

Leadership in the New Testament Church

Introduction

It was nine years ago this past month that I formally candidated here at Knollwood for the position of senior pastor. Even though I had been preaching each Sunday morning for 18 months, this two-week period allowed for a conversation about my vision & perspectives related to Knollwood Community Church.

There were two specific issues I addressed in each of the fourteen meetings I had during those two weeks: facilities and leadership structure. As you know, we have been working on the facilities issue ever since I came, and by God's grace, we are about to see the fruit of our hard labors towards new facilities, specifically Phase I of our MasterPlan.

The second issue was that of leadership structure. Knollwood was a church plant of First Baptist Church of Springfield. They had a vision for a church in this new section of Fairfax County in the planned community of Burke Centre.

The leadership structure was modeled after a traditional Baptist church. Several years before I came to Knollwood, the church decided to present itself to the community as Knollwood Community Church. Our legal name has remained the same, though we will propose to change that in the new constitution along with incorporation within the Commonwealth of Virginia.

For those of you who were around nine years ago, I called for us to consider a change in our leadership structure to conform to what I think more accurately reflects New Testament teaching.

I thought we would have moved through this process several years ago, but attention to the building process has taken priority. Over the years the deacons have read a couple of books and there have been many discussions related to potential changes. These changes will be presented within the new proposed *Constitution & By-Laws*.

I want to take time to lay out a biblical basis for the changes prior to jumping into a new message series. And so today we will look at what the New Testament teaches about the leadership structure of the local church: how the local church was governed, what its org chart looked like.

Church governance – sound like a pretty exciting subject, doesn't it? Yet, some churches have fought battles over it; others simply operate as they have for decades with little thought of what the New Testament teaches. Most of us probably have some opinions, informed or not, based upon our experiences with church life. We've seen church

governance work well, and we've seen abuse – abuse, by the way, not limited to a particular form of governance.

Often, congregationalism (the church viewed as a democracy) has been abusive, as has a structure which allows for unchecked authority by a senior pastor or a board of elders or deacons or trustees. The potential problem is sinful people – and that includes all of us – exercising unbiblical authority over others, many times severely affecting the unity of the body.

We don't have time to deal exhaustively with this subject but I want you to see how the early church in Jerusalem was led or governed, how the church responded to needs that arose in their midst, how decisions were made, and then how governance changed as the church grew and developed through missionary efforts, particularly those of the Apostle Paul.

So, let's begin with the foundation – the Jerusalem Church.

I. Foundation: The Jerusalem Church

The Apostle Paul, in his letter of Ephesians – what many call “The Church Epistle,” writes to those first century Gentile Christians:

So then you are no longer strangers and aliens, but you are fellow citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus himself being the cornerstone, in whom the whole structure, being joined together, grows into a holy temple in the Lord. – *Ephesians 2:19-21*

Paul says that the foundation of the church was the apostles and prophets. We see their leadership role from the very beginning. Turn in your Bible to the book of Acts, chapter two. We are going to spend much of our time this morning in this book that relates the history of the early Christian movement.

A. Apostles & Prophets

The disciples obeyed Jesus' instructions at his ascension to heaven by returning to Jerusalem and waiting for the Holy Spirit whom Jesus had promised the Father would send to them. It was the time of the Jewish Feast of Pentecost. Gathered together, the Spirit came in power, filling the disciples, and birthing the Church. Peter took his stand among them and preached the first post-resurrection sermon. Three thousand of those who heard his message believed in Jesus as Messiah and were added to the Church that day.

Acts 2:42-47

We see immediately the central role that the apostles played in the life of the Church. The word “apostle” means “to send out” or “one sent forth.” They were given a special commission and special authority. With this was an authoritative word. Later, there were others who were acknowledged as apostles – those who had seen the resurrected Christ, including Paul – men who had a special authority that was recognized throughout the Church. They laid a foundation of content, of God’s truth, upon which the Church would build.

A second group of people mentioned later by Paul were the prophets. These were people who were able to interpret that authoritative word and explain in such a way that the truth was clear and compelling.

A situation arose in those early years of the church that gives further insight into the focus, calling and priority of the apostles. That account is in Acts 6.

