

# **HOW NEW TESTAMENT ELDERS LEAD THE LOCAL CHURCH**

**James W. Garrett**

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# **HOW NEW TESTAMENT ELDERS LEAD THE LOCAL CHURCH**

## **James W. Garrett**

The topic, "How New Testament Elders Lead the Local Church," immediately draws us into three arenas:

- A. The nature of leadership in the local church;
- B. The activity of leadership in the local church;
- C. The style of leadership in the local church.

The nature of leadership deals with the question, "What is meant by leading a New Testament Church; does leading refer to taking the church somewhere?" A frequently asked question of leadership is, "Where is the church going," implying some sort of direction toward a goal, activity, emphasis, or season. Is this even an appropriate question?

The activity of leadership deals with what elders do to achieve the appropriate goals of leadership.

The style of leadership deals with manner or spirit in which leadership functions.

The "what," the "how," and the "why," are so intertwined that they cannot be separated, completely. How one does something is related to what is being done. Therefore, as we enter into this study, organizing our thoughts under various topics, the lines will be somewhat blurred.

## **SECTION I**

### **THE NATURE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH**

The nature of leadership in the local church is much more difficult to define than the activity and style of leadership. Since our study deals with the local church, rather than itinerant apostolic ministry, much of the historical material of Acts is not relevant to our quest. Of course, the manner in which apostles led the local church is relevant, as well as principles that are appropriate for all ministry.

In order to sensitize us to the question, let's take a look at "successful" leadership as it is defined in the contemporary American church. Today's church is one in which excitement seems to be the key to successful leadership. Successful leaders keep people excited by leading their churches into various experiences, crusades, programs, and building projects. The charismatic leader who can be clever in the pulpit seems to be a "must" in the typical thriving contemporary church. To a large degree, Christian television has forced the quiet country parson to become a noisy, rambunctious motivator, and in some cases, a covert entertainer. By all means, he must be an entrepreneur. Many are obsessed with "being on the cutting edge." More than once, the

expression, "I'd rather have wild fire than no fire," has been voiced by various contemporary leaders. It is interesting that two different Tulsa churches have described themselves as "Exciting.....Baptist Church." The atmosphere in church culture is a reflection of society, as a whole. If there is anything that has grown exponentially in America in the last fifty years it is the entertainment element. Americans have become addicted to stimuli. For this reason, in most major cities, large portions of the church population migrate from building to building, showing up for the latest whatever. Those church leaders who lag behind in the excitement factor invariably lose members.

The above description is of course, a caricature. Although this picture is odious to many, it must be admitted that the current American church has accomplished amazing things with its "success." Because of sheer numbers, successful churches have impacted their cities. They have become institutions with which society must reckon. Also, successful churches have produced sizeable finances for missions and other ministries.

Contrast this, however with the picture of church life and leadership in the New Testament. For one thing, the culture was far different. Entertainment for godly people was having dinner together or taking a walk. The ungodly, on the other hand, especially in the Roman cities, were entertained by spectacles in the amphitheater.

Tertullian, the earliest of the Latin Fathers,<sup>1</sup> in his treatise, *De Spectaculis*, argued that Christians had no business going to the amphitheater. He asked the believers of his day, *Since the spirit of religion, is pure, peaceable, and gentle, how could it harmonize with these noisy exhibitions?* He then presented the following argument:

What is our desire but that of the apostle - to depart and be with Christ? While in this life, why not be content with those pleasures which God bestows: What more delightful than reconciliation with Him; the revelation of truth; the discovery of errors; the pardon of sin; a pure conscience; a blameless life; and a blissful hope of heaven? What a spectacle is that fast approaching advent of our Lord, now owned by all, now highly exalted, triumphant over all! What that exaltation of the angelic host! What the glory of the rising saints! What the kingdom of the just made perfect! What the New Jerusalem! Yes, and there are other sights; that last day of judgment, with its everlasting issues - that day unlooked for by the nations, the theme of their derision, when the world, hoary with age, and all its many products, shall be consumed in one vast conflagration!<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> Tertullian (160 – 220 AD)

<sup>2</sup>The Select works of Tertullian, F.A. March LL.D, New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers 1876 p168-169

According to Tertullian, the Christian should forgo entertainment in this life, knowing that something more spectacular awaits him, if he lives only for Christ. An interesting perspective. Excitement was not viewed by the early church leaders as a requisite for a successful church. Again, we pose the question, "What is the nature of leadership in the New Testament Church?" In the Old Testament era there were leaders that "led" God's people. Moses led through the wilderness; Joshua led in the conquest of the Promised Land; David led in battle against the Philistines; etc. It was a "come follow me, boys," type of leadership. The picture of leadership in the New Testament is different from that in the Old Testament. Instead of leaders' leading the corporate body to this, that, or the other, the picture is of a leadership that seeks to lead individuals to a deeper relationship with Christ through a fuller surrender to Him. The outworking of that relationship caused believers to do, instinctively, what present day leaders try to get people to do through excitement and motivational programs.

For example, it is significant that the New Testament Church leadership did not lead the people into fulfilling any aspect of the Great Commission. Instead, they led them into a relationship with Christ and with one another. When God took the initiative and put individual Christians into certain situations, sharing Christ seemed to be a natural outcome of their lives. God called some into deliberate Great Commission activity (Paul, Barnabas, Timothy, etc). These, however, did not lead the rest of the church into that activity, other than prayer for the fruitful outcome of their apostolic work<sup>3</sup>. The New Testament Church leaders did not exhort the church to give money for an outreach program. The offerings that were raised among the churches were not for evangelism or outreach, but for benevolence.

