

Effective Leadership

Contributed by
November 08, 2006

For the past three years, most of our churches have taken painstaking and sober inventory of our past leadership deficiencies and failures, striving in general to replace hyper-authority, over-control, and rigid hierarchy with something new and prayerfully, more Biblically mature. Clearly this has meant questioning not only the role of authority between congregations, but within congregations. We understandably ask, were Evangelists (who led in most churches) the problem? Should elders and/or teachers be the answer? Was the problem the 'one man model'? Is the answer 'consensus leadership'? Who exactly has what authority and how should it be exercised?

In the context of disappointment, confusion, or bitter experience, it may even be tempting to abandon these questions altogether and decide that human authority itself is the enemy. We would be wise, though, to resist that temptation. We would be wise to reject inadvertent anarchy in our churches and wholesale fear of authority, because the Scriptures conspicuously and unmistakably affirm authority as a fundamental emanation of God's will and nature. It is clear that God has all authority since he gave it to his son Jesus (Matthew 28:18), and that all human authority comes from Him (Romans 13:1-2)--not meaning that all authority is virtuous. In fact, all human authority is flawed.

In Israel, God gave authority to various leaders, including what we might in parallel today call 'lay leadership,' (Numbers 27:20, Deuteronomy 1:15). In those days, the people tithed to support the Levitical tribe--those devoted full-time to preaching, studying, serving God, temple sacrifices, etc. . In the first century God gave authority to leaders to preach the word (Matthew 10:1), to build up the body of Christ (2 Corinthians 10:8, 2 Corinthians 13:10, 1 Thessalonians 4:2) and expected disciples to submit to that authority (Hebrews 13:17, Titus 2:15). Moreover, all disciples have authority to proclaim the gospel, to make disciples, to mature in Christ, to obey and realize the Scriptures in their own lives, in the fellowship and in the world (Matthew 28:18-20, Ephesians 4:14-16). God clearly gave authority to secular kings and rulers (Daniel 7:6, 14), expects our general submission to it (Romans 13:1, 1 Peter 2:13), and has power to completely take it away (Daniel 4:31). Authority itself, clearly, is not the problem, but rather in how it is exercised (Matthew 20:25). We should correct authority problems while seeking godly character, affirming godly authority principles, avoiding quick fixes and reactionary swings which are likely to need correction themselves.

For example, until recently, strong 'Lead Evangelists' have, for the most part, had the greatest authority or influence within our congregations. This was true even in churches with mature men serving as elders--in many cases, the evangelist would direct the affairs of the congregation without the elders' and/or lay leadership's serious consultation. Predictably, this created alienation in the leadership as a whole. In reaction, several, perhaps many churches have swung to the opposite extreme, with elders assuming leadership of the congregations in a way alienating former Lead Evangelists and marginalizing the ministry staff. In some extreme cases, elderships have relegated the evangelist to the role of employee, ignoring their particular gifts and experiences in ministry and church building. Indicative of this overreaction is the complete rejection, in some corners, of the biblical title 'evangelist.'

These conflicts can engender weariness, and when we tire, it may be tempting to rush to overly simplistic judgments about what leadership should look like. We ought to pause, however, in the face of the broader sweep of church history, and stand in awe of just how old these questions and conflicts really are. From the New Testament times until today, Christians have struggled with the boundaries of church governance. Since the Reformation, early Episcopal forms featuring hierarchical executive decision-making (i.e. Catholic, Lutheran, and Episcopal denominations) by Bishop-leaders were followed by reactionary Presbyterian forms that promoted more group leadership--bodies of elders locally, then regionally, then nationally. (One might argue that while Presbyterian structures were more pluralistic, they still were essentially Episcopal/hierarchical in philosophy between 'levels' of elders.) Still later in the Reformation came Congregationalism (i.e. Baptist movements, Restorationist Churches of Christ, and others) which kept the Presbyterian form locally while severing it from regional or national obligations & hierarchies. Within this tradition yet another evolution has come: the emergence within the Baptist movements of a leader/Pastor--a kind of 'Elder of elders' charged locally with preaching, teaching, and shepherding.