B. Situation with the Hellenistic Widows

Acts 6:1-4

The apostles were not above serving. Their judgment wasn’t that this job was beneath them, that somehow they were more important and shouldn’t be bothered with the task. It was that their role as apostles in teaching the Word and in praying for the Church would not be effective if they were pulled away from that priority.

The apostles are still clearly the recognized leaders in the Jerusalem church at this time. Realizing the situation, they put the issue before the church body and asked them to select from among themselves those who would focus on the issue and need at hand. Look at the result:

Acts 6:5-7

These men were not formed into a board; they had no position on an org chart. They were selected to address a need. It seems implied that they would be under the authority of the apostles and probably accountable to the congregation. Luke records that after being selected, they were brought to the apostles who laid hands on them and prayed for them, seeming to confer upon them the authority for this designated task.

Not long after, Stephen – one of those who had been chosen to serve the needs of the body, began to demonstrate God’s power through miracles. He preached one recorded sermon, found in Acts seven, and was stoned to death. Preaching may be hazardous to one’s health!

Persecution breaks out upon the Church, led by a young man named Saul, and the Church was scattered. Apparently, the apostles remained in Jerusalem and obviously in the position of the identifiable leaders of the Church.

Luke does not mention other leadership positions in the Church until about twelve years after Pentecost. Turn in the book of Acts to chapter eleven.

II. Development: The Growing Church

Acts 11:19-30

Sometime after the situation of Acts 6, the position of eldership was established in Jerusalem. We don't know exactly when or why. It may be because of the growth of the church; perhaps it was God's preparation for the day when the apostles would no longer be around. Acts eight tells us of the martyrdom of James, the brother of John, one of the original twelve. Was God now broadening the leadership base? Nothing God does is by accident. I think He was setting in place a structure that would serve the Church well, not only in Jerusalem but also throughout the world as the Church stood on the precipice of a great missionary movement.

A. Elders

The next time we encounter the mention of elders is near the end of Paul's first missionary journey. Let's look at that and then consider the subject of elders.

Acts 13:1-4

Notice that elders are mentioned here at Antioch, rather prophets and teachers. As they were focused in worship, God the Holy Spirit directed them to send out Saul and Barnabas, which they proceeded to do.

As these two travelled and ministered, many responded to the message of the Gospel and believed in Christ, particularly a large number of Gentiles. Paul and Barnabas also met with rejection, threats and persecution. At Lystra, Paul was stoned by a mob, dragged out of town and left for dead. But Paul got up and went back into town. How's that for courage?

We pick up the story in chapter 14 – **Acts 14:21-23**

Elders – who were these folks? Phil Newton, in his book *Elders in Congregational Life*, says they functioned as representatives of the Church. We saw that it was the elders in

Jerusalem who received the gift brought from Antioch by Paul and Barnabas. Newton writes:

The authority of these first Christian elders came not by virtue of age or length of membership in the Church, but by way of the weightiness of the ministry they had received from the apostolic missionaries. When those missionaries departed, the work of preaching the gospel, strengthening the disciples, and encouraging them in the face of tribulations belonged to the elders.

There are three terms used interchangeably in Acts and in Paul's epistles to describe this office in the New Testament church. The one used most often is "elder." The Greek word is *presbutéros*. The other terms are:

episcopos – overseer or bishop, and

poimēn – shepherd or pastor

As I said, Paul uses these terms interchangeably, referring to the same position or office. For example, in Titus chapter one, Paul gives these instructions to Titus:

This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders (*presbutéros*) in every town as I directed you – if anyone is above reproach, the husband of one wife, and his children are believers and not open to the chard of debauchery or insubordination. For an overseer (*episcopon*), as God's steward, must be above reproach...– *Titus 1:5-7*

Newton describes how these different terms fill out for us a complete picture of the function of these leaders:

Elder – emphasizes the spiritual maturity of the office

Overseer – implies leadership and direction for the church

Pastor – suggests teaching, nurturing and protecting the flock

There is no evidence in the New Testament that the office of elder evolved into what we see today as full-time pastors. Though these men were "able to teach" as proscribed by Paul, there appears to be no reference to these as "called to preach." I'm not minimizing this important gift for the Church, but it wasn't a requirement for being an elder. Some may have been gifted to preach, others not. All certainly knew the Scriptures and were able to, as Paul says, "exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict."