The New Testament does record that apostolic ministry was supported by the churches. Philippi has become noteworthy for its part in providing for Paul when he was in prison. Because church support of apostolic ministry was assumed, Paul's enemies at Corinth could argue that Paul was not an apostle because he worked with his hands instead of being supported by the church.<sup>4</sup> He argued that this was not a measure of his apostleship, stating that he had the right to such support but that he chose not to claim the right. In his Second Letter to the Corinthians, Paul stated that brethren from Macedonia supported him, financially, so that the Corinthians could receive the Gospel without charge.<sup>5</sup> So, it is clear that translocal ministry usually was supported by the churches. It is stated as a fact, but there is no exhortation to give for this purpose.

All of the exhortations to giving in the New Testament relate to benevolence or the support of elders,<sup>6</sup> not for missions or outreach. The point of all of this is that the New Testament leaders did not lead the people into a Great Commission campaign. They led them to a deeper relationship with Christ, expressed in godly living.

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<sup>3</sup> Ephesians 6:19; Colossians 4:2-4

<sup>4</sup> 1 Corinthians 9:1-18

<sup>5</sup> 2 Corinthians 11:7-9

<sup>6</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17

One cannot say that it is wrong to challenge God's people to fulfill the Great Commission, or to engage in other excellent ministries that reflect the person of Christ. However, there is no New Testament example of the First Century church leaders' doing this. Based on the New Testament record, the primary task of local church leadership is to anchor lives upon the foundation of Christ and to lead believers into an increasingly surrendered life.

## RELEVANT TERMS

It is significant that the common Greek term for "lead," *ago* (ἄγω), never is used in the New Testament for human leadership in the church. It is used only twice in the New Testament, in the sense of leadership in the Kingdom. In both instances, the term refers to the Holy Spirit's leadership in the lives of individual Christians:

**Romans 8:14:** *For all who are being led by the Spirit of God, these are sons of God*  
**Galatians 5:18:** *But if you are led by the Spirit, you are not under the law.*

Most present day church leaders find it difficult to comprehend the fact that the New Testament is devoid of any "leading" of the local church in the sense that modern leadership concepts are expressed.

It also is significant that the Greek term for "ruler," *archon* (ἄρχων), never is used for church government. Thus, "ruling" in an autocratic sense is absent from the character of New Testament Church leadership. Peter explicitly forbids such leadership in the local church:

*nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.* (1 Peter 5:3)

The primary term that Paul used for leadership in the New Testament Church is *proistemi* (προΐστημι).<sup>7</sup> This term is a compound word, meaning *to stand* (*histemi* - ἵστημι), *before* (*pro* - πρό). The term is extremely common in Greek secular literature, where it is used as a transitive verb, meaning, *to put before*, or *to present*. In the New Testament, however, the term occurs only as an intransitive verb, usually in the Middle Voice.<sup>8</sup> The term is used, metaphorically, to communicate the following ideas:

<sup>7</sup>Only Paul uses this term in the New Testament. It is found in the following passages: Romans 12:8; I Thessalonians 5:12; Timothy 3:4,5,12; 5:17; Titus 3:8,14.

<sup>8</sup>The following is a parsing chart of *proistemi* in each occurrence of the word in the New Testament:

Romans 12:8 .....nom. sing. mas. part. pres. mid.  
 1 Thess. 5:12 .....acc. pl. masc. part. pres. mid.  
 1 Tim. 3:4 .....acc. sing. masc. part. pres. mid.  
 1 Tim. 3:5 .....2nd aor. inf. act.  
 1 Tim 3:12 .....nom. pl. masc. part. pres. mid.

1. *To preside*, in the sense of directing, etc.
2. *To protect*, in the sense of going before someone in protection
3. *To care for* in the sense of maintaining, arranging, handling, etc.

All of these nuances are represented in the eight instances in which the term occurs in the New Testament.

It is unfortunate that the KJV tends to translate *proistemi* as, *rule*, a term that the newer translations have tended to avoid. The NAS renders *proistemi* with the term, *rule*, only one time.<sup>9</sup> The NIV totally avoids it. Note the following instances of *proistemi* in the New Testament and how the various versions render the term:

	KJV	NAS	NIV
Romans 12:8	ruleth	leads	govern
1 Thess. 5:12	over	have charge	over
1 Timothy 3:4	ruleth	manages	manage
1 Timothy 3:5	rule	manage	manage
1 Timothy 3:12	ruling	managers	manage
1 Timothy 5:17	rule	rule	direct the affairs
Titus 3:8	maintain	engage in	devote themselves to doing
Titus 3:14	maintain	engage in	devote themselves to doing

A recognition of the terms used for leadership in the New Testament Church helps us to understand the nature of leadership in the Church and the resultant character of that leadership. These terms emphasize managing and overseeing, more than they do direction setting.

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1 Tim 5:17 .....nom. pl. mas. part. perf. act.

Titus 3:8 .....pres. inf. mid.

Titus 3:14 .....pres. inf. mid.

<sup>9</sup> 1 Timothy 5:17

## SECTION II

### THE ACTIVITY OF LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

We now turn to the topic of activities of New Testament elders. These are things that elders do to achieve the goal of anchoring people's lives upon Jesus and leading the believers into a life that increasingly is surrendered to Christ.

