

Note: ET&N is now blogging! Clicking "Blog" under the masthead will take you to the ET&N weblog, where you can comment on or respond to ET&N essays. In future ET&N installments, the "Discussion" section will include a link to the weblog and, when appropriate, highlights of blog discussions. Clicking "Reply" above will launch your default e-mail program for a personal reply.

Pastoral Leadership

This issue of *Ekklesia Then & Now* was inspired by this comment in an e-mail I received requesting the "[*Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs*](#)" edition: "Have also asked a brother to show me where in Scripture the men are supposed to meet in a little back room of the church building and decide the fate of all the women (who usually outnumber the men) of the congregation." The comment disturbed me on several levels, and I responded directly to the individual.

Given her comment about the women outnumbering the men, this woman's gripe seems to be with male leadership of the church, but I want to focus primarily on the comment about deciding the fate of the congregation. In this issue of *ET&N*, I want to examine who is supposed to lead the church, what type of leadership is expected, and why it is important.

Then

Perhaps the most pervasive image of the New Testament church is that of a flock of sheep--not a particularly compelling comparison in our culture. "Following like sheep" is not generally considered a complimentary phrase. It conjures up an almost lemming-like image of a unthinking herd. Furthermore, most of us have never seen a shepherd in action. Most Christians would probably prefer the more activist metaphors for Christians such as ambassadors (2 Corinthians 5:20), athletes (1 Corinthians 9:25), farmers (2 Timothy 2:6) or even soldiers (2 Timothy 2:3). A family--sons/daughters and heirs--is another favored image, but the flock of sheep may be the most appropriate, primarily because we, like sheep, are defenseless against predators without a shepherd (see Matthew 9:36). It is this image that also gives us our clearest understanding of church leadership.

The Chief Shepherd

The church has only one head--Christ Jesus (Ephesians 1:22), whom Peter described as the "chief shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4). Contrary to the papists and other hierarchalists, Jesus did not appoint any individual to head the church. When Jesus completed his mission among humanity, He sent the Holy Spirit as an invisible indwelling counselor for each individual Christian (John 16:13), a helper (Greek, **paraklētos**) who serves as the connection between the Christian and the resurrected Jesus.

Human Oversight

Because God knew, however, that there would be those who would misrepresent His purpose, claiming the inspiration of the Spirit, so he called for a specific form of human leadership within the church. Using Paul, God commanded that elders (Greek, **presbuteros**, *elder, usually older men, but in [1 Timothy 5:2](#), older women*) to be appointed in every local congregation. The churches in Crete had apparently undergone some upheaval, for example, so Paul instructs Titus to appoint elders "so that you might put what remained into order" (Titus 1:5).

Elsewhere, Paul refers to the local elders as overseers (Greek, **episkopos**, *bishops*) and describes the qualities the men who fill this role will exhibit in the church. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 is frequently viewed as a list of qualifications for elders (the section is even labeled as such in the English Standard and other versions, as if it is the responsibility of the church to search for men who fit the description. But the meaning of the passage is better seen as a description of qualities that a man recognized as an elder is already exhibiting.

The Roman church quickly created a sacrament (ordination) out of the appointment of elders, including a ceremony at which time the qualities necessary to lead the church were supposed transferred to the candidate. This soon led, contrary to Scripture, to a separation between ordained leaders (clergy) and the flock (laity). Originally, these ordained clergymen were referred to as elders, presbyters, or bishops, but it wasn't long before the Roman church reverted to human intermediaries and called the clergy "priests" (who could then "graduate" to become powerful bishops). Yet from a New Testament perspective, **every** Christian is a priest (1 Peter 2:9) and the **only** intermediary is Christ Jesus (1 Timothy 2:5). No man or woman is empowered to act as a mediator between God and an individual.

God also understood that oversight of the local church could not be placed in the hands of a single individual. He calls for **elders** in each city, not **an elder**. Furthermore, He underscored the point through one of John's letters, where he refers to the actions of an early church leader who sought to position himself over others:

"I have written something to the church, but Diotrephes, who likes to put himself first, does not acknowledge our authority. So if I come, I will bring up what he is doing, talking wicked nonsense against us. And not content with that, he refuses to welcome the brothers, and also stops those who want to and puts them out of the church" (3 John 9-10).

Not only does God call for a plurality of elders, He insists that no one elder can be first or head of the others.

There is no clear list of elder responsibilities, but they are clearly implied by the qualities elders possess (1 Timothy 3:1-7), as well as Paul's instructions to the Ephesian elders (Acts 20:16-35), whom he tells to "*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 20:28). From this passage, we derive the vital concept of pastoral leadership. The phrase "to care for" is a translation of the Greek word **poimainō**, which means "*to tend as a shepherd*" (Strong's).

