

What Others Say About Pastoral Elders

By quoting the following sources, we are not meaning to suggest that we agree with everything they have written or espoused, with the obvious exception of the apostles of Jesus Christ. We simply want to establish that we are not alone in our belief that the original Christian assemblies were led by pastoral teams rather than single pastors such as we see in many assemblies today.

The Apostles of Jesus Christ

Appoint elders [aka presbyters] in every city as I commanded you. Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine. 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. The elders who are among you I exhort...Shepherd [aka pastor] the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers [aka bishops]. (*Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 5:17; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-2*)

W.E. Vine

In the Christian churches those who, being raised up and qualified by the work of the Holy Spirit, were appointed to have the spiritual care of, and to exercise oversight over, the churches. To these the term “bishops,” *episkopoi*, or “overseers,” is applied (see Acts 20, v. 17 with v. 28, and Titus 1:5 and 7), the latter term indicating the nature of their work, *presbuteroi* their maturity of spiritual experience. The divine arrangement seen throughout the NT was for a plurality of these to be appointed in each church, Acts 14:23 Acts 20:17; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5. The duty of “elders” is described by the verb *episkopeo*. They were appointed according as they had given evidence of fulfilling the divine qualifications, Titus 1:6 to 9; cf. 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and 1 Peter 5:2. (*Vine’s Expository Dictionary of Biblical Words*)

Clement of Rome (96 AD)

Ye therefore, who laid the foundation of this sedition, submit yourselves to the presbyters [elders], and receive correction so as to repent, bending the knees of your hearts. Let the flock of Christ live on terms of peace with the presbyters set over it. For ye did all things without respect of persons, and walked in the commandments of God, being obedient to those who had the rule over you, and giving all fitting honour to the presbyters among you. And thus preaching through countries and cities, they (the apostles) appointed the first-fruits [of their labours], having first proved them by the Spirit, to be bishops [overseers] and deacons of those who should afterwards believe. (*First Letter to the Corinthians*)

Jerome (347-420 AD)

An presbyter (elder), therefore, is the same as a bishop (overseer), and before dissensions were introduced into religion by the instigation of the devil, and it was said among the peoples, ‘I am of Paul, I am of Apollos, and I of Cephas,’ churches were governed by a common council of elders; afterwards, when everyone thought that those whom he had baptized were his own and not Christ’s, it was decreed in the whole world that one chosen out of the elders should be placed over the rest, and to whom all care of the church should belong, that the seeds of schisms might be plucked up. Whosoever thinks that there is no proof from Scripture, but that this is my opinion, that an elder and a bishop are the same, and that one is a title of age, the other of ministry, let him read the words of the apostle to the Philippians, saying, ‘Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ to all the saints in Christ Jesus which are at Philippi with the bishops and deacons.’ Therefore, as we have shown, among the ancients elders were the same as bishops; but by degrees, that the plants of dissension might be rooted up, all responsibility was transferred to one person. Therefore, as the elders know that it is by the custom of the church that they are to be subject to him who is placed over them, so let the bishops know that they are above elders rather by custom than by Divine appointment. (*Commentary on Titus*)

John Robinson (pastor of the Pilgrims)

On the three basic forms of government known to the world, he concluded that all three forms had their place in the church of Christ, writing: “Monarchial, where supreme authority is in the hands of the one,

aristocratical when it is in the hands of some few...and democratical, in the whole body or multitude. In respect of Him the head, it is a monarchy, in respect of the eldership, an aristocracy, in respect of the body, a popular state. The Lord Jesus is the King of his church above, upon whose shoulders the government is, and unto whom all power is given in heaven and earth. But Christ has committed this power to the church, anointing all men as “kings and priests unto God” (Revelation 1:6). Someone or few must needs be appointed over the assembly for discussing and determining of all matters, so in this royal assembly, the church of Christ, though all be kings, yet some most faithful and most able, are to be set over the rest, wherein they are charged to minister according to the Testament of Christ.”

Watchman Nee (Chinese preacher and author)

The first question usually asked in connection with a church is, ‘Who is the minister?’ The thought in the questioner’s mind is, ‘Who is the man responsible for ministering and administering spiritual things in the church?’ The clerical system of church management is exceedingly popular, but the whole thought is foreign to Scripture, where we find the responsibility for the church committed to elders, not to ‘ministers,’ as such; and the elders only take oversight of the church work, they do not perform it on behalf of the brethren. If in a company of believers, the minister is active and the church-members are all passive, then that company is a mission, not a church. In a church all the members are active.... He appointed some to take oversight of the work so that it might be carried on efficiently. It was never His thought that the majority of the believers should devote themselves exclusively to secular affairs and leave the church matters to a group of spiritual specialists.

