

THE DRAMATIC LACK OF ATTENTION GIVEN TO LEADERS IN THE NEW TESTAMENT

By Frank Viola

The NT makes a lot of noise about exemplary action. But it shows no interest in official positions and gives little attention to leadership—including the role of elders.

Consider this. Every time Paul wrote to a church in crisis, he always addressed the church itself rather than its leaders. This is consistent from Paul's first letter to his last. (Note that the "Pastoral Epistles"—1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus—were written to Paul's apostolic co-workers, not to churches.)

Let me repeat that. Every time Paul wrote a letter to a church, he addressed the whole church. He never wrote it to a leader or leaders!

Galatians 1:1-2: Paul, an apostle . . . to the churches in Galatia.

1 Thessalonians 1:1: Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians . . .

2 Thessalonians 1:2: Paul, Silas and Timothy, to the church of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

1 Corinthians 1:1-2: Paul, called to be an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God . . . to the church of God in Corinth, to those sanctified in Christ Jesus and called to be holy, together with all those everywhere who call on the name of our Lord Jesus Christ— their Lord and ours.

2 Corinthians 1:1: Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the church of God in Corinth, together with all the saints throughout Achaia.

Romans 1:1,7: Paul, a servant of Christ Jesus, called to be an apostle and set apart for the gospel of God . . . to all in Rome who are loved by God and called to be saints.

Colossians 1:1: Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, and Timothy our brother, to the holy and faithful brothers in Christ at Colosse.

Ephesians 1:1: Paul, an apostle of Christ Jesus by the will of God, to the saints in Ephesus, the faithful in Christ Jesus.

Philippians 1:1: Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the overseers and servants.

More striking, every church that Paul wrote to was in a crisis (excepting the Ephesians). Yet Paul never appeals to the elders in any of them!

Take, for instance, Corinth, the most troubled church mentioned in the NT. Throughout the entire Corinthian correspondence, Paul never appeals to the elders. He never chastises them. He never commends obedience to them. In fact, he does not even mention them!

Instead, Paul appeals to the whole church. He shows that it is her responsibility to deal with her own (the church's) self-inflicted wounds. Paul charges and implores "the brethren" over thirty times in 1 Corinthians. He writes as if no officers exist. This is true for all of his other letters to churches in crisis.

If church officers did exist in Corinth, surely Paul would have addressed them to solve its woes. But he never does. At the end of the book, Paul tells the Corinthians to subject themselves to the self-giving Stephanas and his household. But he widens this group to others saying, "and to everyone who does likewise."

Notice that Paul's stress is on function, not on position. His stress is also placed upon the whole church. For the entire book of Corinthians is a plea to the entire assembly to handle its own problems.

Probably the most acute example of the absence of officers/elders in Corinth is found in 1 Corinthians 5. There Paul summons the whole church to discipline a fallen member by handing him over to Satan (1 Corinthians 5:1ff.). Paul's exhortation clearly runs against the grain of current thinking. In today's thinking, only those possessing

“ecclesiastical clout” are regarded as qualified for such weighty tasks.

The difference in the way Paul thinks of elders and the way that most modern churches think of them could hardly be more striking. Paul does not utter a whisper about elders in any of his nine letters to the churches! This includes his ultra corrective treatise to the Galatians. Instead, Paul persistently entreats “the brethren” to action.

In his last letter to a church, Paul finally mentions the overseers in his opening greeting. But he does so in a very fleeting way. And he greets the overseers only after he greets the whole church (Phil. 1:1).

His letter opens with: “Paul and Timothy, bond-servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus in Philippi, including the overseers and deacons” (NASB). This is a rather strange order if Paul held to the notion of church officers. Following this greeting, Paul talks to the church about its present problems.

This trend is highlighted in the book of Hebrews. Throughout the entire epistle the writer addresses the entire church. Only at the very end of the letter does he off-handedly ask the saints to greet their overseers (Hebrews 13:24).

In sum, the deafening lack of attention that Paul gives to elders demonstrates that he rejected the idea that certain people in the church possessed formal rights over others. It also underscores the fact that Paul did not believe in church officers.