#### NEW TESTAMENT ELDERS LEAD BY BEING EXAMPLES BEFORE THE FLOCK

Paul was not timid about telling the churches that he fathered to follow his example. This is one reason he sent his delegate, Timothy, to Corinth:

*In Christ Jesus, I became your father through the Gospel. I exhort you therefore, be imitators of me. For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church. (1 Corinthians 4:15c-17)*

To make certain that they got the point, Paul repeated the exhortation, later in the epistle:

*Be imitators of me, just as I also am of Christ. (1 Corinthians 11:1)*

In his First Letter to the Thessalonians he made reference to the same style of discipleship:

*just as you know what kind of men we proved to be among you for your sake. You also became imitators of us and of the Lord, ...so that you became an example to all the believers in Macedonia and in Achaia. (1 Thessalonians 1:5b-6a, 7 )*

In his general letter to the churches located in the five districts of Asia Minor, Peter included this instruction to elders,

*nor yet as lording it over those allotted to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock (1 Peter 5:3 )*

Note that Peter wrote these instructions to "the elders among you," urging them to "shepherd the flock of God among you," and to be examples to "those allotted to your charge." The term, *kleros* (κλήρος), translated, "alloted," indicates that Peter assumed that each congregation was divided into "portions." A literal translation of this phrase is, "Nor as exercising lordship over the lots."

*Kleros* is the term used to indicate something given to a specific individual. It is used for the pebble, small stick, etc., in casting lots; it is used for a share assigned to someone; it is used for

one's fate or destiny. Thus, the term refers to the portion of the flock that is assigned to specific elders<sup>10</sup>. Since this letter is sent to the Church spread over Asia Minor, rather than to a particular church, this terminology could refer to the elders council over each local church. However, this would be an unusual use of the term, *kleros*. Peter probably assumed that each local congregation would be divided into portions with an elder responsible for his assigned portion. The picture is of an elder who has an intimate relationship with a portion of the local church. Before his allotment, he is to set the example of Godly living.

Two thoughts present themselves to us. First, elders cannot be examples before people unless they are "among" the people. It is important for leaders to be known by those who are in their allotments. Because of the life patterns of urban Americans, it is difficult, if not impossible, for elders to fulfill Peter's mandate, unless the cell church model is followed. This, of course, conforms to Peter's picture of a local church's being divided into allotments for the purpose of shepherding. In such an arrangement, those who lead the cells, or house-churches, would be known intimately by those under their care. The cell group leaders then could be related to an elder who models godliness before these leaders.

Second, elders must be certain that their lives are worthy of emulation. Years ago, there was a bit of trite drivel that appeared in church bulletins,

What kind of church  
Would my church be,  
If every member  
Were just like me.

As trite as this ditty might be, it still is a question worth pondering, especially for those in leadership. Jesus rebuked the Jewish leaders with the words,

*Woe to you lawyers as well! For you weigh men down with burdens hard to bear, while you yourselves will not even touch the burdens with one of your fingers*  
(Luke 11:46)

Tragic are the stories of leaders who draw sacrificial offerings from their people, while they themselves live in abundance. Disgusting is the leader who chastises his people for not showing up for nightly meetings, after they have put in a hard days work, while the leader himself has the liberty of sleeping late in the morning or has the freedom to take a nap in the afternoon. There is little need to list here all of the ways that leaders can expect more of their people than they expect of themselves. Anyone who has had any experience with "church" could produce an immediate list of leaders who have been poor models.

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<sup>10</sup>Bauer, Walter, *A Greek English Lexicon of the New Testament and Other Early Christian Literature* trans. William F. Arndt and F. Wilbur Gingrich (Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1957) p.436, notation (2) on *klh~rov*.

Thayer, Joseph, *Greek-English Lexicon of the New Testament* (Nashville, Broadman Press 1977) entry 2819, note (2).

If there is a sense in which New Testament leadership is to have a "follow me, boys," attitude, it is in the area of setting an example for the members of the body to follow.

## **NEW TESTAMENT ELDERS LEAD BY IMPARTATION AND TRAINING**

There is an assumption in the New Testament that impartation of truth, empowered by the Holy Spirit, changes lives. Thus, teaching is one of the primary tasks of eldership. It is noteworthy that all of the qualifications of eldership are character traits except two: (1) the ability to manage one's family; (2) the ability to teach.

Even though all elders must be able to teach, not every elder will be a gifted teacher. Teaching will be the primary calling of some elders. For others, teaching will be something that they do, but not the focus of their lives. Even so, whether or not it is their primary role in the Kingdom, every elder is to teach.

Paul's instruction to Timothy, describes the sort of teaching/motivation that is required of leaders:

*reprove, rebuke, exhort, with great patience and instruction (Greek-didache –  
διδασκαλία - teaching) 2 Timothy 4:2*

The picture in this verse is of a leader who is involved with the development of the lives of his people. He has to be very patient and willing to teach the same thing over and over until the one whom he is instructing demonstrates that he "gets the point."

Jesus was a *didaskalos* (διδάσκαλος), a *teacher*. This term is used forty one times, when referring to Jesus. Twenty-nine of those times are salutations, in which someone addresses Jesus by the term, *teacher*. It is noteworthy that much of Jesus' teaching consisted of explaining the true import of what his hearers already knew. Jesus' hearers were Jews who knew the Law, much of it memorized from childhood. Note that Jesus gave the spiritual understanding of these things and imparted new information about the Gospel of the Kingdom. Much of Jesus' teaching related to practical situations in life and the spiritual condition of his hearers. Jesus did not set up a formal teaching situation as did most *didaskaloi*. He met people where they were and spoke to the desires of their hearts.

