

The Moses Style and the Jesus Style - Should a Senior Pastor or a Team of Elders Lead the Church?

Through the history of the church, there are classically three forms of church government: Congregational, Presbyterian, and Episcopal.

- **Congregational** means that leadership is entrusted to the majority vote of the congregation.
- **Presbyterian** – which comes from the ancient Greek word for “elder,” *presbyteros* – means that leadership is entrusted to a group of men (or sometimes not men in today’s culture) who are recognized as elders.
- **Episcopal** - which comes from the ancient Greek word for “overseer” – means that leadership is entrusted to a man who leads the church.

At different times and at different places, any one of these three forms have been more or less popular. For example, in some countries – especially European countries – most all the churches are congregational. In America, I think the predominate form of church government is Presbyterian (not the denomination, but the structure) which is “elder-led.”

Of course, the most important question for any of us is “What does the Bible say?”

The bottom line is simply this: there is no precise direction given on how churches should be governed in the New Testament. We are given many titles for leaders - elders, pastors, deacons, apostles, overseers – but their relationship to each other and to the congregation are not detailed. Jesus and the apostles never gave any detailed the structures of leadership, emphasizing only the heart of leadership (Matthew 20:25-28, 1 Peter 5:1-3). Many scholars see this clearly:

“At the same time He [Jesus] laid down no minute arrangements, but only the simple and necessary element of an organization, wisely leaving the details to be shaped by the growing and changing wants of the church in different ages and countries.” (Philip Schaff, *History of the Christian Church*, 1:484)

“No question in church history has been more darkened by controversy than that of the origin and development of church offices, and none is more difficult, owing to the scantiness of the evidence that has survived. It is probable that the development was diverse in different localities. Not all early Christian congregations had identical institutions at the same time.” (Williston Walker, *A History of the Christian Church*, pg. 39)

“It is better to recognize that in the New Testament church, there were elements that were capable of being developed into the episcopal, presbyterian and congregational systems, and which, in point of fact, have so developed. But while there is no reason why any modern Christian should not hold fast to his particular church polity and rejoice in the values it secures to him, that does not give him license to unchurch others whose reading of the evidence is different.” (Leon Morris in *Baker’s Dictionary of Theology*, “Church Government.”)

I believe that God *deliberately* left the specifics flexible so they could adapt to changing people and changing situations. So, if someone wants to have a congregational, elder-led, or pastor-led form of church government I won’t dispute it *Biblically*. At the same time, I believe that one of these three forms are definitely preferred, and it is the form of government we practice at Calvary Chapel.

Let me read you a quote from Pastor Chuck:

“We feel that this is the form of government God desires for His church: Jesus Christ is the head of the body, the church; He established the *episkopos* or bishop, who we call the pastor, who is responsible to Jesus and whom must recognized and bear the responsibility to guide and direct the ministry of the local church, guided directly by Jesus Christ. Under the pastor, in some cases, you have the assistant pastors, equivalent to the priests under Moses’ rule.” (Chuck Smith, *The Philosophy of Ministry of Calvary Chapel*)

You should know that there are some people who say that the form of church government we practice at Calvary Chapel is *not* Biblical – usually this comes from people who believe in elder-led churches who say that the Bible supports only their form of church government. What I want to do in this message is show two things. First, that pastor-led church government is totally Biblical and supported by the New Testament. Second, I’ll spend just a few minutes speaking about why I think it is a better form of church government than the other two forms. However, let me remind you again that my quarrel isn’t with those who want to practice congregational or elder-led church governments – I think you can find *some* Biblical support for those forms. Nevertheless, I believe that the predominate and most effective form of church government in the New Testament is pastor-led.

In teaching and writing about church government, Pastor Chuck Smith of Calvary Chapel of Costa Mesa shows how the leadership structure of Israel under Moses is one example of a Biblical pattern for our form of church government. Because he uses the structure of Israel under Moses as an example, some people like to call this model of church government “Moses Style” or “Moses Principle” church government. You should know that I have never heard or read a place where Chuck Smith uses those titles, but sometimes other people use them. Some of those who use those titles want to twist the words of good men to make their own point, and some people like to criticize the “Moses Style” saying that it is either unbiblical or just for the Old Testament.