When you think of elders, most people think of Presbyterians. To think that, though, is really a mistake. The first Congregationalists (capital “C” referring to a church group) in the 16th century held the view that elders were for New Testament churches. Early Baptists in England were led by groups of elders. The London Confession of 1644 states:

That being thus joyned [sic], every Church has power given them from Christ for their better well-being, to choose to themselves meet persons into the office of Pastors, Teachers, Elders, Deacons, being qualified according to the Word, as those which Christ has appointed in his Testament, for the feeding, governing, serving, and building up of his Church, and that none other have power to impose them, either these or any other.

Elders were found in many Baptist churches in America in the 18th and 19th centuries. W.B. Johnson, one of the founders and the first president of the Southern Baptist Convention wrote in the mid-1840’s about the advantages of having a plurality of elders in churches. He acknowledged that some churches might not be able to establish a plurality immediately, but should seek to do so as soon as practicable.

Eldership, as an office in Baptist churches, disappeared from the normal Baptist structure during the 19th and 20th centuries. Newton, a Baptist pastor, describes what was at least part of the reason why. He writes:

Much of the growth (in the mid-1800’s) took place in rural and frontier areas, under untrained ministers planting churches among a people imbued with individualistic and democratic ideologies in the wake of the American revolution. The Baptist emphasis on congregationalism, combined with the early American emphasis on individualism, likely resulted in the decline of churches being governed through elder plurality. Additionally, with the move into the frontier, the “one elder” structure of a pastor, who often served several churches, was a necessity of last resort rather than biblical conviction.

As you read the book of Acts and then look at the epistles, it is inescapable to notice that there was always a plurality of elders. After surveying the New Testament texts on elders, Wayne Grudem, in his *Systematic Theology*, writes:

First, no passage suggests that any church, no matter how small, had only one elder. The consistent New Testament pattern is a plurality of elders “in every church” and “in every city.” Second, we do not see a diversity of forms of government in the New Testament church, but a unified and consistent pattern in which every church had elders governing it and keeping watch over it.

There are a number of advantages to this plurality of elders. First, it provides balance of perspective and gifts. Not everyone has the same insight and perspective; not everyone

has the same spiritual gifts. Second, it reduces the likelihood of any one person wielding excessive authority within the church. It protects the church from a tyrant, a dictator, a bully. It also provides for complementary strengths of the different elders.

Mark Dever at Capitol Hill Baptist Church in Washington, D.C. writes about the effectiveness a plurality has in the body:

A plurality of elders should aid a church by rounding out the pastor's gifts, making up for some of his defects, supplementing his judgment, and creating support in the congregation for decisions, leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism. Such plurality also makes leadership more rooted and permanent, and allows for more mature continuity. It encourages the church to take more responsibility for the spiritual growth of its own members and helps make the church less dependent on its employees.

So what are New Testament elders charged to do? What is their job description? John Piper sums up the functions of elders under two headings: teaching and governing. He writes:

Elders are the doctrinal guardians of the flock and overseers of the life of the church responsible to God for the feeding and care and ministry of the people.

Newton suggests that the duties of the elders be seen in a four-fold manner:

- 1) Doctrine
- 2) Discipline
- 3) Direction
- 4) Distinction

Turn over to Acts, chapter 20. Paul is meeting with the elders from Ephesus. Note how attention to doctrine was essential:

Acts 20:28-30

Coupled with doctrine is the issue of discipline. Ideas contained in this word include teaching, admonishing, encouraging, correcting, and, at times, removing a sinning brother or sister from membership. The elders bear the burden to oversee the spiritual health of the church.

Direction would include planning, decision making, and governing in details of the church. Peter writes in his first epistle:

So I exhort the elders among you...shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you....
– *I Peter 5:1-2*

Part of shepherding is guiding, leading, directing.

Finally, it is the task of elders to be an example to others in the church in modeling the life of Christ, living out the distinction of being a Christian. In Peter's exhortation to the elders, he says:

Shepherd the flock of God that is among you...not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock. – *I Peter 5:2-3*

More than fifteen years after Paul and Barnabas first appointed elders on their initial missionary journey, Paul wrote to Timothy to outline criteria for determining whether or not a man was qualified to be an elder in the church. The list puts the emphasis on character, and then resulting conduct – all so that the elder might set a good example of a person who is growing more into the likeness of Jesus.