A difference between the Greek and the Jewish attitude toward teaching is reflected in their different attitudes toward wisdom. To the Greeks, wisdom was theoretical. Rabbinic wisdom, on the other hand, was practical.<sup>11</sup> In the local church, teaching people how to live in conformity

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<sup>11</sup>The Greek tendency toward intellectualism began to infect the Church in its earliest centuries. This influence chiefly came from the Christian community in Alexandria. The Greeks had *didaskaloi* who were free to itinerate and teach Greek wisdom. In the early years of the Church, Alexandrian "teachers" introduced this institution into the Church. This was not a

with the truth of God's Word is teaching. In my opinion, the development of *Functional Gifting* tests in the 1970's created a false understanding of teaching. According to these tests, a teacher is one who is totally occupied with the lesson. His obsession is to deliver truth, without much concern for the response of his hearers. However, *exhorters*, according to this definition, are concerned about the response of hearers and the application of truth. Such a distinction is unbiblical. This definition of a teacher may fit the Greek secular understanding, but it is not the biblical understanding. In the New Testament, teachers teach so that people will show the fruit of that teaching in their lives. Teachers do teach facts to be believed... but they also expect those facts to make an impact on the lives of their hearers.

To repeat the opening sentence of this section, *There is an assumption in the New Testament that impartation of truth, empowered by the Holy Spirit, changes lives.* Thus, teaching must occupy the elders. An elder may teach by sitting in someone's living room and presenting truth and biblical wisdom in conversation. An elder also may teach by standing behind a lectern in a classroom. Both of these scenes fit the New Testament concept of teaching.

The importance of having a teaching eldership is seen in Paul's instructions to Timothy and Titus,

*Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching...holding fast the faithful word which is in accordance with the teaching, that he may be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and to refute those who contradict.* (1 Tim. 5:17; Titus 1:9)

In the past decade, there have been a number of "moves of the Spirit" that supposedly were of God, which sought to displace preaching and teaching. Of note was the recent unbalanced worship movement, that viewed the Sunday gathering as a time for singing (as if this were the only form of worship). If there were time for a sermon, OK, if not, OK. How much, after the fact, problem solving could be avoided if we fed our churches a diet of preaching and teaching that reflected good exegesis and sound doctrine. Unfortunately, such teaching has gone out of vogue in many quarters. Truth often is presented on the basis of experience, rather than objectively revealed absolute truth. Thus, experience has replaced Scripture in much teaching and preaching. For many, experience has become authority.

As intimated above, training is another dimension to biblical teaching. Elders should be committed to seeing that training in Christian living and ministry go on in the local church. For example, biblical training in family relationships is a very great need in this generation. Teaching biblical concepts and then helping the individual believers to apply these concepts is an important teaching activity. Some elders will be more adept at teaching the concepts and others

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continuation of the work of the first Christian teachers, but the introduction of a Greek institution in a Christianized form. Thus, a separate class of teachers came to exist in the Church, following the Greek intellectual model, rather than the Jewish practical/spiritual model. This Greek concept of teaching and a special class of teachers continues to prevail in much of the Church.

will be more adept at teaching how to implement the concepts. This is one advantage of a plural leadership.

## **NEW TESTAMENT ELDERS LEAD BY DELEGATION AND ASSIGNMENT**

When Moses father-in-law, Jethro, visited Moses in the wilderness, he observed his son-in-law's attempting an impossible task:

*It came about the next day that Moses sat to judge the people, and the people stood about Moses from the morning until the evening. Now when Moses' father-in-law saw all that he was doing for the people, he said, "What is this thing that you are doing for the people? Why do you alone sit as judge and all the people stand about you from morning until evening?"*

*Moses said to his father-in-law, "Because the people come to me to inquire of God. When they have a dispute, it comes to me, and I judge between a man and his neighbor and make known the statutes of God and His laws."*

*Moses' father-in-law said to him, "The thing that you are doing is not good. You will surely wear out, both yourself and these people who are with you, for the task is too heavy for you; you cannot do it alone. Now listen to me: I will give you counsel, and God be with you. You be the people's representative before God, and you bring the disputes to God, then teach them the statutes and the laws, and make known to them the way in which they are to walk and the work they are to do. Furthermore, you shall select out of all the people able men who fear God, men of truth, those who hate dishonest gain; and you shall place these over them as leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. Let them judge the people at all times; and let it be that every major dispute they will bring to you, but every minor dispute they themselves will judge. So it will be easier for you, and they will bear the burden with you. If you do this thing and God so commands you, then you will be able to endure, and all these people also will go to their place in peace."*

*So Moses listened to his father-in-law and did all that he had said. Moses chose able men out of all Israel and made them heads over the people, leaders of thousands, of hundreds, of fifties and of tens. They judged the people at all times; the difficult dispute they would bring to Moses, but every minor dispute they themselves would judge. (Exodus 18:13-26)*

Moses, like many leaders in every generation had taken up each leadership responsibility as it arose. He became so busy being "the man" that he had little time to do anything other than meet the needs that forced themselves upon him. He was practicing crisis management. There were four negatives that this produced:

1. The people were unable to get decisions in a timely manner;
2. Moses was reaching a point of exhaustion;
3. Being consumed with many details, Moses was not able to provide true spiritual leadership. He was not fulfilling his primary role of teaching the statutes of God to the people;
4. Others to whom God had given leadership abilities were not given a place to serve.

It was no coincidence that Jethro came to visit Moses at this time. The hand of God clearly is seen in this episode. The closing words of Jethro's counsel are key, "If you do this thing and God so command you..." (v23). It would have been a mistake for Moses to delegate this responsibility if God had not said, "Yes."

Interestingly, sometime later, when the people were complaining that all that they had to eat was manna, Moses, in his exhaustion, told God, "I just can't do this any more." God's response was to authorize the establishment of a council of seventy elders to join Moses in leading the people. God gave to these seventy men a degree of Moses spiritual anointing.<sup>12</sup> This is an important point. Since the seventy and Moses were functioning in the same spirit, they would lead in harmony with one another. The trust was not in the man, but in the spirit that functioned through them.