There are some strong critics of the kind of church government we practice at Calvary Chapel. There are some who believe the modern concept of the “pastor” to be unbiblical – and would exhort all pastors to resign their posts and adopt what they believe to be Biblical church government – rule by elders, without pastors. Or, if there are pastors, none of them should be a “senior” pastor, and all the pastors should just work together as a team, with none having authority over the other.

I am the senior pastor of a Calvary Chapel, though I never emphasize the “senior” aspect of my title in how I refer to myself or prefer others to refer to me. It’s just fine with me if someone calls me “David” or “Pastor David.” I don’t feel a need to ever be introduced as “Senior Pastor David.” Yet, I am the one with overseeing authority at our church, and all other pastors, staff, and ministries answer to me. So, it’s my pleasure to explain why I have no intention of resigning, and even more of a pleasure to explain to others why single-pastor (or “senior-pastor”) leadership is a Biblical form of church government.

As said before, when you look at leadership structures in the early church, you just don’t find much at all. You won’t find instructions in how many elders you should have, what their specific responsibilities are, how they should relate to the pastor, and so forth. You won’t find the minutes of an elder’s meeting in the New Testament. What you will find is a lot of teaching on *character*. Here is a principle to really grab hold of:

The godliness of leaders is far more important than the structure of leadership.

Sometimes when people have problems in churches - especially personal conflicts with those in leadership - they want to blame not only the leaders, but also the structure. The bottom line is that any church government can work and work well depending on the godliness of the people in the structure. You can find plenty of horror stories from any side – the pastor who rules like a dictator, the elders who run the godly pastor out of town, the congregation that stands in the way of vision and growth. When they want to prove their point, sometimes people will compare the best of one system against the worst in another system – which is plainly unfair and unwise.

There are unwise and occasionally ungodly pastors who do rule in a manner contrary to 1 Peter 5:1-3, pastors who refuse counsel from elders, or who are headstrong and dictatorial. These men are fools, and plot their own destruction (Proverbs 11:14, 12:1, 12:15, 13:10, 15:22, 17:10, and 18:12). However, their foolish actions do not make their *form* of church government unbiblical, it only shows that they apply it in an unbiblical and foolish manner. In the same way, the renegade, dictatorial elder doesn’t prove his form of church government to be unbiblical – only his own heart to be wrong.

I believe the pastor-led leadership structure to be a Biblical form of church government and will carefully explain why. However, I also believe that the New Testament does not tell us enough about church government to say this is the only Biblical form. My disagreement is not with those who favor elder-ruled or congregational churches; but with those who insist that elder-rule or congregational forms of church government are the **only** New Testament forms. This approach is both unbiblical and unwise.

Those who hold a dogmatic “elder-rule only” view beg the question. They rightly point out that elders were appointed in many New Testament churches and are prominent in the leadership passages of the New Testament. But in no place does the New Testament explain just what the relation between the offices of elder, deacon, overseer/bishop, and pastor are. Those in the elder-rule camp *assume* they know, and their faulty conclusions are based on these faulty assumptions.

Those who adopt the “elder-rule only” approach also neglect the clear models of leadership presented in the New Testament. Though there isn’t much direct teaching on specific leadership structures, there are abundant *models* of leadership – and most of these models point towards a pastor-leadership structure.

New Testament Examples Consistent with Senior Pastor Leadership

1. Jesus

Let’s begin with Jesus. What was His structure of leadership? Jesus didn’t leave matters up to a majority vote of His disciples, or even the “elders” (if you will) of the disciples - Peter, James, and John. Jesus led - certainly with love, humility, sensitivity, but there was no doubt that the leader of that group was Jesus. Certainly, pastors aren’t Jesus - but they are trying to do what He said to do in imitating His model of leadership (John 20:21).

