

The Modern Pastor System

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The one-man pastor system as currently practiced by many congregations of Churches of Christ is without scriptural warrant or justification. To many Christians it will seem odd that anyone would challenge the scripturality of a practice that is so widespread. It is the purpose of this article to examine what the bible says about church government and also to contrast the pastor system innovation with the clear biblical teachings concerning church government.

First, let me begin by pointing out that there is absolutely nothing wrong with any congregation calling an evangelist to come and work with them. It is also absolutely scriptural for an evangelist to work with a congregation for an extended period of time. The problem starts when scriptural ground is violated and an arrangement that is foreign to the scriptures begins to be employed. It is at this point that God's plan for the government of congregations is disregarded and rather than the elders of a congregation exercising authority, the pastor assumes it.

Many congregations do not call the preacher their "pastor", but this innovation manifests itself by other names-pulpit minister, preacher, etc. Whatever the name, it is the practice we contend with. In Ephesians 4:11, the apostle Paul wrote, "And he gave some, apostles; and some prophets; and some evangelists; and some, pastors and teachers;". This passage clearly distinguishes the office of the pastor from that of the evangelist. This word pastor is translated from the Greek word signifying someone who is a shepherd. Certainly, this word cannot refer to the evangelist or pulpit minister, it must refer to the elders of a congregation. This is the only place in the King James

Version of the bible where the word pastor appears. It is significant that the word is contrasted with the evangelist. If you have any doubts concerning the distinction between the evangelist and the elders, please notice the differences in the charges given by Paul to Timothy (an evangelist) in 1 Timothy 4: 6-16 and also in 2 Timothy 4:1-5 with that given to the elders in Acts 20:28-38.

When the church was established on the day of Pentecost (Acts 2), the church had no elders or deacons. It was not until the sixth chapter of Acts that we find any office besides that of an apostle. The church was governed by the 11 remaining apostles along with Matthias who was chosen to take the place of Judas. The primary responsibility of these men was that of evangelism, or the spreading of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. By the time of the events of Acts 6:1-6, the church had grown to number many thousands. At this time a controversy arose over the division of goods to the widows of the church. The apostles considered the matter and delegated authority to the seven men chosen who served as the first deacons of the church. Shortly after this time the church was dispersed from Jerusalem and the Christians went everywhere spreading the gospel (Acts 8:1-4).

During this time of tremendous outreach and growth, the only authority in the church was that of the apostles. Saul of Tarsus was converted to Jesus and became the last apostle (Acts 9:1-19). It is in his writings that we find the delegation of authority described which would guide the church through the centuries.

The apostle Paul was a great missionary who traveled extensively establishing churches and caring for them. Paul and Barnabas were commissioned to preach the gospel by the church at Antioch (Acts 13:1-3) and they later returned there to give an

account of their work (Acts 14:26-28). From passages such as these we find that it is scriptural to send out evangelists to do mission work. In the life of Paul we find several occasions where he stayed with a local congregation for an extended period of time in order to ground them in the faith. Examples of this are found in Acts 15:35; Acts 18:11; Acts 19:8-10; Acts 20:3. From these scriptures we can plainly see that it is scriptural for a congregation to have an evangelist working with them. The bible plan, however, is that elders would be developed, selected, and ordained to govern the congregation eventually. This would release the evangelist for further missionary activity. The ministry of Paul shows this pattern as he wrote Titus, "To Titus, mine own son after the common faith: Grace, mercy, and peace, from God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ our Saviour. 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 1:4-5). In Acts 14:19-23 we find that Paul and Barnabas ordained elders in every church.

Paul wrote several epistles to guide and strengthen those who were new in the faith. It is in these epistles that we find the references to elders and deacons, teachers. The scriptures we wish to examine are Titus 1:6-11 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

Elders are also commonly called bishops (Philippians 1:1) and overseers (Acts 20:28). Deacons, who had no leadership authority in the early church, were also known as servants of the church. This article will deal primarily with the function of elders. The first item of interest is that of qualifications for the office of an elder. These qualifications are found in the following passages: Titus 1:6-11 and 1 Timothy 3:1-7. From these verses we see that elders were to have the following qualifications: blameless, husband of one wife, vigilant, sober, of good behavior, given to hospitality, apt to teach,

not given to wine, no striker, not greedy of filthy lucre, patient, not a brawler, not covetous, ruling his own house well, having his children in subjection, not a novice, a good report from those without, not self-willed, not soon angry, a lover of good men, just, holy, temperate, and holding to the faithful word as they have been taught.

