

Church Government 5 Senior Pastor or NSP?

John McArthur wrote an article on elders in which he took some time to defend the Senior Pastor position. He believes the church is to be led by elders but that one of them must take the lead and will be the main speaker. The reasons given are as follows:

1. The lists of disciples is in various orders but always there is one disciple that seems to head up each group of four, ie Peter, Philip, and James.
2. James was apparently regarded as a leader and spokesman for the entire church (Acts 12:17; 15:13).
3. Peter and John are the two main characters in the first twelve chapters of Acts. Peter did most of the speaking. Equal but different roles.
4. Beginning in Acts 13, Paul and Barnabas become the dominant characters, again equal but Paul leading out.

JM agrees that Scripture shows elders to be equal in authority. He points out that all healed, all preached, all had a say in decisions. "They had an equal office, equal honor, and equal privileges and responsibilities." He says that one would lead out does not diminish the other authority or position as apostles.

Let's examine his claims. First is there is a chief speaker or one who always speaks out is it possible to have equality?

Am I correct to conclude that each church should always have exactly four elders based on the structure of the different lists of the apostles as described by JM? Or am I correct to conclude that each church should always have at least 3 "special pastors" (Peter, Philip, and James and don't forget Paul)? Am I correct to conclude that when we list the elders of a given church, we should always start with the special leader and then list the others in any old order? Am I correct to conclude that because James serves as a spokesman for the church council in Acts (12:17; 15:13) we should recognize a hierarchical bishop over all of the churches? We stand on pretty shaky theological turf when we go through such gymnastics for the major exegesis to establish such an important distinction. JM has just finished excellent explicit teaching about the nature and responsibilities of the plurality. Implicit material such as what he presents in this chapter can never supersede explicitly stated truth.

It is definitely arguing from silence (and stretching my credulity) to try to make a case that the other apostles (other than Peter, Philip and James) were not prominent public preachers and evangelists as well. Certainly when they were sent out in pairs (Mark 6:7) there would have to have been a minimum of 6 "special leaders" or in reality, the better emphasis in the gospels and in Acts is that they were all "special leaders" -- that's why they are the apostles. The fact that from a historical standpoint (and even from an immediate standpoint) some

were more prominent is not the grounds for delegating the primary teaching responsibility in the local church to a special leader. To suggest from silence that support for the "SP" can be drawn from the observation that "there is no record that John ever preached a single sermon" reduces one of the famous "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17) to a frustrated spectator. Anyone who has experienced the burning passion for preaching the burden of the Lord would realize that such a theologian as John whom God used to write the most profound books of the NT could never have maintained such silence.

The relationship between Paul and Barnabas deserves special attention. Rather than supporting the case for "SP", it overwhelmingly illustrates some of the fundamental points of the "NSP" position. JM admits that "Barnabas was probably the leading teacher in the church before Paul came in." In fact Barnabas is mentioned first in the sending of the first missionary team in Acts 11:29-30. But there must have been equal opportunity based on unique giftedness or Paul never would have been able to advance to shoulder the majority of the teaching load. Since they were both sent out by the church at Antioch, there were other gifted teachers ministering there as well who continued to carry on the public ministry after the missionary team departed. The model at Antioch reveals a very fluid situation where there definitely was not a recognized special leader.(Acts 13:1-3) Barnabas didn't just do "some teaching and preaching"; he must have done a lot of teaching and preaching. Later on down the road when he splits off from Paul and takes John Mark with him (Acts 15:39), Barnabas does not resume the activity of preaching which he had supposedly curtailed under Paul; instead, he continues to use his giftedness at all times to the maximum advantage.

The relationship between Paul and Timothy should be examined in depth as well. Paul was the one always encouraging the public preaching of Timothy.

1 Timothy 5:17.

This verse is often used by Presbyterians to support a distinction between "teaching" and "ruling" elders under the "SP" umbrella: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching." This verse does distinguish between elders on the basis of quality of leadership ("rule well") and sacrificial labor in public ministry (particularly preaching and teaching). However, this distinction is an outworking of the equal opportunity afforded to all of the elders.

The passage clearly assumes that more than one elder in a local church may be worthy of this "double honor". That could only be the case if men are allowed to minister on the basis of their giftedness and effectiveness rather than on the basis of official position. Therefore the verse provides one of the best examples

of the "NSP" structure. It is helpful to turn the argument of the "SP" position around and ask: "On the basis of this distinction between teaching and ruling elders, does that mean that the teaching elder is not to function in a ruling capacity?" The answer is obvious: All of the elders must teach and all must rule.

Traditional Presbyterian ecclesiology, by defining the office of "the pastor" or "minister" as one of and yet different from the rest of the elders, provides a stark contrast to this "nonofficial" tone of I Tim. 5:7. The family is the primary training ground for both elders and deacons. The rise of Bible Institutes and Seminaries has resulted in the substitution of formal and academic requirements for the public teaching of God's Word. These qualifications have created an unbiblical division within the eldership, the distinction between teaching and ruling elders.

"If the main pastor-teacher in your church were to leave tonight, would sufficient leadership and teaching remain for the church to continue without having to establish a "Pulpit Committee" to start the proceedings of calling a new pastor from the outside?" "Have you only lost one of your core group of gifted teachers and leaders or have you lost your one indispensable leader on whom you depend for quality instruction, overall direction, and leadership?" "Do the people perceive that there is a #1pastor, a #2 pastor, etc.?"