The principle of delegation is displayed in these two episodes from the life of Moses. In one instance, delegation of jurisprudence. In the other instance, delegation of leadership responsibility. The lessons contained in these accounts are relevant to an elders' council.

Some elders find it difficult to surrender control of any area of church life. Not only do they find it difficult to delegate, but if and when they delegate, they still want to tell their delegates how to do everything. They just don't seem to be able to take their hands off of certain things so that they can give their attention to higher priorities. The negative results of such a leadership style are the same as those experienced by Moses:

1. Elders meetings become so full of details about every aspect of church life that the elders fall behind in their schedule of making important decisions. When decisions are not made in a timely fashion, the church staff and volunteers become frustrated, things are not done when they should be done, and church life suffers.
2. The dominant sounds coming from elders are groans and sighs. The schedule and responsibilities of church leadership become unbearable;
3. The primary role of being communicators of the Word of God is forfeited when administrative responsibilities and other routines rule the elders' lives;
4. Because the elders do everything, the members of the body are not trained and given experience in ministry. Thus, the body does not grow in health and strength.

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<sup>12</sup>This does not mean that Moses anointing diminished. The anointing was like fire, which spreads, but does not diminish when a portion of it is moved to ignite something else.

Moses' experience is mirrored in the Jerusalem Church. For the first twelve to eighteen months, the apostles were the only leadership in the fledging church. They did everything. One very demanding task was the administration of the treasury. Since the Jerusalem congregation had a common purse, the administration of these funds must have been a huge task. Thus, when the Greek speaking Jews charged the apostles with being unfair in the distribution of the food to the Hellenistic widows, the apostles seemed to concede, tacitly, that they had not done a very good job of overseeing the program. They delegated the responsibility to seven "servants." These seven would serve tables while the apostles served the Word of God.

The apostles laid hands on the seven. Were they imparting a portion of their anointing on the seven, as a portion of Moses anointing was imparted to the seventy? It very well could have been. In essence, the apostles said to the seven, "You take it; we are going to put this responsibility out of our minds."

Delegation also was a part of Paul's apostolic pattern. As his church planting ministry grew, Paul increasingly practiced delegation. He could not be everywhere doing in-depth church development. So, he began the practice of leaving one or two of his team members in a church where they would carry on the work. Two men, Timothy and Titus, especially fit the description, "Paul's delegates." To Titus, he wrote,

*For this reason, I left you in Crete, that you might set in order what remains...  
(Titus 1:5a)*

When Paul sent Timothy to Corinth, He wrote the Corinthians,

*For this reason I have sent to you Timothy, who is my beloved and faithful child in the Lord, and he will remind you of my ways which are in Christ, just as I teach everywhere in every church...Now if Timothy comes, see that he is with you without cause to be afraid; for he is doing the Lord's work, as I also am. Let no one despise him. (1 Cor. 4:17; 16:10-11a)*

On another occasion, Paul left Timothy in Ephesus to carry on the work of establishing the church:

*to Timothy, my true child in the faith: Grace, mercy and peace from God the Father and Christ Jesus our Lord. As I urged you upon my departure for Macedonia, remain on in Ephesus, in order that you may instruct certain men not to teach strange doctrines... (1 Tim. 1:2-3)*

Since one of the tasks of elders is to raise people up into the ministries for which they are equipped, delegation of responsibility becomes a very important part of their leadership style. Elders constantly should ask themselves, "is there someone else in the local church who should be doing what I am doing?" If so, that other person probably should be doing it.

## **SECTION III**

### **THE STYLE OF LEADERSHIP IN THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH**

In this section, we will remind ourselves of the style and spirit in which New Testament Church leaders are to lead the local church.

#### **N.T. CHURCH ELDERS VIEW THEMSELVES AS AGENTS OF THE HOLY SPIRIT**

If there is anything that distinguishes the First Century Church from the Twentieth Century Church, it is the presence (or absence) of the Holy Spirit. Not only was the presence of the Spirit evident in miracles, but the Spirit also was evident in the supernatural leadership of the church and the supernatural equipping for ministry. The church expected this type of leadership from the Holy Spirit and assumed that this was the way things were supposed to be.

#### **JESUS EMPHASIZED THE IMPORTANCE OF THE HOLY SPIRIT IN THE LIFE OF HIS CHURCH AND PROMISED THE SPIRIT'S SUPERNATURAL LEADERSHIP**

- Jesus promised the apostles that the Holy Spirit would in-dwell them (John 14:16).
- Jesus promised the Twelve that the Holy Spirit would cause them to remember what He had said to them and enable them to understand His sayings, even though they did not understand the sayings at the time when they were spoken (John 14:26).
- Jesus promised the Twelve that the Holy Spirit was to be the one who would guide the Twelve as they led the early church into the truths of God's Kingdom (John 16:13).
- Because the empowerment of the Spirit was necessary for these who were to lead the church, they were forbidden to make a move until that empowerment was bestowed (Luke 24:49; Acts 1:4).
- The Twelve were told not to pre-plan what they would say when being examined for their faith. They were to rely on the Holy Spirit who would give them, impromptu, what to say in each situation (Matthew 10:18-20; Mark 13:11-13; Luke 21:12-17).

#### **THE FULFILLMENT OF JESUS' PROMISES CONCERNING THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Acts records the fulfillment of these promises. The record begins by making a rather amazing statement about the Holy Spirit. He is declared to be the source or authority for the commandments that Jesus gave to his disciples after His resurrection and prior to His ascension,

*Until the day when He was taken up, after He had by the Holy Spirit given orders to the apostles whom He had chosen. (Acts 1:2)*

The Church was launched ten days after Jesus' ascension, by the filling of the Holy Spirit, which caused them to glorify God in a variety of languages unknown to those who were speaking.