B. Deacons

There is a second office that is recognized in the New Testament; that is deacons. We are not going to spend much time on this subject today, but I do want you to see their purpose in the life of the local church.

The model for the deacon is seen in the responsibility and actions of the men in Acts, chapter six, who were selected by the congregation and affirmed by the apostles. They were to see to the physical needs of those within the body.

The first mention of deacons in the timeline of the early church comes in Paul's opening address in his letter to the Philippians. He writes:

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, to all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. – *Philippians 1:1*

Paul writes this letter from prison in Rome around A.D. 62. Probably why there isn't mention of deacons prior to this time has to do with the reasons for this office. Most of the churches even at this time were fairly small. With a plurality of elders, there was probably a sufficient number of men to address not only the spiritual needs of the body but also the physical needs.

However, as New Testament churches grew and increased in number, the burden of caring for members of the body outstripped the time and ability of the elders to do it all. Just like the reasoning of the apostles in Acts six, elders would need to give priority to the spiritual needs and direction of the local church.

Those who were gifted in serving others were now recognized by the church and selected to assist the elders. Their focus would be to help the elders in carrying out the shepherding function. The duties are not spelled out in detail in the New Testament beyond what the title indicates. The word “deacon” – *diákanos* – means “to serve.”

The following diagram comes from Gene Getz’s book, *Elders and Leaders*. It compares the terms, qualifications and functions of elders and deacons.

<u>Terms</u>	<u>Qualifications</u>	<u>Functions</u>
Elders/Overseers First to be appointed; permanent positions	Described in detail: (I Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9)	Manage/shepherd in ways that are <i>supraculturally</i> <i>defined</i>; e.g. overseeing, teaching, admonishing, praying, delegating
Deacons Appointed only when necessary; position may be temporary	Described in detail: (I Timothy 3:8-13)	Serve in various ways that are often <i>culturally</i> <i>defined</i>

As we conclude this look at elders and deacons, let me say a word about the role of the congregation in the New Testament. There is no evidence in the New Testament that the congregation voted on every issue. Much of the decision-making was delegated to those identified to serve as elders and were recognized and respected as such. The congregation, though, seems to have the final authority in four particularly significant matters of church life:

- 1) Personal disputes – Matthew 18
- 2) Church discipline – I Corinthians 5; II Corinthians 2
- 3) Doctrine – In Galatians, chapter one, Paul calls on the church to judge their teachers as to whether or not they were teaching the true Gospel – a gospel of salvation by grace alone.
- 4) Membership – for example, the church was to maintain a roll of widows who were given help by the church.

What about other issues, like taking on debt or a missions decision, approving an annual budget, etc.? The New Testament is silent on such things and gives no real guidance. It would seem to me, then, that this decision is up to the body collectively. The church membership chooses what it wants to delegate to its spiritual and serving leaders, and what it desires to retain for itself. There are few examples of good governance by a committee of the whole. Delegation makes sense in many respects. But it is the Church who decides what to delegate when the Scriptures are silent.

III. Application: Knollwood Community Church

What does this mean for Knollwood Community Church? As I said at the beginning of the message, the current leadership of the church will bring a proposed revised *Constitution & By-Laws* to you in the next few months. We want to get through the Phase I process culminating with the conversion of our construction loan into a permanent mortgage.

The new *Constitution & By-Laws* would establish the office of elder and also include recognition of those who serve in a formal sense as deacons. There will be ample time set aside for questions and discussion before it ever comes to a vote. Then, at a specially-called business meeting, members of Knollwood will vote on adopting the proposed revision.

It seems most appropriate as we close this morning for me to remind you what Paul teaches the church – including us, about the role of ministry and service. In Ephesians, chapter four, he writes – and this is a quite literal rendering of the Greek New Testament:

And he gave some apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some shepherds and teachers, for the perfecting (or equipping) of the saints to the work of ministry, to building of the body of Christ. – *Ephesians 4:11-12*

“To the work of ministry” – the word “ministry” is *diakonia* – from which we gain our word “deacon,” meaning “service,” or in verb form: “To serve.” We are all called to serve. We are all called to minister. It is in our job description as those who are God’s children.

The exclamation point to this comes from Peter’s comments regarding the use of our spiritual gifts within the body:

...in order that in everything God may be glorified through Jesus Christ. To him belong glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen. – *I Peter 4:11*