teaching role;
- 4) It is usually the pastors who demonstrate the strongest gifts (all around) for the shepherding role;
- 5) It is the pastors who experience that 'call' of God to set themselves apart from ordinary pursuits to devote their whole lives to the work of ministry.

Biblical eldership, so far as I can see, was largely a vocation, not a sideline.

A true elder is one upon whom the church 'lays it hands.' [1 Tim. 5:22] That is another way of saying a true elder is one in whom a local church recognizes the signs of the calling of God (Acts 13:2-3). The 'calling' of God is not a moonlighting proposition.

Some apply this status to themselves much too loosely. By the call of God, we mean a divine initiative *whereby God sets His servants apart from their regular pursuits for special tasks, usually on a permanent basis.*

In the Bible people who were 'called' of God to do anything were drafted to give themselves over completely to whatever project or enterprise God commissioned them to discharge. A person in whom a church recognized the call of God was set apart for the work by the laying on of hands. This was not an after-hours deal.

God told the church at Antioch to 13:2 to "Set apart [*aphorise* from *aphorizo* = set apart, appoint] for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called [*proskalemai* from *proskaleo* = to call on, summon, call to oneself, invite or to call to a special task or office; see Arndt and Gingrich's Greek Lexicon, p. 722) them."

This same verb *proskaleo* is used in its latter denotation in Matthew 10:1 where the author speaks of Jesus' calling of His twelve disciples.

In Luke 10: 1 the idea of 'calling' applies to the 70 that on one occasion Jesus sent on a special mission:

“And after this the Lord appointed [verb form from *anadeiknymi* = 1) to show clearly, reveal 2) to appoint or commission someone to a position] seventy others, and sent them two by two ahead of Him . . .”

In this instance (though it is an argument from silence) the ‘calling’ may have been a temporary commission. Yet, please note, that it was not a sideline work. It was a short-term mission. As long as the mission lasted, this was their work. They went out and devoted *all* their time to the task He had called them to do.

Another classic example of this ‘calling’ phenomenon is cited in Hebrews 5:4 concerning the setting apart of Aaron and his family for the high priesthood:

“And no one takes the honor [of the high priesthood] to himself, but receives it when he is called by God, even as Aaron was.”

In 5:10, the writer to the Hebrews speaks of the Son as “*being designated* [from the verb *prosagoreuo* = *designate, name*] by God as a high priest according to the order of Melchizedek.”

The *call*² of God was never, that I can see, an avocation. God’s call, it appears to me, was always a vocation, at least temporarily. People called by God always ‘left their boats’ and followed His direction. (Matt. 4:18-19) Again, the call of God is not an after-hours, moonlighting proposition. So far as I can see from all biblical analogy, whomever God has ever set apart for a task, He has called *away* from one vocation, or life track, and harnessed to another.

Anytime you see in the Old or New Testament a “laying on of hands,” it is symbolic of the consecration of someone or something for a sacred task. It marks a setting apart in response to God’s directives. What one is set apart from is everything else, in order to pursue that purpose.³

² That word ‘call’ [klesis (noun) or kaleo (verb)] does not usually appear in these contexts where a ‘calling’ of God appears, but the concept of setting someone apart for a divine work is common from Genesis to Revelation. We see in the Scriptures the revelation of the Trinity, but that particular word is never used. No matter. The concept is there. So it is with the call of God.

³ The argument that Paul was a tentmaker fails altogether to blunt the point. The Apostle makes it quite clear that his tent making was not a remunerative sideline apart from the Gospel, but very much a part of his missionary strategy in connection with it. In 1 Thess. 2:9 and again in 2 Thess. 3:8 he describes his motives as “working day and night so that we might not be a burden to any of you . . .” and also in 1 Cor. 9:1 “so that he might offer the Gospel without charge” and thus cut off from his detractors any opportunity to impugn his pure motives. This strategy was designed to advance his purpose, not to raise his standard of living by having a profitable job on the side.

This idea of calling corresponds to our modern military idea of being “called up” to military service. Speaking of their ministry in this vein, Paul admonishes Timothy (2 Tim. 2:3-4):

“Suffer hardship with me, as a good soldier of Christ Jesus. No soldier in active service entangles himself in the affairs of everyday life, so that he may please the one who enlisted him as a soldier.”