We rightly seek the Scriptures for clarity and resolution: what are the Biblical patterns of congregational governance? What are the clear New Testament commands? As we ask these questions, one conspicuous caveat bears timely heeding: 'Accept him whose faith is weak, without passing judgment on disputable matters' (Romans 14:1). Without being exhaustive, the following list summarizes our common prominent observations about congregational leadership, especially the eldership:

- Old Testament tribes were led by elders; that is, the 'elders' were simply the leaders of their people--spiritually, but also in administrative, legislative, and judicial milieus.
- In addition, these elders looked to various men with leadership gifts --to Moses, Joshua, the judges, and then the kings of Israel.
- Moreover, these elders were supplemented by specialists: priests, 'rulers' and teachers of the law, for example.
- The elders of Israel collectively comprised the Sanhedrin of Jesus' day.

Probably, these relationship observations should have some bearing on how we view elders in the New Testament.

- New Testament elders were apparently to be appointed in each church as men became qualified, and apparently by apostles and evangelists who were often traveling in the early days of the churches. (Acts 14:23, Titus 1:5)
- At the Jerusalem council, the leaders of the Jerusalem church were identified \the apostles and elders,\ who met to consider the question of the Gentiles and who apparently made the ultimate decisions.
- Before Paul's arrest in Jerusalem, he made a moving \farewell\ address to the elders of Ephesus.
- From 1 Timothy 5:17-18 we know that elders \direct the affairs of the church,\ or, as the KJV puts it, \rule\ the church. Those who do well and preach and teach are worthy of compensation and \double honor.\
- From 1 Peter 5:1 we learn, among other things, that elders are admonished not to lord it over the flock, but to lead by example.
- We see other leaders in an executive role (Paul, Titus, Timothy) appointing, advising, and leading elders under some circumstances.
- We see beachhead ministries established apparently not by groups of elders but by apostles, evangelists, and sometimes teachers (such as Philip).
- We see deacons (servants) appointed in the local churches to expand the leadership net within the congregations. (1 Timothy 3)
- It seems obvious, then, that the manifest will of God is to bring about unity and maturity in His church by utilizing a plurality of variously gifted leaders in local churches and in the kingdom overall (Ephesians 4; Romans 12). Leaders are to lead by example and by faith, not by lording over the flock. They are to shepherd and oversee. Some are called to be full-time--some in preaching and teaching, some in other fields.

And that's pretty much it. The patterns and examples do not seem to be all that many or all that complicated. There is no detailed blueprint here. In fact, one of the most striking things about leadership patterns in the Bible is not how much is revealed, but how much is left unrevealed--the area of \disputable matters.\ Consider these questions and observations that cry out for more information:

- When Timothy lived in Ephesus, who led with the highest authority? Was it Timothy, as an evangelist, who might have to rebuke an elder? (1 Timothy 5:20). Was it the elders, who laid hands on Timothy? Was it neither? Is it clear?
- When Paul called together the elders of Ephesus, did he have authority over them? If he did, was it because of his unique apostolic (and now obsolete) role in revealing God's inspired word, or because of his more common (and not obsolete) \father-in-the-faith\ relationship in having taught them in the past? Can we know the answer to this for sure? If he did have a kind of authority, was it just the authority to inspire, to remind, to exhort, or was it the authority to dictate detailed actions in their city? Again, how can we know for sure?
- In local churches, did elders appoint a chairman, or \quarterback\ elder? Is it an open question, a \disputable matter,\ or does the Biblical example prohibit any kind of \lead elder,\ even if temporary? How much freedom do we have here?
- In our own movement, did \Lead Evangelists\ exercising strong authority generally get the job of maturity done? If not, will a group of elders exercising strong authority get the job done? If so, will it be because of their number? Or will it be because of their age and wisdom? Has this kind of leadership paradigm produced growing churches in the past, and if it was working, why did the Lead Evangelist paradigm get traction? Why do churches that are elder-led rarely ever dramatically grow or plant churches?
- How did the Jewish based understanding of leadership change through the principles and practice of the New Testament Church and then lead in incredible different cultures around the world?
- How do we navigate these complex leadership interactions and dynamics? Surely the Scriptures can shed bright light on vigorous and harmonious church leadership. Surely God does give us adequate counsel on how to proceed.