*And they were all filled with the Holy Spirit and began to speak with other tongues, as the Spirit was giving them utterance. (Acts 2:4)*

Peter later identified this Pentecostal filling as the promised, "Baptism in the Holy Spirit."<sup>13</sup> Just a few days later, Peter was arrested and brought before the Jewish leaders to be examined concerning his healing of a lame man in Jesus' name. When brought before the authorities, Peter experienced a fulfillment of the promise that the Holy Spirit would speak when disciples were arrested and examined for their faith. The record states,

*Then Peter, filled with the Holy Spirit, said to them, "Rulers and elders of the people..." (Acts 4:8)*

When the Jewish officials were not able to compose an adequate response to these words from the Holy Spirit, they released Peter and John. The two quickly went to where the other apostles were praying. Upon their report of what God had done, the brethren burst forth in imprecatory prayer. Note how God answered their prayer:

*And now, Lord, take note of their threats, and grant that Thy bond-servants may speak Thy word with all confidence...And when they prayed, the place where they had gathered together was shaken, and they were all filled with the Holy Spirit, and began to speak the word of God with boldness. (Acts 4:29,31)*

The source of the boldness was not their dedication or their zeal, but the filling of the Holy Spirit.

At a later time, Philip, a deacon, went to Samaria because of persecution in Jerusalem. He preached the Gospel and a great number were saved. An angel told Philip to leave that city and go into the desert. Upon arriving at the appointed place, he saw a man of wealth riding in a chariot. Then,

*the Spirit said to Philip, "Go up and join this chariot..." (Acts 8:29)*

Here is a specific direction of the Holy Spirit to take a very bold, and seemingly inappropriate action. Philip obviously expected such supernatural guidance and did not hesitate to obey.

A bit later, as Peter was traveling among the churches, he spent some days in Joppa. While praying, Peter had a vision in which God instructed him concerning some things that Peter did not understand. It was preparation for his being used of God to evangelize the first Gentile converts. After the vision,

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<sup>13</sup>Acts 11:15-16

*And while Peter was reflecting on the vision, the Spirit said to him, "Behold, three men are looking for you..." (Acts 10:19)*

Peter obeyed the Spirit and traveled with the men to Caesarea, where he preached to a house full of Gentiles. In the middle of his sermon,

*While Peter was still speaking these words, the Holy Spirit fell upon all those who were listening to the message. And all of the circumcised believers who had come with Peter were amazed, because the gift of the Holy Spirit had been poured out upon the Gentiles also. For they were hearing them speaking with tongues and exalting God. Then, Peter answered, "Surely no one can refuse the water for these to be baptized, who have received the Holy Spirit just as we did, can he?" (Acts 10:44-47)*

Thus, the Holy Spirit took the initiative for and credentialed the bringing of Gentiles into the Kingdom of God.

Up to this point in the life of the Church, no purposeful action had been taken to fulfill the Great Commission to "make disciples of all the nations." Then, about ten years after the establishment of the church, the Holy Spirit decided that it was time to move ahead. Barnabas and Saul had been ministering in Antioch for about a year, when, during a leadership prayer meeting,

*The Holy Spirit said, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them."...So, being sent out by the Holy Spirit, they went down to Seleucia and from there they sailed to Cyprus. (Acts 13:2,4)*

While on Cyprus, Saul experienced the impromptu speaking of the Holy Spirit when he encountered a magician who opposed them:

*But Saul...filled with the Holy Spirit, fixed his gaze upon him, and said, "You who are full of all deceit and fraud, you son of the devil, you enemy of righteousness, ...the hand of the Lord is upon you and you will be blind and not see the sun for a time"... (Acts 13:9-11)*

The Church was about sixteen years old, when controversy arose over the work of Paul and Barnabas among the Gentiles. In order to settle the dispute and keep harmony in the Kingdom, a delegation from Antioch (the launching pad for Gentile Christianity) went to Jerusalem to resolve the dispute. After the apostles and elders in Jerusalem, along with the delegates from Antioch, had explored the matter, a decision was made. The council expressed itself,

*For it seemed good to the Holy Spirit and to us... (Acts 15:28)*

Thus, the Holy Spirit that had launched the Church, guided the Church, and empowered the Church, also assumed responsibility for preserving the truth of the Church. This was a fulfillment of the promise recorded in John 16:13,

*...when He, the Spirit of truth, comes, He will guide you into all the truth; for He will not speak on His own initiative, but whatever He hears, He will speak; and he will disclose to you what is to come.*

The Church leaders knew that Spirit could be trusted to lead the Church in those areas which up to that time had been unclear.

Throughout his missionary journeys, Paul was directed by the Holy Spirit. For example,

*And they passed through the Phrygian and Galatian region, having been forbidden by the Holy Spirit to speak the word in Asia; and when they had come to Mysia, they were trying to go into Bithynia, and the Spirit of Jesus did not permit them. (Acts 16:6-7)*

*And after looking up the disciples, we stayed there seven days; and they kept telling Paul through the Spirit not to set foot in Jerusalem. (Acts 21:4)*

Even though these Pauline experiences were not in a local church leadership role, they still exemplify the type of Spirit-led ministry that prevailed in the First Century.