Clearly most Christian men have no choice in the matter. They have to get entangled in the business of earning a living. They have to retail their time and energy, to a large extent, to the marketplace. But there are men who are “called up” to active duty who must leave the marketplace behind and devote themselves entirely to the work of the ministry. To these shepherds (or elders) the church gives an allowance to enable them to serve without distraction.

One should not claim this standing unless he is prepared to withdraw from the ordinary pursuits of life and give himself to the work. Unfortunately, to many people, speaking of being ‘called’ means no more than being led of God. Misapplication of this special status results in a semantic inflation that degrades the significance of the concept.

Pastors then are those who, in the main, discharge the work of biblical elders in our local churches. Who can deny this? On the other hand, in our modern churches the average elder, does he not, functions more like a trustee a shepherd? The reality is that pastors correspond with biblical elders, and those whom today we call ‘elders’ are typically something other (and less) than scriptural elders. There are exceptions, of course, but this is the general rule.

Fourth Premise

A case can be made (from biblical precedent) that what is described may not necessarily be prescribed for all time;

In other words, a case can be made for the status quo. My interest here is to affirm that simple fact that pastors are elders. Not simply elders, but the most genuine elders a church has. However, one can argue that it is legitimate and also wise in our contemporary circumstances to complement pastoral elders with other elders.

Up to this point, if you have been tracking with my argument, you might have been ready to say:

“Well, if I understand you, you are really saying, when it comes right down to it, that, if we want to get really serious and conform to NT polity in the strictest fashion, only those who function as pastors qualify to be elders.’

Yes---if you believe that a modern church is obliged in all matters of polity to conform essentially to what the NT describes as normative in local churches of that era. I am not sure, as I indicated in a previous footnote, that that is necessary.

Let me elaborate my reluctance to subscribe to that thesis a little more fully.

In biblical interpretation, it is important to differentiate between what the Bible merely *describes* for the record and what it timelessly *prescribes* for Christian faith and practice. What is described it is not always obligatory nor even proper to emulate.

An example would be the Jerusalem church pooling all its resources in a community pot for the common welfare. Nowhere else, so far as we know, was the unusual action repeated, encouraged or commanded. It describes a special circumstance existing in that place and reflects the overwhelming love of Christ that bonded these early Christians together and animated them to set no boundaries in caring for one another. That same willingness of Christian love ought always to stand at the ready, but that same practice is not usually necessary nor desirable for a variety of reasons.

Another example we find in passages of the NT where synagogue worship is alluded to. Now it is no secret that the synagogue was a creation of Jewish tradition, not a product of divine direction. Yet our Lord seemed to `own' it by His participation in it. This suggests that behind some human tradition may be an element of divinely endorsed wisdom in adapting to changing circumstances.

We see an example of this very phenomenon of adaptation in Acts 6. While the church was still in its infancy, growth so overwhelmed its nascent infrastructure that special needs threatened the ability of the apostles to keep on task. At that point the leaders took the liberty of modifying its elementary organizational structure in creating the office of `deacon'. In this descriptive account, is there a lesson here for churches in the future---a lesson about the need to adapt (with the parameters of revelational prescription) to changing circumstances? I suggest there is.

For that reason I personally am not so hung up on crossmatched titles as I am insistent about preserving biblical functions. I am not certain it matters a great deal if, owing to legal necessities, the need to maintain the appearance of accountability, and the value of providing pastorals elders with a handy reservoir of expert advice, experience and skills, churches see fit to appoint others alongside them and call them `elders' too.

The main thing, if this is done, is that we simply recognize the different functions and grant to the *truest* elders the latitude of leadership and authority necessary to govern the church. Or, maybe a better and less confusing option would be to find another name for these `lay' elders who discharge more often the function of trustees than elders and serve an advisory role in matters where pastors are less competent than they.

Now maybe I am wrong at this point. I have never been totally secure in my judgment at this juncture, but that opinion is not lacking foundation.

If, however, one is confident in his own mind that there is no room for adaptation or alteration of NT norms, then, I must say, the implications are radical. They affect traditional elders more than pastors. *In this case, there is no longer any room for any elders not to function as pastors.* And I do not mean in that truncated, emaciated sense that we today typically use that term `shepherd`.