Instead of "Candidating for a Pastorate", why not merely allow the other elders to function. It sounds much more like looking for a position in a prominent law firm or interviewing for some other secular career. That is because we have elevated this "special leader" to a career status that differs from the functional status of the rest of the elders. How can we hope to evaluate someone in such an artificial, limited context where far too much weight is given to his preaching ability and doctrinal answers? Why should pastors be leaving one church situation to jump to another without the counsel and direction of the elders of the sending (or in most cases "abandoned") church?

Headship and Authority of Christ.

The "NSP" structure best pictures Christ as the Head over His Church and Christ as the Great Shepherd. The elders as a united group represent the corporate authority of Christ over a local body of believers and serve as undershepherds. However, Christ and the Word of God still remain the direct personal authority for the believer.

This is a difficult balance to maintain, but I think some of Norbert Ward's insights in his article "Who Has the Authority in the Church" (Baptist Reformation Review, Summer 1976; vol.5:2) merit consideration:

"The Romish (Catholic) idea is that Christ is absent from His church, and common ideas of 'shepherding' have little difference from the Romish concept. The Biblical concept is that Christ is present in His church in the authority of His Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. Elders are shepherds over the flock in the presence of Christ, not in his absence.... This does not strip officers in the church of authority. It puts teeth in the authority, for they bear not their own authority but the very authority of Jesus Christ, when they preach the Word and are examples to the flock.... 'Office' and 'Authority' within the church must be thought of in the same way that we think of an officer of the law. A law officer represents the state. The law is the authority, not the law officer. The law officer has no authority, except to tell us what is written in the law books of the state, and to carry us before a judge if he believes we have violated what is written. Justice is served as we are judged by what is written! ... The basic principles to which I refer are: 1. The authority is in Christ; 2. The statement of His will is in the written Word. The ruling of an elder is then his service to the church in teaching and application of the authoritative Word."

Any earthly "head" or "senior shepherd" detracts from the focus of the assembly in simple dependence on Christ. The goal is not to meet the needs of people by causing them to depend on a dynamic human leader. The goal is to point to Christ as the All-Sufficient Savior and Shepherd of His people. We don't want people to identify a church as "John MacArthur's church" and Pastor MacArthur does not want that either.

However, just like the Israelites sought Saul to be their earthly ruler instead of the invisible God of their theocracy, believers in the church have a natural tendency to look to a man. The reality is that the picture communicated by the "SP" structure, despite public teaching to the contrary, obscures the picture of the Headship of Christ.

In our culture people view the man who has the major teaching responsibility on Sunday morning as the chief leader of the local church, despite what other ministries the other elders may be performing. Titles such as "Assistant Shepherd (Pastor)" only contribute to this image. In order to elevate all of the elders to their rightful position as undershepherds, we must make sure they are not ranked under a "chief-shepherd" here on earth, but rather directly under the proper Chief-Shepherd -- Christ.

"God has given each member certain spiritual gifts for the work of the ministry....The local church essentially is a training place to equip Christians to carry out their own ministries. Unfortunately, for many Christians the church is a place to go to watch professionals perform and to pay the professionals to carry out the church program. In many quarters Christianity has deteriorated into professional 'pulpitism,' financed by the lay spectators. The church hires a staff

of ministers to do all the Christian service. This scheme is not only a violation of God's plan, but an absolute detriment to the growth of the members of the body. Every member needs to find a significant place of service. To limit the work of the ministry to a small, select class of full-time clergymen hinders the spiritual growth of God's people, stunts the development of body, and hinders the evangelistic outreach of the church into the community." (The Church: The Body of Christ, by J. MacArthur Jr. pp.122-123).

I have recently had discussions with a pastor who has served an "area bishop" in a denomination, about this subject. His arguments were the order of 1Co 12:28. His claim was that Prophets were preachers – forth telling of the word -. If this is the intent of this passage then I would assume he understands that his second in the hierarchy would be a teacher and third workers of miracles. When the passage is read in context it is clear that it is referring to gifts and not church offices.

His other proof text was the first three chapters of Revelation. There Jesus tells John to deliver the message to the "angelos" which he interprets as Senior Pastors. As well as being used to refer to God's messengers (angels) this word is used of mortal men, as in Matt. 11.10 of John the Baptist. Its use in the first three chapters of the book of Revelation is a little more problematical - is it referring to a church officer of that name or what? Most commentators seem to agree that it must refer to one man; a satisfactory answer will be found when we look at the synagogues, where an officer of that name is found, and his equivalent in the churches is then easy to identify. The "angelos" duty was not to be the CEO of the synagogue or its chief spiritual leader.

I hope that by spending this time on this one point we do not come to a fanatical stance that all churches with a Senior Pastor are out of God's will or that any with a single elder have missed God's best. Instead my hope is that we take an honest look at the early church form and see God's lessons in it. May we never be guilty of elevating a man as the head of the church, which is idolatry. We should always look to Christ as the head of our local church and our lives as individuals. We are responsible for our own spiritual growth. A group of elders can help equip us and point us to the Word, but they can never take the place of a personal walk with the living Lord Jesus.

What is the Lord saying to you in this week's study? Does it call for some kind of action on your part? How can you keep the lesson fresh in your life? Why do people prefer to "have a king reign over us"?