2. The Apostles

Now consider the apostles - how did Paul lead in Ephesus when he was there for three years (Acts 20:31)? The entire tenor of Paul’s ministry as described in Acts and his epistles makes it tough to believe he was only one among a group of elders, with no greater voice than any other elder had. Paul was a leader, and he led. Are senior pastors today equal with the apostles? Of course not; yet they are doing what Paul said to do – he said to follow his example in ministry (1 Corinthians 4:16).

3. Timothy and Titus

Next, what about Timothy and Titus? How did they function in Ephesus and Crete, respectively? As one elder, equal among others? Or did they assume a role more analogous to the model of senior pastor leadership? Of course, they did; why else would Paul leave *them* with the authority to appoint elders themselves (Titus 1:5)? Because they were given this authority to evaluate and choose elders, some today might call Timothy and Titus “dictatorial senior pastors” but they clearly followed what God directed them to do through the inspired Apostle Paul.

4. James in Jerusalem

James in Acts 15 is a clear example of single-pastor leadership. Among the elders of Jerusalem and others gathered in Acts 15, James is clearly the one who takes the lead – even stating the case in the words “Therefore I judge” (Acts 15:19) to summarize his case. Indeed, the Greek presents it even more strongly as “I determine” or “I resolve” (see Expositor’s Greek New Testament on Acts 15:19). Adam Clarke rightly says here, “The rest either *argued* on the subject, or gave their *opinion*; James alone pronounced the *definitive sentence*.” This was James’ leadership at work, in the context of reliance on the wisdom and counsel of others present. In addition, when the decision of James was published, it was presented as the mutual decision of all present (Acts 15:25: “it seemed good to us”). Clearly, James’ leadership was supported by all present.

5. The Ephesian Elders of Acts 20

What kind of model do the Ephesian elders in Acts 20 present? Because the word “elder” is present, many assume it speaks of what they envision as an “elder-rule” structure. But this approach makes huge – and erroneous – assumptions about structure in the early church.

Here is a critical point many “elder-rule only” advocates miss. When Paul spoke to the Ephesian elders in Acts 20, they assume these elders were a group that presided over a single Ephesian congregation. This, in their mind, “proves” the Ephesian church was run by elders, not by a single pastor. But they inaccurately construct the model of the Ephesian church to make this wrong assumption.

Acts 20:17-32 addresses those overseers – “bishops” – who were called to pastor the church in Ephesus. Not all elders were bishop/overseers who functioned as senior pastors. Paul is addressing these elders - who are not collectively elders of a single, large Ephesian congregation, but individual pastors over small Ephesian home churches. 1 Corinthians 16:19 mentions specifically a house church in Ephesus, led by Aquila and his wife Prisca. Romans 16:3-5 mentions another house church in the home of Aquila and Prisca, this time in Rome. The house-church structure was normative in Apostolic times.

“It was necessary and appropriate in apostolic times, as on some occasions today, for Christians to make their home available for the congregations of the saints.... In a city like Rome or Ephesus there would be more than one such congregation. The fact that the church in the house of Aquila and Prisca is particularly mentioned in this list of greetings shows that it did not comprise the whole church at Rome. Hence there would be other churches and it would be proper to speak of the churches in Rome.” (John Murray, *The Epistle to the Romans*, pg. 228-229).

The organization of the early church into house-churches made it necessary to have elders as “senior pastors” over these small congregations, with several elders functioning as overseer/bishops in any given city. It wasn’t until much later that most Christians even had the capability of regularly meeting together in large congregations. Certainly some of these elders would be qualified as overseer/bishops of home churches, and some would not - they would assist those who were. The elders of Ephesus in Acts 20 were pastors of house churches. Significantly, in Philippians 1:1, Paul makes no mention at all of elders – only of overseer/bishops and deacons – undoubtedly, those serving in the individual home churches of Philippi.