So, logically speaking, we have a choice here. Either we conclude that we have, under the Spirit's guidance, some liberty to adapt our polity to best fit our situation, or we decide that we are obliged to conform the norms described in the NT. Half measures, I hope you see, will not get us back to that standard. The only way we re-occupy that ground is for all elders to be functioning as pastors (in the fullest sense of the term) and all pastors to be elders. I repeat, in the NT pastors are just elders by another name. That leaves little room for `part time` elders.

Now, if our consciences insist that we must conform to NT description of the governance model of the local church, then let's stop dividing asunder what God has put together. Yoke pastors and elders together again. Designate your pastors the rightful biblical elders and be done with these semantic fictions.

Then let all those who have other God-given gifts, skills, wisdom, experience, knowledge and time come alongside the pastors and say, "Here we are. Lead us. We will follow and support and offer to you from `our bag` whatever God has put there."

Again, I beg you not to misunderstand me here. What I have said is neither intended to disparage nor to minimize in any way the earnestness or invaluable contributions of our devout brethren who serve as lay elders. To us pastors, your support, encouragement, wisdom, knowledge, counsel and skills are priceless benefits and resources without which our leadership would be far less effective. I am simply pressing the logic of a position to its natural conclusion.

As I said, I am not persuaded that NT description amounts in this case to universal prescription. But if you feel it does, I believe you have no choice but to land here logically. That is all I am saying.

Fifth Premise

`Elder rule` in the NT was never strictly egalitarian in operation, but always followed (at the very least) a *primus inter pares* (first among equals) principle.

As for the idea that in the NT, local elders were an egalitarian lot, all standing on the same footing of authority and influence, this conclusion is neither agreeable to the NT, human nature nor human institutions as a whole.

The Apostle Peter refers to himself as a “fellow elder.” (1 Peter 5.1) Does anybody think for a minute this “fellow elder” carried no more weight than other elders? But there is more.

Take Timothy, for instance. Timothy, bear in mind, was a shepherd, and a shepherd is a **poimen** (which translated means also ‘pastor’) Clearly, his work at Ephesus is an example of an elder who had assumed in that congregation a status corresponding to that of modern pastor. He was an elder among other elders, but Paul’s epistles to him leave no doubt about who was the leader of that work there.

And at least on a temporary basis, it is clear that Titus had gone to Crete to lead that church and set things in order there. In other words, we see one man, at least for a time, giving authoritative direction to a local NT church. His voice, at least temporarily, was a bigger voice than others there. In 2:15, Paul admonishes Titus:

“These things speak and exhort and reprove with all authority (epitages = command). Let no one disregard you (or take you lightly).” [NASB]

Paul is speaking in the singular, not the plural. In other words, he is not speaking to Titus as a representative of the elders (whom he had come to appoint, an act of superior authority in itself) but as a temporary *primus inter pares* (at the very least).

In fact, it can be argued (as Baptist churches have historically held) that, in NT church polity, each local church had *one* elder and may have had a plurality of deacons. For example, whether it was the Jerusalem, Ephesian or Corinthian church, there were clearly thousands of Christians in those places in a short time. Obviously, there was not a single congregation. There were no facilities or church buildings to accommodate congregations of any great size. What that means is that the church at Corinth, for example, was a collection of house churches or smallish congregations overseen by individual pastors (or elders) who together formed what we might call a college or conference of bishops or elders at Corinth. That picture is precisely consistent with the picture we see taking shape immediately after the Apostolic period when, in the vacuum left by the apostles, the pastors of local church were overseen by supervisors or super-elders called ‘bishops’ who were the pastors of the pastors. Given this scenario, it is improbable that a given congregation had more than one elder or pastor at a given time, though it is possible that larger ones may have.

In Acts 15:22, the Jerusalem Council appoints “Judas who was called Barsabbas and Silas, men who were leaders among the brethren” to accompany Paul back to report their decisions to the church at Antioch. The Greek participle for *leaders* is hegoumenous. The verb hegeomai means ‘to rule, be leader’. The noun form is hegemon (from which we

derive the English word 'hegemony'), which means 'a leader, guide, commander, a governor (of a province)'. Applied to these two men who were part of the Council, the participle makes it quiet clear that not all the elders enjoyed the same footing or influence any more than all the apostles had the same leadership status among themselves.

