

What forms the leadership of the Biblical church?

There are huge numbers of leadership positions in the modern church, which all claim to be Christian. There are formal institutions, such as Anglicanism, which has an archbishop, bishops, priests, vicars, curates and so on; but informal Charismatic churches have many more: apostles, prophets, worship leaders, local church leaders, congregational leaders, cell-group leaders, administrators etc. Can all these be right?

The Bible answers this question simply – there is only one type of church leader; that is an elder (Acts 11:30; 1 Tim 5:19; 1 Pt 5:1). There is no leadership hierarchy, or multiplicity; there are simply elders. These are sometimes called by different names, such as pastor-teachers (Eph 4:11); shepherds (i.e. pastors, Acts 20:28; 1 Pt 5:2); leaders (1 Thess 5:12; ‘over you’ = Greek: *proistemi* meaning ‘a leader’, also Rm 12:8 ‘leads’); bishops (that is an overseer, Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:1, 2; Titus 1:7); and overseer (Acts 20:28; 1 Pt 5:2); but they all mean the same thing. Acts 20:17 with 28 and Titus 1:5 with 7 show us that the terms ‘bishop’ and ‘elder’ refer to the same person. ‘Elder’ (*presbuteros*) originated from the Jewish concept meaning an older and wiser man (Lk 7:3) while ‘bishop’ (*episkopos*) was a Greek term used in the city-states; both carry the idea of superintendents or guardians.

The local church is independent and is always to be led by a team of elders as required; these are equal in authority (Titus 1:5). The point of this is to avoid one man gaining dominance and lording it over the flock (1 Pt 5:3); there is no Biblical reference to a ‘senior-pastor’. Thus the key formula for Biblical elders is ‘equality in plurality’.

Only men may be elders (1 Tim 2:12, 3:2) and they cannot be a recent convert (1 Tim 3:6). Like shepherds, their key function is to feed the sheep with good pasture (1 Tim 3:2; thus men who cannot teach cannot be elders) and protect them from wolves (false teachers; 1 Pt 5:1-4). Their main goal is to equip saints and release ministry within the body (Eph 4:9-16; Col 1:28-29).

The way they work is to lead the sheep but make strategic decisions by consensus. Eldership ministry is never ‘top-down’. Acts 15 demonstrates this process in action, and despite the presence of the best apostles, the policy decision was made by the whole body present. Therefore, elders are much more like fathers than managers, since the church is a family.

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Understanding Ministries

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