Peter's letters make similar music. Like Paul, Peter writes his letters to the churches, and never to its leaders. He also gives minimal airtime to elders. When he does, he warns them against adopting the spirit of the Gentiles. He makes the specific point that the elders are among the flock, not lords over it (1 Peter 5:1-2).

The elders, says Peter, are not to "lord it over" (katakurieuo) the flock (1 Pet. 5:3). Interestingly, Peter uses the same word that Jesus used in His discussion on authority. His exact words were: "... the rulers of the Gentiles lord it over (katakurieuo) them ... but it shall not be so among you" (Matt. 20:25).

This same emphasis is found in Acts. There Luke tells the story of how Paul exhorted the Ephesian elders to "be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers..." (Acts 20:28, NASB). Notice that the elders are "among" and not "over" the flock.

James, John, and Jude write in the same strain. They address their letters to the churches and not to leadership. They all have very little to say about leadership. And they have nothing to say about official eldership.

It is quite clear, then. The NT consistently rejects the notion of ecclesiastical officers in the church. It also greatly downplays the role of elders.

Eldership vs. Brotherhood

It would do us well to ask why the NT gives so little airtime to the elders of the churches. The oft-ignored reason is surprising to institutional ears. It is simply this: The bulk of responsibility for pastoral care, teaching, and ministry in the ekklesia rests squarely upon the shoulders of all the brothers and sisters!

The richness of Paul's vision of the Body of Christ stems from his continual emphasis that every member is gifted, has ministry, and is a "responsible believer" in the Body (Romans 12:6; 1 Corinthians 12:1ff; Ephesians 4:7; 1 Pet. 4:10). As a consequence, ministerial responsibility is never to be closeted among a few.

This explains why the word *adelphoi*, translated "brethren," appears 346 times in the NT. It appears 134 times in Paul's epistles alone. In most places, this word is Paul's shorthand way of referring to all the believers in the church—both men and women. By contrast, the word "elders" only appears five times in Paul's letters. "Overseers" only appears four times. And "pastors" only appears once!

The stress of the NT, then, is upon corporate responsibility. It is the believing community that is called to carry out pastoral functions. The brothers and the sisters (=the whole church) are called to:

Organize their own affairs (1 Corinthians 11:33-34; 14:39-40; 16:2-3)

Discipline fallen members (1 Corinthians 5:3-5; 6:1-6)

Warn the unruly (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

Comfort the feeble (1 Thessalonians 5:14)

Support the weak (1 Thessalonians 5:21)

Abound in the work of the Lord (1 Corinthians 15:58)

Admonish one another (Romans 15:14)

Teach one another (Colossians 3:16)

Prophecy one by one (1 Corinthians 14:31)

Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)

Bear one another's burdens (Galatians 6:2)

Care for one another (1 Corinthians 12:25)

Love one another (Romans 13:8; 1 Thessalonians 4:9)

Be devoted to one another (Romans 12:10)

Show kindness and compassion to one another (Ephesians 4:32)

Edify one another (Romans 14:19, 1 Thessalonians 5:11b)

Bear with one another (Ephesians 4:2; Colossians 3:13)

Exhort one another (Hebrews 3:13, 10:25)

Incite one another to love and good works (Hebrews 10:24)

Encourage one another (1 Thessalonians 5:11a)

Pray for one another (James 5:16)

Offer hospitality to one another (1 Peter 4:9)

Fellowship with one another (1 John 1:7);

Confess sins to one another (James 5:16).

With dramatic clarity, all of these “one-another” exhortations give substance to the decisive reality that every member of the church is to bear the responsibility for pastoral care. Leadership is a corporate affair, not a solo one. It is to be shouldered by the entire Body.

Stated simply, the NT knows nothing of an elder-ruled, elder governed, or elder-directed church! And it knows even less about a pastor-led church! The first century church was in the hands of the brotherhood and the sisterhood. Plain and simple.

In summary, the testimony of the NT denouncing positional/hierarchical authority is unmistakably clear. And it is in direct harmony with the teaching of Jesus. As such, the final word to the

Christian regarding Gentile and Jewish leadership structures is incarnated in our Lord's piercing phrase: "But it shall not be so among you" (Matt. 20:26). That is the linchpin of the whole matter!