That there is a gradation of honor (and status) among elders is evident from the fact that Paul urged a certain class of elders to be considered worthy of *double honor*.

"Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching (lit. "in word") and teaching." (1 Timothy 5:17)

Can anyone doubt that James was the elder *primus inter pares* of the Jerusalem church? He and Peter are the two most influential figures in the Jerusalem Council and his wisdom prevailed (15:13-21). But more compelling evidence of his ascendancy we find in Acts 21 where Paul reported to "James, and all the elders were present." Clearly James enjoyed preeminence among his peers. This James, I remind you, was not James the Apostle, so we cannot trump the argument with the special status card.

Sixth Premise

The pure egalitarian 'ideal' is not only contrary to the NT picture, but also at odds with the operation of all divine, as well as purely human, institutions from time immemorial, hence contrary to human nature and woefully impractical.

As far back as we go in biblical history, it seems that virtually every institution from the home, to tribal organization, to the priesthood, to the military, to the government, to the priesthood and all its subsets (singers, gatekeepers, etc.) were always hierarchically configured. In other words, nothing was run by committee. Every entity had a leader. If nothing else, such precedents under the Old Covenant prove that a hierarchical mode in spiritual institutions and enterprises is *not* inconsistent with the character of God nor inimical in principle to the work of His Spirit.

Even among the tribes of Israel, the Lord chose one tribe, Judah, as *primus inter pares*. See 1 Chron. 28:4. Each tribe had its elders, princes or leading men (1 Chron. 27:22, 2 Chron. 1:2). The nation had a king. The army had a hierarchy of officers. The priesthood had a hierarchy, too. Even the singers had leaders. There was no egalitarianism in the OT. You won't find it in any of God's institutions that I can think of. Even among the prophets, we find "schools of prophets" and the operation of the principle of *primus inter pares* appears clearly evident. Elijah and Elisha were more than just "one of the boys."

Even in ancient aristocratic societies where oligarchies (rule of the few) appear, like ancient Greece, for example, one finds the principle of *primus inter pares* always in play. An oligarchy was a power club, but the weight of authority and influence was never evenly distributed.

Nature simply forbids functional egalitarianism, no matter what legalisms may be created to mandate the appearances thereof. The simple reality is that leaders are inevitable in either a formal or functional form. Try to level the playing field or create a vacuum and the effort will be doomed to failure. Sooner or later, and usually right away, by force of positioning or by dint of personal attributes or both, a few people will exert influence above the others, and among those, officially or unofficially, one will become that person who, more than the others, the group tends to look to for direction or to expect leadership initiatives from.

That is life, we contend. It is a reality no less in the church than in the other venues of human endeavor. There is no reason, biblically, historically, or otherwise, to think that the NT churches were exempt or ought to have been exempt from this inevitable dynamic whereby natural, if not official, leaders inevitably surface and are more dominant in influence and force of personality than the others.

The truth is that neither God nor His representatives on earth ever previously established any institution or ordered any group enterprise without ordaining or commissioning somebody to lead the charge. That is as natural in the order of life as eating and sleeping.

It would be exceedingly strange, it seems to me, an almost unaccountable departure from established precedents for the Church, for the Church alone, of all those institutions established by divine approval, to be the lone exception to this pattern. If in a simple social organization like the family, God appointed one member with responsibility and authority, it would odd indeed if in the church, He vested authority and responsibility with a large group, but disallowed that any should become *primus inter pares*. This is contrary to natural law. To fight it is to stick our heads in the sand, in my opinion.

Seventh Premise

*Where this egalitarian principle is alleged to work, closer scrutiny will reveal either that the testimony is false or that the egalitarian mode is just a legal fiction and that in actual practice, the principle of *primus inter pares* is alive and well.*

A lot of people advertise, from a safe distance, a gourmet banquet. When you get to the table, what you find served up are greasy White Castle hamburgers.

If there is one thing on earth that I feel safe in being dogmatic about, it is the insistence that, in the real world, no organization, from a simple one like a home to a more complex one like a church, can be run by a committee of equals. Show me a single instance. I have absolute confidence that if you give me intimate access to its inner workings, I can show that its model is a myth.