To have pastors in a church is Scriptural, but the present-day pastoral system is quite unscriptural; it is an invention of man.... It is not God’s will that one believer be singled out from all the others to occupy a place of special prominence, whilst the others passively submit to his will... To place the responsibility in the hands of several brethren, rather than in the hands of one individual, is God’s way of safeguarding His church against the evils that result from the domination of a strong personality. (*The Normal Christian Church Life*)

George Barna (contemporary author)

Leadership works best when it is provided by teams of gifted leaders serving together in pursuit of a clear and compelling vision. In many cases we may not realize the depth and range of leadership competence provided simply because a team works so smoothly—almost as if it were one invisible entity rather than a collection of individuals. In these situations the team embraces one unified position, speaks with one voice, gains a single image in the public eye, and operates with such unity that we remain unaware of the multiple parts that work cooperatively behind the scenes. When those parts are working in lockstep, all we see—or care about—are the results. A major advantage of being led by a team is that the results always transcend what any individual from that team could have produced without the assistance of the other leaders involved in that team.

It seems most likely that God’s design for leadership is for individuals to work together in teams—and thus minimize personal glory—than for a single, solo leader to strive to make everything happen and receive the brunt of the church’s attention. Team leadership helps keep the focus on God, while solo leadership may deflect the spotlight from Him.

When personnel changes happen, a church is less likely to be crippled by the departure of one team member than by the departure of the solo leader. The church will struggle in both situations, but the struggle will be less profound in the case of losing one team-based leader.

Quality in leadership is enhanced by constant and objective performance evaluation. Solo leaders have a relatively poor track record of self-evaluation when compared to the self-assessment of leadership teams. (*The Power of Team Leadership*, pg. 8, 10, 200)

Neil Anderson (contemporary Christian author)

There are historic leadership roles in Scripture: prophet (preaching and teaching), priest (pastoring and shepherding), and king (administration). Only Jesus in His perfection is capable of occupying all three roles simultaneously. I believe we need the checks and balances of a plurality of elders in the church, distributing the three roles to more than one person. No one can survive his own unchallenged authority. Every true, committed Christian in a leadership role needs to submit himself and his ideas to other mature believers who will hold him accountable.

David K. Bernard (contemporary author)

Local churches were led by elders, people whom God calls to the ministry of preaching, teaching, leading, and overseeing the church. In the New Testament, the titles of elder (*presbuteros*, “elder, presbyter”), bishop (*episkopos*, “overseer”), and pastor (*poimen*, “shepherd”) are used interchangeably for the spiritual leader of a local congregation. Acts 20:17, 28 says elders (*presbuteros*) are overseers (*episkopos*) and are to feed the church, literally, “to tend as a shepherd” (*poimaino*). Titus 1:5-7 equates elder with bishop. I Peter 5:1-4 describes the work of elders as shepherding the flock (*poimaino*) and taking oversight (*episkopeo*). I Timothy 5:17 similarly describes elders as ruling. (Extracted from an article in *Forward* magazine, September-October, 2005)

Nelson’s NKJV Study Bible

BISHOP: The Greek word refers to a person who oversees a congregation. In many New Testament passages, the Greek words for *bishop* and *elder* are used interchangeable for the same office (see Titus 1:5-7). The Greek term *episkopos* means “one who oversees.” In the New Testament, elders are described as overseeing a congregation. See Acts 20:17; 20:28, where the *elders* of the church at Ephesus are called *overseers*. Elders were responsible for the internal affairs of the church; and there seem to have been several elders in positions of responsibility in any given congregation (see Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5-7). After New Testament times, it became the custom to appoint one elder as the presiding elder and to give him the title of *bishop*. (p. 2045)

Zondervan Illustrated Bible Backgrounds Commentary

Generally the elders or overseers (an alternative term, indicating function rather than seniority) led a city-wide church, irrespective of the number of house churches within the area. For example, Jerusalem had many house churches to accommodate the large number of believers, but we never read of more than one body of elders. Likewise Philippians 1:1 points to one group of leaders in a mature church. Titus 1:5 instructs Timothy to appoint elders in every town, without any indication he should appoint multiple groups if the town was large. This structure is probably the reason the local bishop (in the second century) developed before the local church pastor (in the sixth century). Peter assumes that the churches he is writing to are led by elders. (Vol. 3, p. 146)

J. H. Merle D'Aubigne

In his article *Journey to the End of the Earth: A Reformation Pilgrimage to Iona*, Doug Phillips of www.visionforum.com writes: "It was here that Columba built a Christian religious center and missionary outpost in 563 AD from which the light of the Gospel would shine throughout the world. Here the Bible was preserved, the famous *Book of Kells* penned, and missionaries were trained. Here a school of theology was created, and a form of church government with plural and equal elders was established."

He then quotes the church historian, J. H. Merle D'Aubigne: "It was the Holy Ghost, Columba maintained, that made a servant of God. When the youth of Caledonia assembled around the elders on these savage shores, or in their humble chapel, these ministers of the Lord would say to them: 'The Holy Scriptures are the only rule of faith. Throw aside all merit of works, and look for salvation to the grace of God alone. Beware of a religion which consists of outward observances: it is better to keep your heart pure before God than to abstain from meats. One alone is your head, Jesus Christ. Bishops and presbyters are equal; they should be the husbands of one wife, and have their children in subjection.'"

Citation: J. H. Merle D'Aubigne, *History of the Reformation of the Sixteenth Century* (Harrisonburg, VA: Sprinkle Publications, 2003), Book 17, Chapter 1, pp. 19-20, as reported in www.visionforum.com on July 31, 2008.