

## **Church Leadership: Integrating Biblical Instruction and Contemporary Concepts**

By Bob Young

Many English words are used to describe church leaders. Different religious groups use different official terminology. Some churches have elders; others call such leaders presbyters. Technically speaking, a “presbyterian system” of church government is one which uses groups or boards of congregational leaders. A well-known religious group refers to members of their boards as deacons and uses the word pastor to describe the minister. Many other groups have adopted this terminology. A different system of church government is reflected in those groups that refer to the church leader as a bishop. One seldom encounters a “board” of bishops, because an “episcopal system” of congregational governance refers to a leadership system which uses a single leader. Some pastor systems are also single leader system, even though the word pastor (shepherd) is never used in this sense in the Bible. A third system of church governance is the “congregational system” in which a congregation is governed by congregational decisions. More recently, it has become more common to refer to church leaders as overseers or shepherds. “Reverend” is not a job description, but is rather a description of a person or may be used as a title. There is no Bible foundation for such use, since only God is to be revered. Other groups refer to church leaders as “father” or “priest”.

In the New Testament, three Greek words are used to describe the church leaders which were to be appointed in each congregation. There is no system of church government higher than the local congregation reflected in the teachings of the New Testament. These three Greek words refer to the bishops (episkopos = overseer), elders (presbuteros = elder) and shepherds (verb, poimaino = to feed or to shepherd; poimen = shepherd, pastor). Based on a careful study of Acts 20, where Paul addresses the church leaders from Ephesus, all three of these words refer to the same group of leaders. Note that the leaders from Ephesus are called elders, overseers, and are charged with feeding the flock.

### **Bible Descriptions of Church Leaders**

The three Greek words reflect three different roles or tasks for church leaders.

Overseer. As overseers or superintendents, church leaders are administrators. Overseers may oversee the work; the more likely meaning of the word is to oversee the lives of those Christians entrusted to them. A misuse of this concept has turned many modern-day overseers into managers. The word administrator suggests “moving toward ministry”. Administrators are those who help move others to fulfill their ministry or service. This concept is reflected in Ephesians 4—leaders equip the saints for works of service. This suggests that overseers are equippers or mentors. In turn, equipping and mentoring suggest the necessity of preparing others for work and delegating certain tasks so that the spiritual body, the church, functions effectively by that which every member does.

Shepherd. Shepherds are those who shepherd or feed. The fact that elders give account for the souls of those entrusted to them is consistent with the role of shepherds, and gives rise to a companion concept—elders are guardians in the sense that they guard the flock and guard

souls. In practice, many elders today do little to feed, shepherd, or guard, but that is the basic meaning of this word.

Elder. The word used most often, at least in the context of churches of Christ, is elder. The New Testament concept may have roots in the Old Testament practice of elders among the people of God. Elders provide wisdom, provide direction, establish goals and priorities, and work in conflict resolution. In the Old Testament, the elders sat at the city gates and resolved disputes that were brought to them. In this sense (dispute resolution), elders make decisions, but the decisions they make are of a certain type. Elders are not charged with making every decision. Elders are able by their wisdom and knowledge of the word to instruct those who oppose or speak evil—whether inside the flock or outside.

### **Practical Matters**

As overseers or administrators, church leaders must be careful to do the work entrusted to them and not become distracted. The temptation is to do all of the work in the church, rather than to equip and train the church members and to delegate and share the work. Many local congregations fail to function as the body of Christ because the members are not “let loose” to do the work. More than once I have heard the question, “Can we do this without asking the elders?” Church work is hindered and stifled when church leaders serve as gatekeepers (a better sounding word than bottlenecks, although the meaning is about the same). Church leaders should make certain they are equipping the saints for works of service. Through the years, I have known very few elders that took seriously the work of equipping the saints. Church leaders can train others by accompanying them on hospital and home visits, Bible studies, and as co-teachers in Bible classes. Church leaders can train others through effective mentoring. Many churches suffer from a lack of future leaders because the current leaders are not training future leaders. The product of effective leaders is more leaders. Church leaders must be certain that the equipping has as its goal maturity that imitates Christ. Often lost in the struggles of church leader is the truth that the ultimate goal of leadership is not doing but becoming.

Church leaders who are serious about effective oversight will avoid hands-on management of every detail, and will be concerned with overseeing souls through effective management based on cultural standards.

As pastors or shepherds, church leaders must commit to being in contact with the members of the flock. Nothing will take the place of regular, diligent contact. Since the flock is typically together once a week in one place, the most obvious point of contact for shepherds is through regular and faithful presence at the assemblies of the church. Some elders have tried to serve in a shepherding role while being absent once a month or every 4-6 weeks, but in my observation, such persons are seldom effective shepherds. Such pastor-shepherds may be able to manage the church without contact with the members, and they may be able to make a lot of decisions without contact with the members, but it is difficult to shepherd and guard and guide the members of the flock without personal contact.

Pastors and shepherds must be committed to being in contact with those members of the flock who are absent. This is likely a more challenging aspect of church leadership than being with

those faithful members who are always present. The good shepherd leaves the 99 and goes in search of the one. Shepherds who are serious about this role will spend much time in prayer and in visiting as they seek the sheep that have wandered and are lost.

I have saved until last the term most frequently used to describe church leaders in my religious heritage. The term elder may appear to say more about age than about the work to be done. In fact, the word basically means those who are older. This may imply more experience and thus more ability to make wise decisions. In this regard, it might be noted that the same thing is true of elders as is often said of ministers in jest: there is a difference in having 20 years experience and having one year experience 20 times. Church leaders must be those who have continually matured in their Christ-likeness, and in their ability to serve in the areas outlined in the New Testament.

As elders consider their work, several warnings are relevant. Elders must avoid the trivial. Elders must not spend an inordinate amount of time on things that will not move the church forward. They must not spend their time discussing the past. Elders must provide the long-term vision for the church. Often this is left to the minister, but elders should be among the first to think long-term more than short-term. Elders must be proactive rather than reactive. Elders should develop their own agenda separate from the ministers (employees).

The purpose of this article is help God's people think about how the Bible concepts that describe church leaders can find more relevant and contemporary applications in the twenty-first century. The traditional biblical concepts can be linked with more modern terminology to reflect a fresh understanding of leadership skills and challenges. Church leaders must understand their role, and seek to do all of those things that God's word describes as their task.