

THE PASTOR AND THE PRIORITY OF PLURALITY

I. INTRODUCTION

II. APPROACHING PLURALITY

A. My Story

"Most of the matters that keep us divided are (in relationship to) our church government; it's right form and order."¹

B. Defining Plurality

1. A way to describe scriptural evidence that New Testament churches were led by more than one leader
2. A sampling of passages (1 Peter 5; Acts 15; Titus 1)²

"The apostolic churches seem, in general, to have had a plurality of elders as well as deacons."³

"On the local church level, the New Testament plainly witnesses to a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership. Therefore, leadership by a plurality of elders is a sound biblical practice."⁴

3. In the wisdom of God, he arranged a form of government for churches that assumes interdependence and protects from dangers of autonomous rule
4. The responsibility for the church is shared. We call it 'team ministry.'
5. It has long been the practice and approach in reformed circles.⁵

C. What About the Senior Pastor?

¹Richard Baxter, *The Reformed Pastor: A Pattern for Personal Growth and Ministry* (Portland, ME; Multnomah, 1982), 53.

²For the overwhelming evidence on plurality in ministry in the New Testament, note Addendum 1 titled, *Biblical Evidence for Plurality of Leadership*.

³J.L. Reynolds, *Church Polity: or The Kingdom of Christ in its Internal and External Development* (Richmond, VA: Harrold & Murray, 1849), in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*, ed. Mark E. Dever, 295-404 (Center for Church Reform; printed by Sheridan Books, 2001), 349.

⁴Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership*, rev. and exp. (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth, 1995), 37.

⁵"And as the whole spiritual government of each church is committed to its bench of elders, the session is competent to regulate every concern, and to correct everything which they consider amiss in the arrangements or affairs of the church which admits of correction." Samuel Miller, *The Ruling Elder*. 2d ed., 1994, (Dallas, TX: Presbyterian Heritage, 1984), 15.

1. Senior pastor's exist because a plurality needs leadership
2. It is a role grounded upon plurality
 - a. The senior pastor emerges from plurality not by authority, but by virtue of his gifts.
 - b. He becomes "first among equals"

"The title bishop, which was applied to all the elders, came after a while to be applied exclusively to the president—elder, as Justin in the middle of the second century still calls him—merely to distinguish him from his equal co-elders. He was not superior to them, but only 'first among equals.'"⁶
3. This role exists to provide care, facilitate decisions, provide training, be a spokesman, mobilize gifts and ensure the plurality is healthy and operational.
4. But we must always remember: the presiding pastor is based upon the foundation of plurality.

"...the permission for that person (the senior pastor) to lead comes from a plurality of leaders."⁷

III. WHY PLURALITY? SIX SUMMARIZING REASONS

- A. Because it is strongly supported in Scripture (see addendum 1).
- B. Because it embodies the New Testament principle of the interdependence and diversity of gifts among members of Christ's body (Rom. 12:4-6; 1 Cor. 12)
- C. Because it disseminates the authority and responsibility for the church to more than one person, thereby protecting both the church and the elder.
- D. Because no one elder possesses the full compliment of gifts that God uses to bless and build the church.
- E. Because it creates a structure where men must model the unity that should ultimately characterize the church (John 17:23; Rom. 15:5; Eph. 4:3, 13; Col. 3:14).
- F. Because it creates a "multitude of counselors" (Prov. 15:22; 24:6) for leading and guiding the church.
- G. Because it creates a defined venue of accountability for life and doctrine among the leaders (1 Tim. 4:16; Titus 1:6; James 5:16).

⁶William Williams, *Apostolical Church Polity* (Philadelphia: American Baptist Publication Society, 1874), in *Polity: A Collection of Historic Baptist Documents*, ed. Mark E. Dever, 527-552 (Center for Church Reform; printed by Sheridan Books, 2001), 532.

⁷Bill Hull, *The Disciple Making Pastor: The Key to Building Healthy Christians in Today's Church* (Old Tappan, NJ: Fleming H. Revell, 1988), 84.

“Regardless of what polity conclusions one draws, the leadership structure of the local church placed authority in the hands of a small group of men, not just one man.”⁸

IV. COMMON PITFALLS OF PLURALITY—PLURALITY BUSTERS

A. My Role is My Identity

1. Our devotion to Christ is our highest call
2. If we bolt down our position in Christ, then other roles don't become identity roles. The “Caller” can call us into ministry and call us out of ministry based on what He thinks will glorify Him and best serve His church.
3. Sovereign Grace Ministries is looking to build churches committed to faithful men enjoying a lifetime of thriving ministry feasting on the fruit of God's grace.