I can think of at least three large, flourishing works (one in our city) whose leaders might, if asked, claim to operate on an egalitarian footing, based on remarks I have heard from them in the past. The irony is that, in each instance, everybody who knows anything about those churches can tell you in a heartbeat who the leader is! In fact, show me, if you can, a flourishing church anywhere in America where the congregation or knowledgeable outsiders have trouble identifying who the primary leader is. Forget the creative titles they come up with to mask their primacy in the mix. A leader cannot hide his leadership.

The truth, I contend, is that in every organization, from the simplest to the most complex, somebody must---and somebody will---officially or unofficially become a *primus inter pares*.⁴ It is as inevitable and necessary as the law of gravity. Any attempt to suspend it will only result in terrible inertia. More time will be spent in trying to maintain the fiction than getting on the business of the church. Which, by the way, is often the case.

The vision of a *leaderless* college of elders, none having more influence or authority (or none at all!) than the others, is not only contrary to NT reality and the experience of the church in the immediate postapostolic period, but also at variance with all social reality, ecclesiastical and secular.

Again, at the risk of overcooking this point, it might be enlightening to some to remark on the ecclesiastical experience of that group which is the primary source of all this flap about plurality of elders (and its egalitarian corollary). This controversy is traceable to this sect (that I prefer not to name) and those who have been influenced by them.

In fact, 'the Bible' that some of its adherents lean on is a certain popular book on eldership. The author is a fine man, a good teacher, and a personal acquaintance from my earlier teaching days. In fact, early on in his research, this brother consulted me once about some Greek issues. He, in fact, is a good example of what I have been saying. Everybody knows, despite the theory, that the author is (informally) the main player in his body.

I know that denomination fairly well. Over the years since my seminary days, a number of my closest friends have come from that tradition. I respect them highly, though I disagree with their notions of church polity. They reject an ordained ministry. Naturally then, they have no pastors, but place their churches under the authority of 'lay' elders (who sometimes are seminary trained).

⁴ Years ago, one of our pastors copied to me a short article by a church growth expert relating to multi-staff models in local churches. If I recall, he discussed eight. One of them was a co-pastor model where the two leaders shared equally the leadership. He rightly observed that the downside of this arrangement is that eventually there will be a rivalry of power. Of course there will. It is an arrangement contrary to human nature. If it works, it is only because one is content to be equal in theory, but is a weaker personality and acquiesces to the other in practice.

Even my friends in that sect have fretted to me occasionally that most of their bodies (I am being coded here), especially those that they call the `closed' ones, are deader than a doorstep. In fact, I personally have never heard of a large church of their type, unless it is one I was told about in Pennsylvania. The majority are pretty small potatoes. Even the sound church where the aforementioned author attends and serves as an elder, at last word, ran only about 200. No shame there. Many fine saints worship there. My point is simply that smallness to the point of near invisibility is the norm in that sect, a fact that I largely attribute to that stifling polity obstacle, for there are many very gifted and capable leaders and teachers among them, who, given a better platform for leadership could boost them.

My point, I reiterate, is not to denigrate smallness per se (in fact, today, megachurches tend to be sicker than many smaller churches), but simply to observe that there can be an unfortunate correlation between unsound polity and church visibility and vitality.

In their case, their polity, a distinctive they are as fanatical about as some Baptists are about congregation government or immersion, suppresses strong leadership. They more or less force (by their arrangement) their most gifted teachers and leaders to find a venue (and employment) outside their churches.

Oddly, that helps explain why their indirect influence weighs more than they count. Their better teachers have no choice but to find a roost as instructors and professors in independent Bible colleges and seminaries. There, some use their bully pulpit to promote their views, sometimes aided and abetted by jealousy and resentment of the larger profile of pastors of more traditional churches.

Idealistic students, infected with the antiauthority spirit of the age and in the grip of what I call an `Aaron-Miriam complex' (that envies the influence of stronger personalities and the superior status God has given others), rally around them. Then they carry the `gospel' of this egalitarian lay elder polity back to the alien environment of their churches. In their zeal for what they see as `reform' or NT purity, they divert the energies of the church from its more important tasks. The result is often division and chaos.