Paul uses the noun form of **poimainō, poimēn** (*a shepherd*), in describing the gifted roles within the church: "*And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the pastors [poimēn] and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ*" (Ephesians 4:11-12).

Peter also refers to the pastoral responsibilities of elders: "*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: shepherd [poimainō] the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain*" (1 Peter 5:1-2)

The Role of the Shepherd

A literal shepherd's primary responsibilities were to ensure (1) that the sheep were fed, (2) that none of the sheep wandered off, and (3) that a predator didn't take any of the sheep. It is not coincidental that church leaders are considered "shepherds" because the primary responsibilities are identical: (1) teach (feed) the congregation, (2) help the congregation remain faithful by serving as an example, and (3) guard the congregation against false teaching (like the current torrent of lies about Jesus that the media is promoting). Nowhere in those responsibilities is the right to direct specifically stated nor even clearly implied, although elders are to be honored for their service (1 Timothy 5:17).

In fact, Scripture specifically addresses the concerns of the women I quoted at the beginning of this issue of *ET&N*. After Peter calls for the elders to shepherd the flock, he adds an important qualifier: "*...not domineering over [Greek, katakurieuō, to lord against, control] those in your charge, but being examples to the flock*" (1 Peter 5:3). An effective leader sets the example. A shepherd may have to lead his sheep to a good pasture a few times, but then the flock will continue to follow his example.

Now

The Protestant Reformation rejected the concept of the Roman Catholic mediating priest, but the reformers only managed to put new clothes on an unbiblical concept. The practice of ordination of clergy was retained but instead of a priest, the monolithic leader became a minister. Just as each Christian is a priest, however, each Christian is also a minister. The Anabaptists sought to restore the biblical equality of believers, only to be mercilessly persecuted by the reformers who themselves had been persecuted by the Roman Catholic institution.

In most current Protestant circles, the biblical term "pastor" is applied unbiblically. The modern pastor is typically the single head of the congregation. He or she is clergy, set apart from the laity by "ordination." If there are elders, they are typically a lay board of advisors to the pastor. Worse still, in some Christian groups, pastors are assigned by a centralized board rather than being accepted for their qualities by the congregation from within the congregation. Perhaps this helps to understand why the average tenure of a modern pastor is less than three years! Furthermore, when pastoral responsibilities lie primarily with a single individual, the load becomes overwhelming. When dominant leaders sin, as they inevitably do (and the more powerful they become, the more temptations arise), the impact on the congregation

is devastating. Most modern pastors are caring, deeply committed individuals, but the expectations of the role are often beyond one person's capacities.

The role of pastoring is not limited to a single individuals in a church, nor even a group of individuals. Effective pastoring is a gift that any Christian may be given and expected to exercise. Fathers and mothers pastor their children, teachers pastor their students, older Christians pastor younger ones. We can all--within the context of our individual gifts and our experiences--pastor others.

There are many permutations of church leadership structures that are in direct contradiction to Scripture, but there is only one God-given one: a plurality of elders, recognized from within the congregation, who jointly serve that congregation by setting an example, teaching the truth, and protecting against predators. It is in this sense that elders are to "manage" (1 Timothy 5:17) the congregation, just as fathers are expected to manage their family--teaching (Deuteronomy 6:6-7), providing, and protecting (1 Timothy 5:8). And just as elders are warned not to "lord over" the flock, fathers are told not to exasperate (or provoke) children (Colossians 3:21).

Fathers and elders can not and do not directly "decide the fate" of those in their care, but their action (or inaction) can have either a positive or a negative impact. When Paul comments that man is the head of woman (1 Corinthians 11:3) and therefore of the family, I think his primary meaning is that the direction a man goes will largely determine the direction his family goes. So too, the direction elders go largely determines the direction their flocks go. Because cultural influences have often caused men to shirk their leadership responsibilities in familial settings, the Bible provides very strong commands for fathers.

My own local congregation is blessed to have elders who understand the concept of servant leadership far better than I can convey in words, because they live it. I appreciate, love, and submit to each of them.

Comment: I suspect there may be some readers who see some inconsistency in my arguments about church leadership and music, but there are a couple of big differences. First, biblical instruction about church leadership is clear whereas musical forms are not. Second, I am not suggesting here that churches that do not practice genuine pastoral leadership are not Christian or that members of such congregations are lost. Third, I can see no negative impact of instrumental music (it does not cause people to fall away), but the sometimes devastating impact of rigidly authoritative, single person rule of a church or of centralized decision-making bodies removed from the local congregation presents numerous examples.

Discussion

There were no comments posted on the [ET&N](#) blog about this issue. I hope you will consider posting to the blog rather than e-mailing responses unless they are private in nature.

Wayne from Maine sent this response:

Dick: I usually print your issues of ET&N for later reading, but devoured the article on this subject

immediately. We may be thinking in parallel but not necessarily identical lines.

Have attached for you some pieces developed here in 2000 during a study of leadership that was followed by an elder nomination process. A church existed at this place for a half-century without elders -- as is the case in many northeast churches -- for a variety of reasons. Our two elders have been serving since 2001 and we are now in a reaffirmation process.

Documents:

Sermon Handout -- passed out, read together and discussed. Note: The excerpt at the end from BBB's tract was not used as a creed (authority) but included to show that the congregation's belief and practice in this regard are within the mainstream of Churches of Christ.

THE ELDERSHIP (role descriptions) There's a long story behind this, short version being that a potential elder (who had never been in a congregation with elders) kept asking for a Job Description. We were perplexed, having never heard of one. Folks we consulted said it couldn't be done. This man wouldn't consider the position without one. Sooo, a draft was put together that grew into what was adopted by the congregation. During the process, it was expanded to include the role of the congregation to the elders.

POINTS OF CONSENSUS -- explanatory opening paragraph.

I hope you find these interesting. Any questions, feel free to contact me.

[DS] The documents Wayne shared were very thorough, and I agreed with most of what was included. If you are interested in reviewing them, reply to me and I'll forward the request to Wayne.

This note came from Jim in Texas:

I enjoyed your article on leadership in the church. I have a question regarding your comments on I Tim 5:2, where you seem to express that this verse represents "elder" as the God ordained servant leader (shepherd, bishop, elder) rather than "elder" in the sense of one who is older in age, man or woman, which is my understanding of the term "elder" in this verse. I understand it as respecting a man or woman who is older in age and how they are to be treated rather than the "office" in church leadership whose qualifications are listed in Timothy and Titus. Would you please clarify your understanding of this verse, and can you identify where a woman held this "office" in NT times? Thanks....Jim

[DS] My response to Jim:

I guess I can see how that might have been confusing, but I was only defining the Greek word **prebuteros** as meaning "older." Sometimes it is used simply to refer to older men (e.g., Luke 15:25; 1 Timothy 5:1; Hebrews 11:2). Throughout the gospels, it usually refers to the Jewish leaders on the Council. In most of the New Testament letters and the later chapters of Acts, **presbuteros** refers to the leaders of the church of Jesus Christ. In 1 Timothy 5:2, **presbuteros** refers to older women, but neither 5:1 nor 5:2 refers to the leadership position in the church. To my knowledge, there were no women elders in the early church, and I think it is clear that the biblical prescription is that Christian elders be men. In American culture, that isn't a popular idea, but the church is not expected to mirror culture. Sorry if the parenthetical remark created any confusion about the gender of elders.

This issue of *ET&N* marks its three-year anniversary. When I began *ET&N*, I had no particular expectation, but I certainly would have been surprised to know it would go on for this long, and that it would draw so many subscribers (more than 1,300 as of today). I appreciate each subscriber and hope *ET&N* is as rewarding for you as it is

for me. My site stats package only goes back to July 1, 2004, but since then, here are the ten most popular issues, based on downloads:

1. ET&N 72 Psalms, Hymns and Spiritual Songs
2. ET&N 58 How Do I Love Thee?
3. ET&N 39 New Testament Apocrypha: Gospels
4. ET&N 47 Restoring Mary Magdalene
5. ET&N 23 Cities of the NT: Corinth
6. ET&N 62: Paul's Co-Workers - Aquila and Priscilla
7. ET&N 46 Giving: Alms, Offerings and Tithes
8. ET&N 63: Paul's Co-Workers - Aristarchus
9. ET&N 15: House Churches
10. ET&N 53 Cities of the NT: Rome

Other personal favorites (those I particularly enjoyed researching and writing):

- ET&N 20 The Path of Life
- ET&N 26 Water Baptism
- ET&N 36 The Eucharist: Remember the Christ!
- ET&N 48 My Fellow Lepers
- ET&N 55 Hot Spots, Double Helixes, and the Crab Nebula



Unsure about or don't agree with something in Ekklesia Then & Now? First, be a Berean (Acts 17:10-11). If you still disagree, respond so we can all share in the discussion!

NEXT ISSUE: Church Arithmetic (June 13)

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