B. The Senior Pastor As “Big Man”

1. The authority for church is invested in the entire eldership, not just the senior pastor.
2. Same authority, different gifts—preaching and leadership (one and one(a))
3. The danger of valuing efficiency over plurality.

C. Misapplied Consensus

1. Healthy pluralities dwell in various tensions:
 - a. Consensus and expedience
 - b. Consensus and leadership gift
 - c. Consensus and humility“Consensus is the absence of leadership”
2. When to seek consensus: How do elders know when it is wise to seek consensus?
 - a. It is wise when core doctrine is at stake (actually, it is imperative when core doctrine is at stake!)
 - b. It is wise when the issue affects whole church, the future of the church or the reputation of the church

⁸Ibid, 78.

- c. It is wise when previously determined values, priorities or direction would/could be changed
- d. It is wise when evaluating someone for eldership, church planting or Pastors College candidates
- e. It is wise when prioritizing the church ministry calendar
- f. It is wise when the senior pastor thinks consensus is necessary

D. The Silent Elder

1. When eldership meets, all gathered to fully participate
 - We're called to govern; govern means leading through our opinions
2. Elders express care through tenacious evaluation of themselves and the church (Acts 20; 1 Tim.)
3. As church grows, ministries become more specialized. Must protect role of elders in expansion
 - a. An elder remains responsible regardless of size—creating departments shouldn't confine elder
 - b. The church remains united and protected as eldership retains responsibility for whole church
4. It's value of tenacious evaluation and communication that protects church prevents us from drift towards irrelevance
 - a. Example of Acts 6
 - b. The disciples exercised the courage to honestly evaluate the widow's real needs and their own positions. As a result, the church grew. One era ended, but a new kind of fruitfulness began.

E. Confusion Over Friendship and Function

1. We are not professionals, but we are not merely friends either
2. The unique call to blend friendship and function
3. The danger of friends first
4. Sacrificing both function and friendship for the mission

F. An Ambition for MY MINISTRY

1. One of the temptations of ministry that increases with time is the desire for personal fulfillment—a sense that the longer I am in ministry, the more my

personal sense of gifts and vision should form the contours of my ministry.

2. Ministry is always service
3. Service comes before gifts—the church is not just the context for a gift or call, it is the definer of a call
4. You don't get ministry fruitfulness by running at fulfillment—you run at humble service, and there you find fulfillment

V. CONCLUSION

- Review of Covenant Fellowship Church Affirmations (see addendum 2)

ADDENDUM 1

BIBLICAL EVIDENCE FOR PLURALITY OF LEADERSHIP**

Evidence of plurality among pastors/elders/shepherds

1. Many instances where Elders/Pastors/Overseers/Shepherds (plural) is mentioned in context of a Church (singular)

Jerusalem Church

Acts 11:30 And they did so, sending it to the elders by the hand of Barnabas and Saul.

Acts 15:2 And after Paul and Barnabas had no small dissension and debate with them, Paul and Barnabas and some of the others were appointed to go up to Jerusalem to the apostles and the elders about this question.

Acts 15:4 When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church and the apostles and the elders, and they declared all that God had done with them.

Acts 15:6 The apostles and the elders were gathered together to consider this matter.

Acts 15:22 Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders, with the whole church, to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers ...

Acts 16:4 As they went on their way through the cities, they delivered to them for observance the decisions that had been reached by the apostles and elders who were in Jerusalem.

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

Lystra, Iconium and Antioch

Acts 14:23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.

1Tim. 4:14 Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you.

Ephesian Church

Acts 20:17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.

Acts 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.

Acts 20:29 I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock

1Tim. 5:17 Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

Philippian Church

Phil. 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus,
To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and
deacons:

Cretan Churches

Titus 1:5 This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into
order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you—

Other Churches

James 5:14 Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church,
and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.

1Pet. 5:1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the
sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:

1Pet. 5:2 ... shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not
under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain,
but eagerly;

1Pet. 5:3 ... not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the
flock.

2. No instance where there is a clear indication of a single
Elder/Pastor/Overseer/Shepherd over a church.
3. All references to Elder/Pastor/Overseer/Shepherd (singular) is fully
compatible with plurality.

1Tim. 3:1-2 The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he
desires a noble task. ²Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the
husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able
to teach ...

1Tim. 5:19 Do not admit a charge against an elder except on the evidence of two or
three witnesses.

Titus 1:6 ... if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children
are believers and not open to the charge of debauchery or insubordination.