### **ALL MINISTRY SHOULD BE PERFORMED WITH A SENSE OF DEPENDENCY UPON THE HOLY SPIRIT**

Here is a key passage for church leadership:

*As each one has received a special gift, employ it in serving one another, as good stewards of the manifold grace of God. Whoever speaks, let him speak, as it were, the utterances of God; whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength which God supplies; so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs glory and dominion forever and ever. (1 Peter 4:10-11)*

Peter urges us to not speak, unless we are doing so at the empowerment of God. The Greek term, *logia theou* (λόγια θεοῦ), is translated, *utterances of God* in the NAS. The KJV renders the term, *as the oracles of God*. This expression is used three times in the New Testament to refer to Old Testament Scripture (Acts 7:38; Romans 3:2; Hebrews 5:12). In the Septuagint, *logia* is used as a translation of the Hebrew word, *naam*. An interesting example of these terms is in Numbers 24:2-4, in which Balaam is described as one who speaks as God gives revelation. He is not able to speak what he chooses to speak, but can speak only that which God gives.

It is in this sense that leaders are to speak as *oracles*. Leaders in the N.T. church should speak only that which God has revealed. Of course, Scripture is such revelation. One also would expect guidance from the Holy Spirit as to how Scripture is to be ministered in specific situations. There is another dimension contained in the second phrase of I Peter 4:11,

*Whoever serves, let him do so as by the strength (Greek – ischus – ισχύς) which God supplies;*

Such dependency upon the Holy Spirit is necessary, *so that in all things God may be glorified through Jesus Christ, to whom belongs the glory and dominion forever and ever.* This is an important point. Teaching and ministry that is out of our own strength, ability, or learning, glorifies us. That which is done at the revelation and in the strength of the Holy Spirit, glorifies God, since He is the sole source.

We live in a day in which, if he had enough money, a church leader could go to some sort of seminar or conference every week. One wonders what would happen if all of these expensive and time consuming gatherings would be canceled; every leader would spend as much time on his knees as he would spend in a conference; and church leadership begin to function in faith, depending upon the Holy Spirit for every moment of ministry. Such is the character of ministry in the New Testament.

This does not mean that study and training are useless. They are important. The Twelve went through a very intensive, twenty-four hour daily, three year, training and schooling. One's mind is not to be disconnected when he enters into a relationship with Christ. Our Lord declared that the first and great commandment is,

*Jesus said unto him, Thou shalt love the Lord thy God with all thy heart, and with all thy soul, and with all thy mind. (Matt. 22:37 KJV)*

The New Testament contains many comments concerning the mind. The important point, however, is that one's intelligence, learning, and knowledge must not be what we rely upon in making decisions, teaching, etc. The Holy Spirit must be paramount, with the elements of learning, experience, and reason in submission to the Spirit's leadership.

## **NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH ELDERS LEAD IN AN ATTITUDE OF PRAYER.**

Almost every glimpse that we have of the First Century local church, finds a prayer meeting somewhere in the picture. Acts describes normal church life as being a life of corporate prayer. Note the following flow of prayer in the early days of the Church:

1. The Church was born in a prayer meeting.(Acts 1:14 - 2:4)
2. The Church was continually devoted to prayer. (Acts 2:42)
3. On every occasion of triumph or concern, the Church prayed:
  - When Peter & John were released from prison (Acts 4:23ff)
  - When the first non-Jewish converts were received into the Church and their acceptability to God was credentialed by the reception of the Holy Spirit (Acts 8:15-17)

- Upon Peter's imprisonment, the Church began an uninterrupted prayer meeting until his release (Acts 12:5-12)
  - Upon the bidding farewell to traveling trans-local ministries (Acts 20:36; 21:5)
4. The inception of new ministries always was accompanied by prayer.
    - When the first deacons were chosen (Acts 6:1-6)
    - When the first apostolic team was launched (Acts 13:1ff)
    - When the first elders were installed in Gentile churches (Acts 14:23)
  5. The Apostles considered prayer and teaching to be their main priorities. (Acts 6:2-4)
  6. Prayer was the means whereby healing was ministered. (Acts 9:40; 28:8; see James 5:13ff)
  7. Daily prayer was the practice of apostolic teams. (Acts 10:9; 16:16; 16:25)

A reading of the Epistles would reveal even further examples.

To the New Testament Church, prayer is like breathing. Life cannot be experienced without it. Through prayer, things are changed and the Church hears from God. Satan will do everything that he can to keep the Church from going to its knees in prayer.

Today, most elders meetings are business meetings, not prayer meetings. If there is not enough time in the meeting to both pray and discuss business, prayer usually is sacrificed. This, of course, reflects American society. We are "doers." One has to wonder what would happen to the church in America if elders meetings became prayer meetings, with the business decisions growing out of prayer, rather than discussion. Prayerfully seeking the mind of God, even in the smallest of matters, is the New Testament leadership style. Some elders councils, recognizing this need, are scheduling two meetings each week: one for prayer and one for business. Even with this arrangement, it must be remembered that the business meeting should be couched in prayer. We could cite a sad list of churches whose problems would not have existed, had leadership led the church in humble prayer. It is no coincidence that the message being spoken on every continent, today, is "God is calling His Church to prayer."

### **NEW TESTAMENT ELDERS LEAD BY RESPONDING TO PROPHETIC INPUT**

God has given prophets to the church. Not everyone who prophesies is a prophet. Experience has shown that not every prophet is called to be a prophetic advisor to elders. Even so, in a growing number of New Testament churches there are those recognized as men called to this role. These are prophets with a proven track record. Every elders council should pray for God to provide trusted prophets (or a prophet) who could give input into difficult decisions.

It is worth noting that when God called out the first missionaries, He came to a group of prophets and teachers, who were "ministering" to the Lord and fasting. How did the Holy Spirit say to the group, "Set apart for Me Barnabas and Saul..."? Was it a through a prophetic word? There are many times in Acts in which the Holy Spirit spoke to an individual, without a prophetic word. However, the normal manner of such communication to a group was through prophecy. This would lead us to the assumption that a prophet or prophets spoke the word to the group.