What they fail to realize is that this model of church polity, at least in my opinion, doesn't work all that well for them, so why should they expect it to be the `savior' for others? One shouldn't expect this outcome, not if one measures success by the ability of the churches to build the people up in Christ and send them out for Christ in order to bring others to Christ. If their teachers didn't have a platform in Bible colleges and independent seminaries, their influence wouldn't register at all on the spiritual Richter scale. Their experience shows clearly, in my opinion, that, to the extent their polity works at all, it works only on a small scale.

The bottom line is, a church has to have vocationally dedicated and competent leadership to mind the store, but this egalitarian, lay elder polity is not very conducive to that outcome.

Eighth Premise

Not only was the principle of *primus inter pares* operative in the NT, but we even see evidence of a primitive *chain of command*.

The point here is that the principle of *primus inter pares* involved more than just deference to some honored saints. We see, at least, an incipient command structure. We see authority vested in individuals, delegation of authority to others, and the giving of executive orders, if you please. *Hence no one should consider the hierarchical principle alien to either NT or modern church polity.*

The apostles themselves assumed the prerogative of directing local elders and churches about how to put their houses in order (1 Cor. 5:1ff). It is no objection that the apostles were a special case, for the issue is whether or not there is anything inimical in the presence and exercise of authority to NT church polity.

In fact, immediately after the apostles passed off the scene, we find the emergence of bishops in the form of what we might call 'super elders', who had oversight of parishes or territories and ruled the churches under their authority. That this tendency was so proximate to the lifetimes of the apostles would suggest that this hierarchical arrangement was not a late-breaking aberration from apostolic tradition in some 'dark age' of the church, but was most likely an extension of a form of polity already at least incipient just as the apostles were passing off the scene. It was a natural, 'adaptive' transition in the passing of the baton from apostolic authority to those whom the churches thought worthy to succeed them.

That there is nothing inherently wrong or unwise about a "chain of command" in the governance of local churches is evident from the facts:

1) that the NT churches clearly had one of these, as seen in the authority exercised by the apostles, not just acting in concert as an apostolic community, but acting independently as did Paul in giving orders and instructions to the churches.

In 2 Corinthians 13:10, Paul explains his tone:

"For this reason I am writing these things while absent, in order that when present I may not use severity in accordance with the *authority* (exousian) which the Lord gave me for building up and not for tearing down."

This text, by the way, furnishes the clue that reconciles the rod of authority with the servant spirit that Jesus demanded of Christian leaders. To be a servant is not necessarily

to be devoid of authority. What Jesus meant in Matthew 20:25-26 was not that recourse to authority is pagan, but that Christian leaders are to deal with others as servants rather than in the high-handed, domineering, tyrannical and self-serving manner characteristic of Gentile power players.

In other words, the exercise of authority by elders in a church accords exactly with that of the husband in the home---it is to be used in a servant spirit. That is, with a view to building up and not tearing down. Christ vested the apostles with authority. However, He meant for them to exercise that authority in a spirit of servanthood, not in a tyrannical or self-serving attitude.

2) that terms expressing authority are used relative to NT church governance (e.g. "rule well" 1 Tim. 5:17; 1 Tim. 3:5).

"Let the elders who rule [proestotes = be at the head of, rule, direct] well be considered worthy of double honor." (1 Tim. 5:17)

"Obey your leaders, and submit to them; for they keep watch over your souls, as those who will give an account." (Heb. 13:17a-c)

"But we request of you, brethren, that you appreciate (or recognize = *eidenai*, an infinitive form of the verb *oida*) those who diligently labor among you, and have charge over you (= *proistamenous* from *proisteme* = to be at the head [of], rule, direct or be concerned about, care for, give aid) in the Lord and give you instruction." (1 Thess. 5:12)

Combining the two denotations of the verb (which literally means to 'stand before' something or someone), we have a word that connotes the idea of standing before someone (in a leadership capacity) to minister or care for their needs. Christian leadership is not vacant of authority, but it never allows for tyranny. The object of Christian leadership and any authority vested in it is for the good of others. There is no place in it for vainglory or self interest.