Titus 1:7 For an overseer, as God's steward, must be above reproach. He must not
be arrogant or quick-tempered or a drunkard or violent or greedy for gain ...

1Pet. 5:1 So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the
sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed:

**Much credit to Alexander Strauch, "Shared Leadership," *Biblical Eldership*
(Littleton, CO: Lewis and Roth Publishers, 1995), 35 ff.

ADDENDUM 2

COVENANT FELLOWSHIP CHURCH TEAM AFFIRMATIONS

COMMITMENT OF THE TEAM MEMBER

I affirm the value of **Devotion** by remembering that my identity is in Christ, not in my ministry, position, calling or the approval of man. My greatest joy and fulfillment is to live as his servant for the glory of his name.

I affirm the value of **Humility** by encouraging the men around me to help me assess my strengths and weaknesses of both character and gifting, and working with them to place me for the best benefit of the church and the mission of the Gospel

[Note: In affirming the value of **humility** I acknowledge that one of the temptations of ministry that increases with time is the desire for personal fulfillment – a sense that the longer I am in ministry, the more my personal sense of gifts and vision should form the contours of my ministry. In fact, the longer I am in ministry, the more I need the help of others to keep me from settling into what could be comfortable employment rather than sacrificial service for Christ and his church. At the same time the elders acknowledge the importance of considering a particular man's sense of calling as they give priority to the needs of the church.]

I affirm the value of **Honesty** by committing to sharing my opinions and struggles with the team or members of the team, or with team decisions, in a way that to the best of my understanding is humble and constructive.ⁱ

[Note: In affirming the value of **honesty**, I acknowledge the temptation to want to either withhold my perspective to avoid evaluation of my motives, or to express my opinions as if they are ideas disconnected from desires of my heart. I recognize that my contribution on the team necessitates both my honest perspective and my participation in the evaluative process that keeps sinful agendas from driving team decisions.]

I affirm the value of **Integrity** by taking responsibility to open my life and my family to evaluation and care.

[Note: In affirming the value of **integrity**, I acknowledge that care of my soul and my family is largely dependent on the meaningful access of the pastors into my home and of my family to the pastors. Both expediency and pride can tend to make me a hindrance rather than an asset to this care. My wife is best cared for if she feels freedom and encouragement from me to bring her concerns about me to the team, and if the team has access with my ongoing cooperation to my wife and her perspective as it relates to me.]

I affirm the value of **Accountability** by committing to lay my life before the team in light of the biblical qualifications for ministry. I recognize and affirm that the responsibility of evaluating my qualifications is the responsibility of the church and its leaders.ⁱⁱ

[Note: In affirming the value of **accountability**, I acknowledge the temptation to passively assume it is the team's responsibility to discern what issues of concern as related to my qualifications might exist. To battle this passivity I will accept the team's responsibility to evaluate my fitness for ministry, but I will be proactive in serving the team by furnishing them information into any area of my life where my qualifications come into play.]

I affirm the value of **Faithfulness** by looking for, praying for, and where possible, training and promoting my ultimate replacement in ministry so that the church may continue to grow and mature into future generations.ⁱⁱⁱ

[Note: In affirming the value of **faithfulness**, I acknowledge the temptation to fear the ultimate transition out of ministry and seek to protect my position on the team. I will battle this fear and the striving and ambition that accompany it by embracing evaluation of my gifts and call as an ongoing necessity for me to be an effective member of the team.]

I affirm the value of **Unity** by acknowledging that I will seek to do all I can to represent the values of team ministry in the local church while I am serving in vocational ministry, and if and when that service ever ends.^{iv}

[Note: In affirming the value of **unity** I acknowledge the various temptations that can occur with the stark change of life that is an inevitable part of stepping out of ministry. I will battle these temptations by living according to the values I have taught and practiced in ministry, by pursuing the care of my brothers on the pastoral team for myself and my family, and by seeking to set a positive example of godliness and support for the church in my involvement and interactions with others. I recognize that the greatest impact of my life for the Gospel might potentially be how I conduct my life, how I relate to God's church and his appointed leaders, and how I display grace operating through faith by standing firm in these biblical convictions when I am no longer in ministry.]

COMMITMENT OF THE TEAM

Recognizing that the call of the ministry is a holy and joyful call to every man who serves the church as part of the pastoral team, we affirm and commit as a team to seek God together for the best positioning of each man, committing to bring encouragement where we see God's grace in his life and ministry, loving observations and correction where there may be weakness or error, and God exalting goals for future growth as a pastor, husband and father.