Perhaps we have not been looking at all the evidence. Relying too often on \patternism\ as our hermeneutic, we have perhaps created a philosophy, even a doctrine, of church leadership akin to speculating anthropologists who sculpt whole primate creatures out of just a few fossilized jaw fragments. Perhaps the key is in understanding not just New Testament patterns of leadership, but in combining these with clear and abundantly referenced New Testament principles of leadership. What, then, are these principles? Surely they include the following:

- All righteous authority comes ultimately from God. He has ordained leadership and authority as a way to organize groups of people to do His will in this world. It is obvious that any group needs some practical structure and some human leadership to function.
- Biblical church leadership pursues honoring God and serving others -- not authority in and of itself. (John 20:20-27) Our only authority comes from God. We come to serve. God's authority is total. Any authority we have draws simply from what he has done in our life and his Spirit's gifts in our life. Gifts matter, but character matters most. We have seen in our movement that talent, politics and personality may accomplish quick results, but ultimately they fail without the character of Jesus.
- Leadership must be effective. Revelation's letters to the seven churches in Asia describe God's basic expectations of the church. The church must purge sin, must find its first love, and must never tolerate lukewarmness. The beautiful picture painted in Ephesians 4:11-16 portrays a model of maturity, security, and unity, all clearly engendered by appropriate, effective leadership. The entire book of Acts shows the most prominent leaders in NT history shepherding the flock and leading that flock to striking evangelistic fruitfulness. The letters of Peter and First and Second Timothy admonish leaders to fulfill their charge and call. No matter what titles we bestow upon our leaders, and no matter what configuration they assume, the Bible is clear that leaders must equip the church to continual growth and maturity. If not,

God is ultimately not pleased.

In our own time, for example, we may have often relied on youth, vigor, and talent more than proven effectiveness. We should take care to avoid putting the partner attributes--age, deliberation, and wisdom--on the same pedestal. The question is still one of combining godliness, spiritual gifts, competence and proven effectiveness -- \Consider the outcome of their way of life and imitate their faith.\ (1 Corinthians 3:10-15; Hebrews 13:7). No matter what we propose, leadership must actually and effectively lead people to Christ and equip them to mature in Christ. This should be clearly felt and seen by all leaders and the congregation as a whole.

- Natural influence and natural authority come from example, not title. In the early days of our movement appointment to serve in certain roles was done by identifying those who obviously had the gifts for those roles and were already serving in those capacities in their daily life because of their heart for God and people. Later, in our need for more leaders, we tended to compromise our principles and began appointing people simply on the basis of their talents and not their spiritual lives. God's discipline revealed this folly. Also in the past, most will agree, we relied too much on titles--especially the title of Evangelist. Will we repeat this same phenomenon with different titles--Minister, Deacon, Elder, Teacher? Will different titles save us from the same mistakes? Paul spoke of those \reputed to be pillars,\ (Gal 2:6 NIV). This reference strongly suggests even first century struggles with real versus perceived leadership.

Jesus made it clear that effective, godly leadership is first and foremost an issue of example (John 13:15-16). Paul told a young and perhaps unconfident Timothy to take his stand by setting \an example for the believers\ (1 Tim 4:16). The pantheon of elders' qualifications in Titus 1 and 1 Timothy 3 has everything to do with proven example. It is clearly a character description of a mature man of faith, not a job qualification checklist. Thus, if we want the church to be evangelistically effective, we must allow those who have set a proven example in that area--practically, motivationally, and spiritually--to lead with authority in that area. The same is true for nurturing the body of Christ, for administration, and in areas such as marriage and parenting. Such examples are easily commended, then, by the body in the spirit of Acts 15:40.