6. The Idea of Assembly Leadership in Hebrew and Greek Culture

For this, we’ll have to take look at some ancient history. Leadership in the early church is described in both Hebrew and Greek cultural contexts. The word and idea behind “elder” are essentially Jewish, while “overseer/bishop” is essentially Greek. The term “shepherd” had a legacy in each culture. How do these terms – and their cultural understanding – help us to understand the structure of leadership in the early church?

Jewish Examples

Synagogues were led by the “head of the assembly” – who was the presiding officer, who maintained order, removed disturbances, distributed ministry positions, selected scripture passages, fixed topics for sermons, and was in many cases the caretaker of the building itself. Usually there was only one “head of the assembly” at each synagogue. (See “Synagogue” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*). In each synagogue there would also be elders – presbyters – who functioned as an advisory council to the “head of the assembly,” assisting him in his leadership of the synagogue. Synagogue elders were “leaders in war, judges in disputes, and givers of wise advice and witness in administration.” (See “Elder in the OT” in *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*).

Therefore, the idea of a “head of the assembly” being counseled and supported by a council of elders was familiar to synagogue structure. The Essenes also had an office among them analogous to the pastor. To have a pastor (or senior pastor, if you will) supported by a council of elders was natural for Jewish Christians.

Greek Examples

The words “deacon” and “overseer” have a clear Greek cultural root. There was an office of “overseer” in Greek culture, and in some ways the Christian office was patterned after this example. Basically, the overseer was one who had a protective care for those he watched over. When the New Testament speaks of an overseer, it is entirely consistent with a pastor-led form of church government.

7. The use of “overseer” only in the singular in the Pastoral Letters.

The fact that the overseer/bishop is only spoken of in the singular in the Pastoral Epistles (1 Timothy 3:2 and Titus 1:7), in contrast to the plurality of deacons (1 Timothy 3:8) also indicates that they operated as individual leaders over churches – probably house-churches.

In fact, this is used by liberal scholars to “late date” the Pastoral Epistles, because some can’t bring themselves to believe that churches would have this form of church government this early. This certainly isn’t to say that there were not some churches ruled by a plurality of elders – the structures were no doubt adaptable to circumstances and the caliber of men available for leadership.

8. Pastors have the potential for “lording over” in 1 Peter 5:2

There are three specific references to pastoral ministry: Acts 20:28 (where Paul exhorts the Ephesian elder/overseers to shepherd - pastor - their flocks), Ephesians 4:11 (where the office of pastor-teacher is mentioned) and 1 Peter 5:2 (where elders are exhorted to shepherd - pastor - their flocks). Peter’s exhortation shows there was a real danger of pastors to abuse their position, becoming dictatorial and tyrannical. Evidently, there was a structure that would allow this wrongful exercise of authority - not the structure suggested by a college of elders, all equal in authority.

9. Pastors have congregations “allotted” to them.

In addition, 1 Peter 5:3 speaks of “those entrusted to you” – more literally, “the portion allotted to each individual elder,” signifying that each pastor mentioned in 1 Peter 5 had a portion of God’s flock “allotted” to them by God – a portion they were called by God to lead and oversee.

The broadness of early church leadership structures is also shown by 1 Timothy 5:17 – not all elders are teachers; seemingly, comparing the usage of “overseer/bishop” with “elder,” we may say that all overseer/bishops were elders, but not all elders were overseer/bishops. The delineation is also seen in Titus 1:5-9 – where Paul uses “elder” to describe a title of overall spiritual leadership, and “overseer/bishop” as a particular function of certain elders. Among the Early Church Fathers, Clement’s support of the office of bishop should be seen in this light (1 Clement 42:4, 44:1-4), as should Ignatius’.

The “elder-rule only” crowd is frustrated because the New Testament doesn’t use the word “pastor” enough for their liking, but the model of single-pastor leadership is throughout the New Testament, appearing far more frequently than models of some envision as elder-rule. We see the following models and evidences for single-pastor leadership:

1. The example of Jesus.
2. The example of Paul and the Apostles.
3. The example of Timothy in 1 Timothy (the power to appoint elders and deacons himself).
4. The example of Titus in Titus 1 (he had the power to appoint elders and deacons himself).
5. The example of James in Acts 15 (he made the decision at the council of Jerusalem which the rest supported).
6. The example of Jewish synagogue structure.