Consider this verse: "Now such persons we command and exhort . . ." (2 Thess. 3:12). The verb 'command' which Paul employs here is *paranggelomen*. It means to *give orders, instruct or direct* and is used, according to Arndt and Gringich's lexicon (p. 618) "of all kinds of persons in authority. . ." Again, the fact that Paul was an apostle is irrelevant to the argument here. This kind of language shows that *the exercise of authority* was very much a part of the ethos of NT churches. It goes to prove that it is not alien to either the spirit of Jesus or the way NT churches were intended to operate.

Here is another passage: "You younger men, likewise, be subject [hyptagete from hyptasso] to your elders." (1 Peter 5:5)

One obeys and submits to **authority** figures. God did intend, whether by one or several, that those who were leaders, whatever they may be called, should exercise authority over the churches . . . that somebody, one or several, should have a say so. In short, churches are not intended to be showcases of democracy with the America way of one man, one vote in vogue.

Ninth Premise

A hierarchical polity, which recognizes leadership endowments and admits the use of authority in church governance, is quite agreeable with the servant spirit inculcated by Jesus.

I disagree totally with the absurd notion that there is something inimical to the spirit of Christ and the scheme of the Church in a form of ecclesiastical governance that entails a hierarchical structure and/or the exercise of executive authority. In fact the concept of `elder rule' blended with this `authority-free zone' notion is clearly contradictory. Those who take this ground typically do so in the desire of defrocking pastors of their mantle of authority. It's that insidious *Aaron-Miriam complex* in the mix. In the process they overstep themselves logically and cut the ground out from under elder authority.

For what its advocates fail to see, apparently, is that if it is contrary to Christian principle for the churches to be subordinate the authority of one (namely, a pastor), it is no less counter to Christian principle for churches to be subject to the rule of a few. What is true for the goose also fits the gander.⁵

My logic here is not intended to support the idea that pastors should be `popes' of local congregations but simply that one cannot rule out the hierarchical principle in local church government as something wrong *in itself* and limit its inappropriateness only to one level. If it is wrong in principle to exert authority in Christian leadership, then logically, it is inappropriate at every level.

To appeal to a passage like Luke 22:24-26 as a basis for rejecting the principle of authority in the exercise of Christian leadership is a stretch, to say the least. Jesus is by no means disallowing the use of authority in leadership, but regulating its use in a Christian rather than a Gentile spirit.

The Gentile use of power and authority is to "lord it over" (kupieuosin = be lord or master, rule, lord it over, dominate) their subjects. In short they are oppressive. Not only that, but those who exercise power or authority over them do so for their own glory and exaltation, being extolled as "Benefactors." (See also Matt. 20:25-28.) Jesus' point is

⁵ I can never comprehend how some are so in love with the idea of a body of elders ruling a congregation (without accountability to the latter) and yet find the notion of *their* subscribing to and following the lead of others (who are accountable) so distasteful.

simply that Christian leaders should adopt the spirit of servants. Just as Jesus did when He washed His disciples' feet (John 13:5), even though He owned for Himself the superior standing of "Lord" and "Teacher."

A husband exercises authority over his wife and children, but he is commanded to do so in a selfless, sacrificial way, not in a tyrannical mode.

Some resort to the following specious argument to show that we believers are to be servants to one another, not authorities over one another, as if the two concepts were inherently contradictory:

The Lord Jesus Christ is the Head of the Body

All members of the Body are subject to the authority of Christ, the Head.

Therefore all members of the Body are exempt from any authority except His.

Therefore all members are exempt from the directives of *any* human authority.

This line of argument is deceptive. It makes a leap from the idea that all members are exempt from any authority except His to the conclusion that we are exempt from *any* human authority. What it overlooks is *the principle of delegation of authority*. Authority that is assigned by the Head to a member and rightly exercised in His Name *is* His authority.

Indeed Christ is the Chief Shepherd. But doesn't He appoint undershepherds? Besides, this silly argument 'proves' too much. Following this logic, not only is a church 'relieved' of the hegemony of strong pastors (or individual elders) but also, take note, *absolved of any obligation to acknowledge the leadership of a collective of elders*. It's every member for him (her) self, by this reasoning.