The reality of this principle can get obscured by misunderstanding the role of \overseer,\ a term used interchangeably with \elder\ (Titus 1:5-7). In any other organization--business, military, non-profit, sports--the concept of overseeing cannot be separated from the concept of expertise. We oversee what we have already thoroughly experienced or intimately understand. We sometimes miss this evident point when we have our eyes focused on a different lens--such as the need for men of general maturity (including age) in leadership. It's crucial to refocus on the larger point of overseeing--the ability to train, correct, and demonstrate how something ought to be done. By contrast, if by \overseeing,\ we mean primarily the role of critic, or dissenter (not that we don't need to sometimes wear those hats too), we will tend, with such overseeing, to hamper, discourage, and muffle those who have and can set the example in the area being criticized. Genuine overseeing, as in overseeing an engineering firm, implies experience, expertise, and, again, example. It is a logical mistake to attempt, in the name of overseeing, to control the decision-making in an area with which we lack real expertise. The alternative is to insist that every elder must oversee every action that goes on in the church--a terrible and impractical burden. To illustrate, in the past, we had problems with evangelists overseeing budgets they didn't understand. Shall we now have elders overseeing church planting and ministry they don't understand?

- Full-time leadership carries implicit special authority. This is an issue of clear thinking. If we commission someone to enter the full-time ministry, regardless of field--administration, evangelism, teaching, marriage and parenting--we do so because we believe them to either be an expert in the area or especially gifted with potential in the area. If this were not so, why on earth would we hire them? Once hired, we ought not, then, to muzzle their leadership, whether financially or administratively. When we want to commission a party to be responsible for an area, we must give them commensurate authority in the area. Anything else is a contradiction and will frustrate the very person who has been commissioned. No one can thrive while being micro-managed. If we respect them enough to hire them, we must respect them enough to attempt to follow their lead in the areas of expertise for which we have hired them.

- In spiritual men and women, gift sets transcend titles. That is to say, the appropriate order is to give spiritually gifted & exemplary men the appropriate title rather than bestow title and hope for gifted leadership. The Bible speaks volumes about how God has deliberately set up the body of Christ to have various gifts (1 Corinthians 12:4-31; Romans 12:3-8). This is the clear and enthusiastic will of God. His vision demands the careful and conscientious employment of appropriate skill sets to leadership, in order to lead the church to effective maturity and effective missions (Ephesians 4:11-16). Moreover, the gifts of leadership itself (no matter what the milieu)--powers of motivation, vision, skills of goal-setting, training, and delegation, bold and clear preaching and teaching--seek genuine expression in God's church. We should let those Spirit-gifted leaders lead and take care to not repeat our past mistake of focusing so much on titles that we lose the forest for the trees.

These, and other leadership principles, are to be studied and obeyed just as much as Jesus' admonition (Mark 10) to not lord over others and Paul's delineation of elders' characteristics (Titus 1). We simply are not free to ignore these basic principles of leadership that God has ordained among groups of people and specifically his church. When we do, we fall into the trap of placing the leadership cart before the horse. The consequences are significant, creating frustration and often paralysis within leadership circles and the body at large. These symptoms are not \normal\ but rather dysfunctional, and ought not to be accepted by leaders and members alike, anymore than they would be accepted in a physical family structure.

In the end, no matter what titles (elders, deacons, teachers, or anything else) or configurations of them we contemplate, we must put God first, following the example of Jesus who came not to be served, but to serve. We should acknowledge, in addition, the priority of relationships over raw authority (as in family), example over position and title, and gift-based, even full-time leadership, over traditional seniority. The results will be obvious, harmonious, and blessed. In this context, we will have effective elders, evangelists and teachers, some of them full-time (some of them not), leading with vision and inspiration, and working as a team with other exemplary leaders/ministers, building a culture of humility and appropriate deference, within and without the eldership, to exemplary, godly, and God-gifted leaders.

We have not made our last mistakes as leaders. As we stay in view of the truth of our weakness and in awe of his grace, God will mature each of us in Christ, raise us up to lead in many different capacities according to the gifts the Spirit has given and bless us with lives that people prayerfully will want to follow. Above all, let us remember it is the Lord Christ we are serving, and that it is His body we are serving on earth.