

Elder Leadership – A Biblical Perspective

Biblical examples of shared Leadership

- * The apostle Paul ordained a council of elders for each newly formed church (Acts 14:23).
- * The apostles deliberated with the elders of the church in Jerusalem to settle a doctrinal controversy (Acts 15: 4-6). According to Titus 1:5, Paul did not consider a church to be fully developed until it had functioning, qualified elders.
- * Paul meets with the elders at the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:17) and instructs them to guard and shepherd the flock for which the Holy Spirit made them overseers (Acts 20:28). The term “overseers” is the same term used in I Tim. 3: 1-7 that gives the qualifications of an overseer or elder.
- * When Paul wrote to the Christians at Philippi, he greeted overseers and deacons (Phil. 1:1). Note: *overseers* may be translated either as *bishops* (non-Biblical) or *elders*.
- * Addressing the church at Ephesus, Paul instructs that elders who lead well are worthy of double honor, especially those who preach and teach (I Tim. 5:17-18).
- * James instructed the sick believer to “call the elders of the church”(James 5:14).
- * When writing to churches scattered throughout the five Roman provinces (I Pet. 1:1), Peter exhorted the elders to pastor or shepherd the flock (I Pet. 5:1-2).

The above examples establish a council of elders in each New Testament church that was given the responsibility to oversee or lead, shepherd (guard and care) for the flock, preach, teach, pray for the sick, exhort, and admonish the saints in sound doctrine.

What about a pastor?

The term pastor does not appear in the Greek New Testament. The church leadership consisted of the elders and deacons. The elders were the “shepherds.” Neither the terms elder nor shepherd are used in the singular, rather, the elders were instructed to shepherd the flock. The concept of one person or “pastor” leading or shepherding was developed later in church history.

Shared leadership depends on the local church as a body of Spirit-gifted, royal priests

In order for shared leadership to function according to the Biblical concept, each believer must share the work of ministry. Each member of Christ’s body is equipped by the Spirit to minister to the needs of others. Thus, a responsibility of the elders is to encourage and lead others to help care for the flock (Eph. 4:11-16). The elders depend upon the gifts and skills of others (some of whom may even be more gifted in certain areas) for the overall care of the local church. “They (elders) desire to lead an active, alive, every-member-ministering church” (Strauch, 30).

Why shared leadership?

1. Our By-laws claim that the Bible is the “sole guide and instruction” in all matters and decisions. Any decisions made must be in complete “harmony with the Holy Bible” (Article 5). Shared leadership is in harmony with the New Testament concept of church leadership.

2. Shared leadership allows each shepherd elder to function primarily according to personal giftedness therefore complementing one another and balancing one another's weaknesses (41-42).
3. With shared leadership each elder is accountable to the other. This check and balance serves as a safeguard "...against the horrible abuse of pastoral authority that plagues many churches" (43).
4. Shared leadership supports the vision IBF

The vision of Interfaith Bible Fellowship is to edify the body of Christ by equipping saints for the work of ministry, that in the unity of faith, knowledge of God's word, and the leading and power of the Holy Spirit, the saints together will reach the community and the world with the good news of the gospel (Eph. 4:12-16).

Cautions concerning shared leadership

1. Shared leadership is slower and more difficult than unitary leadership. Working as a team requires a great deal of patience, persevering prayer, wisdom, cooperation, humility, trust, respect for the gifts of others, and much more.
2. The success of shared leadership depends upon careful selection of elders. Elders must meet the moral and spiritual qualifications as stated in I Tim. 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9. Such elders are to be publicly examined by the local church according to the scriptural qualifications, they must be motivated and empowered by the Holy Spirit, and they must be acknowledged, loved, and honored by all the congregation (39).

The Principle of "First Among Equals"

Elders who are particularly gifted, especially in preaching and teaching stand out among the other elders (cf. I Tim. 5:17-18).

The principle of "First among equals" encourages a highly gifted leader to use his God-given gift to full potential (48).

It also allows for ordination and necessary recognition in order to meet the legal requirements to perform marriages in the State of Wisconsin.

Recognizing a gifted elder(s) for preaching provides unity.

An elder(s) designated as a "first among equals" shares equally the decision making of the Elder council and has no authority above the others.

Biblical examples include Peter (Mt. 10:2; Lk. 22:32; Acts 2:14) ; Stephen (Acts 6:8) ; and James, the brother of Jesus (Gal. 2:9,12).

For more information on shared eldership see Biblical Eldership: an urgent call to restore Biblical church leadership by Alexander Strauch. Lewis and Roth, 1995.