At the risk of overkill (of a foolish argument), let me add that the analogy of theocratic Israel also decimates this 'logic'. For any who need a definition, a theocracy is a form of government or polity where God is the constitutional ruler (as opposed, for example, to a democracy where the **demos**, or the people, are the rulers). Israel was a theocracy. Even so, God established elders of the people (heads of fathers' houses) to lead them. He went further. God chose, called and gifted first Moses, then Joshua, then judges like Samuel to lead His people as His representatives. Eventually, He sanctioned even kings.

I think you see where I am going. The Church is a theocracy, too. Hence it is no different in the 'theocracy' that is the Church for local assemblies to be led by elders among whom are peers who are *primus inter pares*. There is nothing in the theocratic principle or the Headship of Christ that is inconsistent or incompatible with the delegation of divine authority to human beings who act in His Name.

The idea is that Christian leaders are to exercise His authority as Jesus did, that is, in a servant spirit, seeking the good of others rather than their own interests. That is why,

as quoted earlier, the Apostle Paul directed Titus, whom he had sent to serve the Cretan churches:

“These things speak and exhort and rebuke *with all authority* (epitages).” 2:15

A servant spirit is not a servile spirit. A servant spirit is determined by the intent to serve the interests of the other person(s). That intent does not exclude the sometimes necessary use of authority, as every parent knows.

Tenth Premise

The argument that power tends to corrupt is no objection to the recognition of leadership nor the exercise of authority in church governance.

History shows that if there is one condition more terrifying than the presence of oppressive authority, it is the absence of any authority. No tyrant is more ruthless or mindless than anarchy. Besides, this objection to power in the hands of pastors cuts both ways. Corruption and oppression could exert themselves through an empowered group (like lay elders) as readily as through an empowered person. One is no more immune to the gravity of the flesh than the other.

Moreover, but for grace, indwelling sin, as it does with God's Law itself, has a way of subverting any good and useful thing to evil purposes. Grace is the redemptive factor that makes leaders safe for the Church. Apart from grace, no leadership model is failsafe. The best system in the world can, and will, be perverted by bad men who will misuse God's people.

When one becomes a Christian, one voluntarily becomes a member of the Body of Christ and linked up with an accountability fellowship with leadership acting (responsibly and faithfully or irresponsibly and unfaithfully) as Christ's human representatives. To these, God's people, if that is what they claim to be, are obliged to submit as to the authority of Christ Himself. He who will not listen to the Church and its leaders will not listen even to God.

Only when one is sure that church leaders have defaulted on their responsibility to Christ, rebelled against His will, and sacrificed truth and purity on the altar of unbelief is the individual justified in resisting or ignoring the existing leaders of a local body. At that point, like mutineers on a ship, the individual had better be right in the sight of God or else he brings down on his head the condemnation that belongs to those who destroy the temple of God. In short, there is a time and place for refusing to heed church leaders and that is in one instance and one only--where they are seriously wrong before God and our own heart and way are clearly right in the sight of the God, who knows the difference between the words of our mouth and the thoughts and intents of our heart.

The American church has gone to seed on individualism and the spirit of democracy and the "rights" of members. Christ alone has rights. We have privileges, duties and responsibilities. We worry so much about one man being above another . . . about one person being in a position to command another and consider it an insult to be subject to the authority of another. This is human pride at its worst.

One of the ironies of social dynamics, I find, is that those who most resistant to being led by others are the most determined and willing, when conditions allow, to impose their leadership and force their wills on others.

An excellent testimony to this phenomenon is the confession of David Horowitz, one of the founders of the New Left and a prime mover of the radical movement of the 60's in his Berkeley days. He makes this very point about the New Left ideologues of that era. They hated authority and flaunted it. Yet they were exceedingly oppressive and tyrannical in imposing their own.⁶ My own observation of life would testify that those who most detest authority are inevitably those who covet it the most and would be least reluctant to impose their authority on others.

The Roman historian Livy, in his *History of Rome from its Foundation*, makes an astute observation about the great Carthagian general Hannibal, who once very nearly overthrew Rome. His father nurtured him into a great leader, Livy notes, because he taught Hannibal first to follow, then lead.

The safest and wisest leaders will usually be those who have first learned to accept the sometimes burdensome direction of others before they are licensed to impose their own sometimes heavy harness on others.

⁶ See *Destructive Generation*, Peter Collier and David Horowitz