The well known itinerant New Testament prophet, Agabus, prophesied to Antioch Church that there would be an empire-wide famine.<sup>14</sup> In response to that prophecy, the Antioch church (certainly under the management of the leadership) took up an offering and sent it to the church in Judea, knowing that the Judean brethren would have a hard time during a famine. Here is a wonderful example of a prophet's giving a word that led the church into action.

Personal prophecy has some value. Prophecy for leadership has great value. It is one means whereby the Holy Spirit leads the local church.

### **ELDERS LEAD THE CHURCH WITH AN ATTITUDE OF HUMBLE SERVICE**

*You know that those who are recognized as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them; and their great men exercise authority over them. But it is not so among you, but whoever wishes to become great among you shall be your servant; and whoever wishes to be first among you shall be slave of all. For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve... (Mark 10:42b-45)*

These words of Jesus need to be memorized as the guiding motto of New Testament leadership:

It is important to realize that the church does not exist for the benefit of the leaders. The leaders exist for the church which they serve (In Roman Catholicism, the "Church" consists of the hierarchy. This is a reversal of the New Testament picture in which the gathered believers in a locality constitute the church). Our Lord is not looking for leaders who will be servants, He is looking for servants who will be willing to serve by taking up the burden of leadership. Here are other Scriptures that need to be in an elders' guidance system:

*For through the grace given to me I say to every man among you not to think of himself more highly than he ought to think; but to think so as to have sound judgment, as God has allotted to each a measure of faith. (Romans 12:3)*

*You yourselves know from the first day that I set foot in Asia, how I was with you the whole time, serving the Lord with humility and with tears... (Acts 20:18b-19a)*

*shepherd the flock of God...not lording it over those allotted to you charge...and all of you, clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, for "God is opposed to the proud, but gives grace to the humble." Humble yourselves, therefore, under the mighty hand of God, that He may exalt you at the proper time. (1 Peter 5:2a,3a,5b-6)*

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<sup>14</sup>The predicted famine took place during the reign of Claudius Caesar.

*Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who, although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, taking the form of a bondservant, and being made in the likeness of men. And being found in appearance as a man, He humbled Himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross. (Philippians 2:5-8)*

The "super star" ministry style is in sharp contrast to Our Lord's prescribed leadership style. The example of Jesus, Himself, stands as judgment against such exaltation. It is difficult to imagine much approval in heaven's courts of the life size oil paintings of *The Pastor* that greet those entering many of America's worship palaces. When the Corinthian Church began exalting various charismatic leaders, Paul brought rebuke:

*For when one says, "I am of Paul," and another, "I am of Apollos," are you not mere men? What then is Apollos? And what is Paul? Servants through whom you believed, even as the Lord gave opportunity to each one. I planted, Apollos watered, but God was causing the growth. So then neither the one who plants nor the one who waters is anything, but God who causes the growth. (1 Corinthians 3:4-7)*

When Paul, performed a miracle of healing on a lame man in Lystra, the people of the city began calling Barnabas, *Zeus*, and Paul, *Hermes*. The heathen priests and the people began bringing garlands and wanted to perform a sacrifice to Paul and Barnabas. The two apostles responded in shocked horror,

*But when the apostles, Baranabas and Paul, heard of it, they tore their robes and rushed out into the crowd, crying out and saying, "Men, why are you doing these things? We are also men of the same nature as you..." (Acts 14:14-15)*

One of the challenges faced by church leaders who do a good job is maintaining deafness to the compliments of church members. This is a real challenge for those who are gifted preachers. Most gifted preachers have a bit of a "ham" in them. The ability to control a crowd through preaching can become very seductive. My mother used an old Cherokee idiom to describe someone who thought highly of himself, "He thinks he's something on a stick." Successful church leaders all too often have such a sense of elevation.

Elders must recognize that Satan is very skilled in stirring pride in the holiest of men. There must be a continual reliance upon the Holy Spirit to cultivate and true humble spirit in the leader's heart.

## NEW TESTAMENT ELDERS LEAD IN AN ATTITUDE OF LOVE

One of the most popular books ever written is Henry Drummond's forty-five page, *The Greatest Thing in the World*. This Christian classic, written more than a hundred years ago, is an exposition of 1 Corinthians 13. The author began his book with this question,

"Everyone has asked himself the great question of antiquity as of the modern world: What is the summum bonum—the supreme good? You have life before you. Once only you can live it. what is the noblest object of desire, the supreme gift to covet?"

Drummond then answered the question with the apostles own words, "The greatest of these is love." Peter wrote, *Above all things, have fervent love among yourselves.*<sup>15</sup> John wrote, *God is love.*<sup>16</sup>

If there is a summum bonum for church leaders, this is it: *love*. Any action of leadership must have love at its core. This is true whether it is in discipline or benevolence. Note that the expulsion of the incestuous man by the Corinthian church was to be done for two reasons (1) purity of the church; (2) that the man may repent and be saved.<sup>17</sup> Unfortunately, church discipline often is executed in a vindictive spirit or a spirit of judgment and justice.

Ministry by some leaders is carried out grudgingly, as a responsibility or a duty, rather than coming from a well-spring of love. Peter addressed this condition,

*...shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness, (1 Peter 5:2)*

Paul described the appropriate spirit for leadership in God's Church,

*...the Lord's bond servant must not be quarrelsome, but be kind to all, able to teach, patient when wronged, with gentleness correcting those who are in opposition, if perhaps God may grant them repentance leading to the knowledge of the truth... (2 Timothy 2:24-25)*

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<sup>15</sup>1 Peter 4:8

<sup>16</sup>1 John 4:8

<sup>17</sup>1 Corinthians 5:5-8