7. The use of “overseer” only in the singular in the Pastoral Letters.
8. Pastors have the potential for lording over in 1 Peter 5:2.
9. Pastors have congregations “allotted” to them in 1 Peter 5:3.

In the books I’ve read advocating elder rule (such as *Biblical Eldership* by Alexander Strauch), each one of these cases is challenged as “a unique example” or with some other dismissal. Strauch’s book is an interesting example of a book that is both good and bad.

In Strauch’s case I find a lot of special pleading and begging of the question. But the models remain and demonstrate that while there isn’t enough in the New Testament to say one form of church government is Biblical to the *exclusion* of others, certainly the models for strong pastoral leadership are clear and present.

As I did at the beginning, let me do so again at the end – I have no quarrel with those who prefer an elder-rule structure instead of a senior-pastor structure. My only disagreement is with those who claim that the senior-pastor structure is *unbiblical*.

Why it is preferred

Beyond the Biblical argument, I also favor the senior-pastor structure simply because I believe it is the most honest. In my opinion, it is the nature of organizations to be led by one leader. In congregational government, there is almost always a “leading man” that the rest of the congregation follows. In an elder-rule government, there is almost always a “leading elder” that the other elders take their cue from. The senior-pastor form of church government simply recognizes this and ideally gives it the kind of accountability it deserves.

I’m sorry for every believer who has had a bad experience with church government - whether that problem was with a pastor or an elder. But the idea that a senior pastor led church is unbiblical – and inherently dangerous - is simply false. I know that as a pastor, I work in cooperative submission with our elders, and would never be foolish enough to disregard their counsel. Perhaps not all pastors at all times work this way, but when they fail to it is a reflection on their own wisdom (or lack thereof), not on the structure itself. God has used the pastoral leadership model to accomplish great things for His kingdom in a godly way, and He will continue to do so.

Scriptures Referred To

1 Peter 5:1

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed:

1 Peter 5:2

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;

1 Peter 5:3

Nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;

Proverbs 11:14

Where *there is* no counsel, the people fall;
But in the multitude of counselors *there is* safety.

Proverbs 12:1

Whoever loves instruction loves knowledge,
But he who hates correction *is* stupid.

Proverbs 12:15

The way of a fool *is* right in his own eyes,
But he who heeds counsel *is* wise.

Proverbs 13:10

By pride comes nothing but strife,
But with the well-advised *is* wisdom.

John 20:21

Jesus said to them again, "Peace to you! As the Father has sent Me, I also send you."

Acts 20:31

Therefore watch, and remember that for three years I did not cease to warn everyone night and day with tears.

1 Corinthians 4:16

Therefore I urge you, imitate me.

Titus 1:5

For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you;

Acts 15:19

Therefore I judge that we should not trouble those from among the Gentiles who are turning to God,

Acts 20:17

From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.

1 Corinthians 16:19

The churches of Asia greet you. Aquila and Priscilla greet you heartily in the Lord, with the church that is in their house.

Romans 16:3

Greet Priscilla and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus,

Romans 16:4

Who risked their own necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks, but also all the churches of the Gentiles.

Romans 16:5

Likewise *greet* the church that is in their house. Greet my beloved Epaenetus, who is the firstfruits of Achaia to Christ.

Philippians 1:1

Paul and Timothy, bondservants of Jesus Christ, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, with the bishops and deacons

1 Timothy 3:2

A bishop then must be blameless, the husband of one wife, temperate, sober-minded, of good behavior, hospitable, able to teach

Titus 1:7

For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money

1 Timothy 3:8

Likewise deacons *must be* reverent, not double-tongued, not given to much wine, not greedy for money

1 Peter 5:1

The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed

1 Peter 5:2

Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly

1 Peter 5:3

Nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock