

Is the One-Pastor System Scriptural?

In the summer of 1985, while pastoring the Victory Baptist church in rural Georgia, I felt led to teach a Bible study series on the New Testament pattern for the church and its leadership. We were not very far into this study before I began to seriously question the scriptural teaching of many of our church practices and traditions. Most troublesome was the question of whether or not my own position as the Pastor of a local church was a scriptural one.

I had always assumed that the one-Pastor system, being the pattern followed in the overwhelming majority of churches today, was founded upon Scripture. But as I began to earnestly study the Scriptures on the issue of church leadership, one disturbing question kept intruding itself—a question I present here for the sober consideration of the reader. Where in Scripture is there warrant for one man to be the spiritual leader and authority over the local church?

Never mind that this is the pattern unquestioningly followed throughout Christendom today. Where is it in Scripture? As I searched the length and breadth of the New Testament, it became obvious to me that such a pattern was nowhere to be found. Rather, I found that the primary role in shepherding the New Testament churches was exercised, not by a solitary Pastor, but by a plurality of men, described as "elders" or overseers

And when they had ordained them elders in every church, and had prayed with fasting, they commended them to the Lord, on whom they believed.(Acts 14:23)

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.... He said unto them... Take heed therefore unto yourselves, and to all the flock, over the which the Holy Ghost hath made you overseers, to feed the church of God, which he hath purchased with his own blood. (Acts 20:17-28)

Paul and Timotheus, the servants of Jesus Christ, to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi, with the bishops and deacons: (Phil. 1:1)

For this cause left I thee in Crete, that thou shouldest set in order the things that are wanting, and ordain elders in every city, as I had appointed thee:(Titus 1:5)

Is any sick among you? 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: (James 5:14)

The quotation above from Acts 20 makes it clear that the "elders" and "overseers" are the same persons, and that it is they who are given responsibility to shepherd, or pastor the church of God. ("Shepherd" is the literal meaning of the word "pastor.") So while others besides elders may exercise a pastoral gift—Bible teachers, for instance, there is no hint in Scripture of anyone claiming to be "the Pastor" of a local church and assuming a position of oversight apart from and superior to the work of the elders. We read nothing of a "Senior Pastor," or "Presiding Elder." Such titles, in fact come perilously close to blasphemy, since Christ Himself is spoken of as "the Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4).

The apostle Peter confirms that the terms "elders" and "overseers" refer to the same persons, and that their work is that of pastoring the flock:

The elders which are among you I exhort, who am also an elder, and a witness of the sufferings of Christ,

and also a partaker of the glory that shall be revealed: Feed the flock of God which is among you, taking the oversight thereof, not by constraint, but willingly; not for filthy lucre, but of a ready mind; (1 Peter 5:1-2)

So when we read in Ephesians 4:11 that God has given "some as pastors" (literally, "shepherds"), can we not assume that this refers primarily to these elders, or overseers, and not to a one-man office about which the rest of the New Testament is completely silent. Nor is all this mere wrangling over terminology.

The point to be fixed clearly in the mind from the above scriptures is that, in the New Testament, churches were never shepherded by one man, whatever his title or designation, but by a plurality of men. Further, the clear impression given by these scriptures is that elders were generally raised up by God from within the local church, not hired and imported from outside-and certainly not from the ranks of a professional "clergy".

This gives rise to another question.

Where in Scripture is there any such thing as a servant of the Lord contracting to receive a stated salary from a church? The New Testament clearly sets forth the principle that those who preach the gospel are entitled to "live from the gospel" (Matt. 10:9-10; 1 Cor. 9:14; 1 Tim. 5:17-18), but there is never any indication that this involves a stated salary, but rather, free will gifts:

Let him that is taught in the word communicate unto him that teacheth in all good things.(Gal. 6:6)

Now you Philippians know also that in the beginning of the gospel... no church shared with me concerning giving and receiving but you only. For even in Thessalonica you sent aid once and again for my necessities. (Phil. 4:10-16)

Bring Zenas the lawyer and Apollos on their journey diligently, that nothing be wanting unto them. And let ours also learn to maintain good works for necessary uses, that they be not unfruitful.(Titus 3:13-14)

The only case in Scripture of a "minister" receiving a fixed salary occurs in Judges 17-a situation filled with compromise and idolatry!

But did not Jesus say, "The laborer is worthy of his hire" (Luke 10:7)? True, but the briefest glance at the immediate context, where these laborers are instructed to carry neither purse nor scrip, and to "eat and drink such things as are set before you"-shows that a fixed salary was the last thing our Lord had in view. Yes, the Lord's laborer is worthy of his hire, but who is it that "hires" him? In whose employ is he--the church's or the Lord's? Surely the Lord's, but the system of a salaried pastorate implies otherwise. I cannot help but believe that the present-day "Pastor search" process, complete with resumes, salary negotiations, trial sermons, and the like, is a grievous offence to the Spirit of God. Again our urgent question must be: where is all this in Scripture?

Where also is the notion that the public ministry of the Word is to be confined to one man in a local church, and that it is contingent upon him being "ordained" by some human authority? On the contrary, we read:

Let the prophets speak two or three, and let the other judge. If any thing be revealed to another that sitteth by, let the first hold his peace. For ye may all prophesy one by one, that all may learn, and all may be comforted. (1 Cor 14:29-31)

Regardless of one's view concerning the nature of the gift of prophecy and its validity for today, it is abundantly clear that the practice of one man monopolizing the public ministry of the Word was utterly foreign to the New Testament churches.

Sad consequences

So when confronted with the plain teaching of Scripture, I could not escape the conclusion that the oversight of the local church is to be exercised by mature brethren raised up by the Holy Spirit from within the church. and that public ministry of the Word is open to any brother who has been divinely gifted for it. In

Contrast, most churches today entrust the spiritual leadership of the congregation and the vast majority of the public ministry to a solitary Pastor, who is chosen from among the professional "clergy," imported from outside the church and promised a fixed salary for his services. Can the reader-with his New Testament open before him-deny that this is a drastic departure from the scriptural pattern? Indeed it is, and it has had predictably severe consequences on the spiritual life of churches. The following are only some of the problems that are created or aggravated by this unscriptural one-Pastor system:

(1) Perpetuates the deplorable distinction between "clergy" and "laity." No more pernicious device of the devil has ever been deployed than this utterly unscriptural distinction. Pastors today grieve about being unable to involve the "laity." without ever considering that it is the very system of dividing Christians into two classes that is to blame.

The answer is not to "involve" the laity, but to abolish it! Away with the idea that Christian work is the province of a special few!

(2) Causes believers to neglect their own responsibility for witnessing to the lost, encouraging the brethren, in-depth Bible study, visiting the sick, etc., out of a conscious or subconscious assumption that these are "the Pastor's Jobs." Often the only one visibly working for Christ in the community is the Pastor, whose witness is impaired by the fact that he is perceived as paid to do so, And how rare is serious Bible study outside of the Pastor's study! There is a widespread delusion that only the "ordained" Pastor is qualified to mine the riches of God's Word, and that only he is responsible for using the Word to encourage the brethren and warn the lost. As a result, men who have been believers in Christ for thirty or forty years and "by this time ought to be teachers" are still being spoon-fed them- selves. (Heb. 5:12) In our churches today this is not the unfortunate exception. It is the norm. Of all the damage wreaked by the unscriptural system of handing over the ministry of the church to a single professional (or in larger churches, a staff of professionals), this debilitating effect on the men of the congregation is perhaps the most tragic.

(3) Leaves little or no room for the exercise of spiritual gifts, other than the Pastor's, in the gatherings of the church.

(4) Leads to churches being built in the flesh, as programs, promotion, and the Pastor's personality must replace the spiritual gifts of the body.

(5) Produces widespread discouragement among Pastors, who are trying earnestly to fill an unscriptural role.

(6) Denies Pastors the fellowship in the ministry they so desperately need. Usually the difference in spiritual vision and ministry responsibility between the Pastor and the congregation is so wide that his

only meaningful fellowship is with other Pastors, who are not fellow-laborers in the same field, but have their own fields to worry about.

(7) Tends to negate the presidency of the Holy Spirit in the church. Though the Pastor may earnestly seek the mind of the Spirit, his perception is clouded by his own personality, desires, etc. How much better, when formulating plans or making a decision, for the elders as a group, along with other spiritual men, to come before the Lord in prayer until the Holy Spirit speaks and brings them to a consensus, as in Acts 13:1-3.

(8) Since one man is given responsibility for the entire ministry of the church-and since no one man has all the gifts-Pastors are forced to spend much of their time doing ministry they are not supernaturally gifted to do, or else that ministry goes undone.

(9) Creates a situation where one person, the Pastor, can turn a doctrinally sound church into a heretical church overnight. Having multiple elders, while not providing absolute immunity from doctrinal error, is a powerful check against heretical teaching.

(10) Leads to a paralyzing shortage of national Christian workers in many mission areas, because of the assumption that these workers must be professionally trained and imported from outside the church. Where is the confidence that the Lord has already supplied the body with the leadership gifts needed?

(11) Puts undue pressure on the Pastor's wife and children, as they are forced to live in a "fishbowl" environment as "the preacher's" family.

These are but a sampling of the consequences that I believe can be laid squarely at the feet of unscriptural beliefs and practices concerning the ministry.

Some Objections Answered

Objection 1: The proper role of a pastor is not to assume the entire ministry of the church, but to mobilize and equip the saints to do the work of the ministry. Therefore, most of the problems you have listed are results, not of the single-Pastor system itself, but of the abuse of that system.

Reply: Since the single-Pastor system is universally beset with these problems, the burden of proof lies on its defenders to prove that the system itself is not at fault, particularly since it is a system with no warrant in Scripture. The concept of a church led by a Pastor-equipper who mobilizes the saints to do the work of the ministry sounds attractive, but the experience of thousands of frustrated Pastors testifies that it simply does not work. There is simply too deeply ingrained a perception in the minds of the congregation that Christian work is for a special few. The clergy-laity gap is the great demobilizer of the saints. Anyone trying to abolish that gap is doomed to failure while clinging to a system where one man, professionally trained and credentialed, is viewed as "the Minister." Incidentally, those who espouse the concept of the Pastor- equipper normally have a very limited notion of what the "work of the ministry" includes. For instance, even the Pastor who makes equipping the saints an emphasis of his ministry will normally call a fellow clergyman-not someone from the congregation-to fill the pulpit when he is away.

Objection 2: The approach you have suggested would produce incompetent church leadership at best, and doctrinal mayhem at worst.

Reply: This is a serious charge because it implies that the Holy Spirit is incompetent in placing the proper leadership gifts within each church. Is it seminary training that qualifies a man for leadership in the

church, or the gifts of the Spirit? We have often been guilty of giving lip service to the latter, while placing greater weight on the former.

Objection 3: The word "overseer" is singular in 1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7 where the qualifications of the overseer are described. This suggests at least the possibility of "overseer" being a one-man work.

Reply: It is a most natural use of language to employ the singular when describing the qualifications of a position. For instance, I might say, "A United States Senator (or even, the United States Senator) must be a man of integrity, honor, etc." without in the least implying that there is only one United States Senator, or even one per state! To stress Paul's perfectly explicable use of the singular here, while ignoring the overwhelming evidence of the rest of the New Testament, would be a strange and twisted exegesis. At any rate, a closer look at Titus 1:5-7 rules out the possibility that Paul was advocating a one-pastor system. How can the use of the singular "overseer" in verse 7 possibly imply that each local church is to have only one overseer, when two verses earlier Paul had introduced the subject by reminding Titus of his instructions to "appoint elders [plural I in every city]"? To my mind, this is conclusive.

Objection 4: Were not the "Pastoral Epistles" addressed to single individuals?

Reply: This objection is based on the common misconception that Timothy and Titus were each "Pastors" of local churches. This is simply not true. To quote from the Zondervan Pictorial Bible Dictionary: "Though these letters do furnish worthwhile directions for pastors, the addressees were not Pastors in the usual present-day sense of that term. Rather, they were Paul's special envoys sent by him on specific missions and entrusted with concrete assignments according to the need of the hour."

Objection 5: What about the leadership role of James at Jerusalem (Acts 12:17). Epaphras at Colossae (Col. 4:12). And Epaphroditus at Philippi (Phil. 2:25)?

Reply: This objection, which I have heard used in defense of the one-Pastor system is a patent example of reading the Word of God through the distorting lens of tradition. James, the Lord's brother, was an apostle (Gal. 1:19). not a Pastor. Epaphras was an evangelist. The "fellow bond-servant" of Paul who brought the gospel to the Colossians (Col. 1:7). (Strange that if he were "Pastor" of the church at Colossae. he is never seen as present there, but always with Paul elsewhere!. (Col. 4:12; Philem. 23) Epaphroditus is simply described as one of Paul's fellow-workers who was sent by the Philippian church as a minister to his needs. All this is evidence for the one-Pastor system?

Objection 6: Do not the "angels" of the churches in Revelation 2-3 refer to Pastors (e.g. "To the angel of the church in Ephesus write...", etc.), and is there not one per church?

Reply: No person reading the New Testament apart from preconceived notions would ever imagine that the "angels" of Revelation 2-3 refer to Pastors. Although the Greek word angelos may be translated "messenger," in every other occurrence of the word in Revelation-and it occurs 76 times!-it unquestionably refers to literal angels. If it does mean "messenger" in Revelation 2-3, it still could hardly be stretched to mean "pastor." In every case where the New Testament uses the phrase messenger of..." (e.g. "messenger of Satan," "messengers of John," etc.), it always describes by whom the messenger is sent, never to whom. In other words, "the messenger of the church in Ephesus" would not likely mean a messenger sent to the church, but a messenger sent by the church, perhaps as part of a delegation to minister to the apostle in his exile on Patmos and to receive instructions from him.

Objection 7: Perhaps the many New Testament references to multiple elders are due to the fact that, while each church had only one elder or overseer, each city had several different churches. For instance,

when Paul writes to "the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons" (Phil. 1: 1), there may have been a number of congregations in Philippi, each with their own overseer, or Pastor.

Reply: This reasoning may seem to answer certain passages, but it utterly falls apart in view of others, such as Acts 14:23 ("So when they had appointed elders in every church..."), James 5:14 ("Let him call for the elders of the church"), etc.

Objection 8: Even if it can be proven that the New Testament churches had multiple elders that would not necessarily be normative for the church today. After all, everyone agrees that believers in the Jerusalem church sold their goods and had all things in common, yet who suggests returning to that pattern today?

Reply: To say that the pattern of the New Testament church is not normative for us today is tantamount to saying that God has left us without any pattern at all. Distressing thought! Has God really left us at the mercy of human ingenuity in deciding how the ministry of His Church is to be ordered? Rather, let us say with the Psalmist, "I esteem right all Thy precepts concerning everything" (Ps. 119:128). In regard to the selling of goods by believers in the Jerusalem church: (1) The passage in question, Acts 2:42-47, does not say that all those who believed sold all their possessions. This was not "Christian communism" as it is sometimes pictured. The use of the imperfect tense in verse 45 implies that from time to time, as necessary, they sold their goods to distribute to brethren in need. (2) I, for one, am not prepared to say that the example of these early Jerusalem saints is not the norm for believers today, particularly in light of the words of John's epistle:

But whoso hath this world's good, and seeth his brother have need, and shutteth up his bowels of compassion from him, how dwelleth the love of God in him. (1 John 3:17)

Objection 9: You cannot deny that God has through the years mightily blessed many Pastors and churches who have used the one-Pastor system, and continues to do so today.

Reply: No one would think of denying this. Yet the problems mentioned above cannot reasonably be denied either. And who would claim that the fruitfulness of the Church as a whole is anywhere near the divinely intended level? Besides, it is a mistake to think that because God graciously blesses someone operating under a certain set of beliefs or practices, that He thereby endorses those beliefs or practices. God has, for instance, greatly used many preachers, teachers, and missionaries who have held to the teaching that Christians may lose their salvation. Yet few who are taught in the Scriptures would suggest that this view therefore has God's sanction, or that it is unimportant to uphold the scriptural teaching of Salvation. Praise God, He does not require us to be perfect in our interpretation of Scripture before He will use us. If so, who could hope to be used? But as we are given further light on the Scriptures, it is our duty and our Joy to conform our beliefs and practices as nearly as possible to the Word of God.

Objection 10: A multiple-elder system might well solve some problems, but at the same time it would create a whole new set of problems of its own.

Reply: This I willingly admit. When, however, you are operating under a scriptural pattern, the problems that arise are scriptural problems. That is, they are problems that have been anticipated in Scripture and for which guidance is provided in Scripture. Also, let us not forget that, quite apart from the question of what problems might be solved or created, we ought to follow the New Testament pattern simply because it is the New Testament pattern. We conform to the authority of Scripture as a matter of principle, not for pragmatic reasons. But when we do so, we invariably find God's way to be the best way.

Objection 11: Surely you don't think all the problems you mentioned would vanish if our churches simply changed their pattern of leadership?

Reply: Unfortunately, no. Not overnight at least, particularly where the clergy-laity mentality has been firmly entrenched for decades. But even in such a case a return to the New Testament pattern, if wholeheartedly adopted by the local church, would certainly produce a dramatic effect. The manifold problems and unscriptural attitudes nurtured by the false clergy-laity distinction could at least begin to be resolved. In other situations, where a fresh start is possible (such as on the mission field, in new churches, or with new converts), these problems can be avoided altogether.

What shall we say then? The one-man pastorate, far from having the sanction of Scripture, is essentially a "**Protestantized**" holdover from the Roman Catholic clerical system. For those of us who claim the Bible, rather than tradition, as our authority, it is time to fervently search the Scriptures to see if these things are so. (Acts 17:11)

I would that every reader of this might share the blessing I have found by "turning my feet to His testimonies" (Ps. 119:59) and choosing to meet in fellowship with those who gather in New Testament local Baptist simplicity and in order.