Why is it so important to appoint only men with these qualifications as elders? The answer is quite obvious, they are responsible for the spiritual guidance and protection of the members of local congregations. It is important to note a few things, first, each congregation was ruled by a plurality of elders, not just one (Acts 11:30; Acts 14:23; Acts 16:4; Acts 20:17; Acts 21:18; and 1 Peter 5:1). The second item is that the elders of a particular congregation have oversight only of their own congregation (Acts 20:28). There is no scriptural warrant for any elder to exercise authority over a congregation other than the one in which he is a member. In apostolic times there was no such thing as an archbishop, a metropolitan, cardinal, or any other such departure from the faith. The only exception to this rule is found in the Jerusalem conference of Acts 15:1-30, which was a special case occasioned by the admission of large numbers of Gentiles into the church. During this conference, the apostles along with the elders of the church in Jerusalem met and considered whether or not the Gentiles would have to keep the Law of Moses. These men decided against that idea and subsequently sent a letter to the Gentile churches giving them instructions.

We also find that no elder was to take over the leadership of a congregation from the other elders thus ruling alone. In the early church there were no dictatorships, except for the example of Diotrophes which clearly is condemned (3 John 9-10). Yet, in many

congregations of the Lord's church, the power, decision-making, and ruling of the congregation rests with one man-the hired pastor (pulpit minister, preacher, etc.).

Now that we have established the clear teaching of the scriptures concerning the role of elders in the New Testament church, let us focus on what has commonly become known as the one-man pastor system. Since this office is not mentioned in scripture we must turn to other sources to learn of it. Simply put, the one-man pastor system is a means by which churches provide for the preaching and teaching of the word. In this case rather than the elders of the congregation being responsible for the teaching mission of the church (remember, they are to be apt to teach), a person is hired by the congregation to preach for them. Usually, the appointment of the pastor involves the understanding that any evangelism that is carried out will be done by the pastor, any visiting of the sick will be done by the pastor, even though James tells us we are to call for the elders of the church when we are sick (James 5:14). Even that most solemn of obligations for the elders of a church, the visiting of those members who have strayed from the faith or are weak spiritually is reserved to the pastor.

This should not be. In the presence of the pastor what need is there for an eldership? If the pastor has assumed all of the responsibilities of the elders, there is no need of an eldership. Sadly, in many congregations of the Lord's church today, the eldership has been reduced to a mere figurehead with no purpose or responsibilities while the unscriptural office of the one-man pastor has usurped the office of the eldership to himself.

Someone will object and say that the preacher (pastor) is merely another elder, one among many. If so, why is the pastor not referred to as an elder? Why are not the

preaching and governance of the congregation shared among all? The problem for many liberal minded churches and Christians is that they have created an office and a responsibility for which there is no bible basis.

What is needed among the Churches of Christ today is a return to strong congregational leadership exercised by the elders of the church. If each congregation would develop and appoint men qualified to serve as elders there would be no problem in preaching the word, visiting the sick, encouraging the weak and all other responsibilities given to elders. This scriptural arrangement would enable the evangelists to carry out their divinely commissioned work-that of spreading the gospel to the lost.

If all Churches of Christ would simply allow the elders to do their jobs and send the preachers out to other fields to preach the gospel to a lost and dying world what a tremendous explosion of growth we would see. I fear that as long as we continue wasting the talents of the eldership and restricting the usefulness of the evangelists by engaging in an unscriptural form of church government we will continue to lose ground to Satan.

The question then becomes, do we follow the divinely given plan for church government with the elders exercising the authority they are granted, or do we substitute an alien, unscriptural form of church government which has been devised by the mind of man? The divinely given plan tells us that elders are to teach, to shepherd the flock, to visit the sick, to warn the unruly, to take the oversight of the congregation (1 Peter 5:2), and to conduct themselves, not as lords over God's people, but as examples (1 Peter 5:3).

In conclusion, let all of us who name the name of Christ give heed to the words of Paul to Timothy, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labor in the word and doctrine. For the scripture saith, Thou shalt

not muzzle the ox that treadeth out the corn. And, The laborer is worthy of his reward. Against an elder receive not an accusation, but before two or three witnesses. Them that sin rebuke before all, that others also may fear." (1 Timothy 5:17-20). And also these words, "Rebuke not an elder, but entreat him as a father; and the younger men as brethren." (1 Timothy 5:1).

Let us also heed the words of Peter, "Likewise, ye younger, submit yourselves unto the elder." (1 Peter 5:5) and also the words from Hebrews 13:7, and 17, "Remember them which have the rule over you, who have spoken unto you the word of God: whose faith follow, considering the end of their conversation." and "Obey them that have the rule over you, and submit yourselves: for they watch for your souls; as they that must give account, that they may do it with joy, and not with grief: for that is unprofitable for you.".