

In this series we are finding out what it means to be a kingdom of priests. Last week we looked at the role of elders in the NT church. The reason that was so important is that the way we understand leadership in the church directly influences the way we understand the role of each believer as a priest. The reality is that if we have a large, official, highly professional, or complex organizational leadership system in the church, it limits the ministry opportunity and ministry confidence of each believer. However, if our leadership structure is a bit smaller, less formal, and more simple, it allows for freedom and opportunity for every believer to do ministry as they grow in their gifts and passions and as the HS leads them. Growth in confidence follows. Giving people responsibility empowers people. Giving people the freedom to make decisions empowers people. The NT directly shows us a limited, informal, simple church leadership style that frees people to do ministry and spreads out the responsibilities among the whole body of Christ, and this empowers people to follow the leading of the HS and do ministry.

The reality is that organizations become more and more top-heavy over time. Regardless of what kind of organization it is, over time, more and more structure and protocol is established. There are more committees and traditions and policies. Each of those elements probably looks great when it is added, but when too much of all that stuff accumulates, not only is it high maintenance, but it does not resemble something that would be the fulfillment of the vision that started the organization in the first place. The same is true of churches because the members are human. We copy our culture. Today, to get back to biblical basics, we will look 5 characteristics of the elders in the NT churches, and my hope is that by seeing the simple and organic nature of church leadership, we will realize the significance that each and every Christian has as a priest in the kingdom of Christ.

## **1-Shared Oversight**

The New Testament presents a vision of shared oversight. The apostles always established plural oversight within the churches they planted.

There were elders in the four churches in South Galatia.

*Act 14:23 And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.*

There were elders (plural) in Ephesus (Acts 20: 17).

*Act 20:17 Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.*

There were elders (plural) in Philippi (Phil. 1: 1).

*Php 1:1 Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons:*

There were elders in the churches in Judea (James 5: 14).

*Jas 5:14a Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders of the church...*

And elders (plural) were to be acknowledged in each city in Crete (Titus 1: 5) last week.

Plainly, a plurality of elders oversaw the activity of each of the early churches. We have no evidence in the NT that any church had a single leader. Such authority was reserved for only one person—the Lord Jesus Christ. He alone was the exclusive Head of the church. As such, only He had the right to command His own sheep. Plural oversight in the church protected the sole headship of Christ.

## **2-Indigenous Roots**

The oversight of the church was not only shared, but it was indigenous. 1 Peter 5 uses the phrase “among you” to describe the elders. This means that the elders were local Christians in their church. We have no NT example of any church importing a leader from another locality to lead that church. Because they were simply brothers, the elders didn’t stand over the flock. Nor did they stand apart from it. Instead, they served the church as those who were among the flock.

### **3-Gradual Emergence**

Just as important, the elders always emerged some time after a church was born. It took at least fourteen years after the birth of the Jerusalem church for elders to emerge within it (Acts 11: 30). A good while after they planted the four churches in South Galatia, Paul and Barnabas acknowledged elders in each of them (Acts 14: 23). Five years after Paul planted the church in Ephesus, he sent for the elders of the church to meet him in Miletus (Acts 20: 17). When Paul wrote to the church in Philippi, which was twelve years old, he greeted the overseers who were present (Phil. 1: 1). Point: There's no case anywhere in the New Testament where elders appear in a church immediately after it was planted. This strongly suggests that the church is a spiritual organism that produces elders naturally. They are in her DNA. But it takes time for them to emerge. So who led those churches in the meantime? Jesus himself, who is the head of the church. And the apostles checked on the churches, wrote to them, guided them, and spent time with them as they were able.

### **4-Called by the HS**

In addition, elders never appointed themselves. They were called by the HS.

*Act 20:28 Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.*

After the Holy Spirit chose the elders, apostolic workers later confirmed their calling publicly. But the function preceded the form. Acknowledgment of elders by apostolic workers was no more than a simple public recognition of those who were already “elder-ing” or offering guidance as needed in the church. It was not “ministerial ordination” as we know it today. There were no denominations or seminaries or ordination councils. The church simply recognized the people she had already trusted for guidance. The New Testament notion of oversight is functional, not official. The authority of the elders was not based on an office that was conferred upon them externally.

True spiritual authority is internal, rooted in character and spiritual life and function, not title or position.

### **Interlude**

Before I go on to the fifth characteristic and then wrap this up, I want to draw attention to a hermeneutical issue. Hermeneutics being the study of how to interpret something, in this case how to interpret the Bible. Here's the big question: when we read about something that happened in the Bible or something someone did in the Bible or how they did it, is that descriptive or prescriptive? In other words, were the biblical authors, like Paul or Peter or John, simply describing what happened and describing how things were, or, were they suggesting or even exhorting that things ought to be done the same way in other churches at the time or in the churches of the future, such as ours. We don't have this issue when we read, for example, a letter like 1 John, and John says 'love one another'. That's pretty straightforward. What we are supposed to do is obvious. John wrote that letter to teach and encourage Christians, so from the start we know that its contents are prescriptive- this is what you should do. But other parts of the Bible, such as the historical parts, are where the issue comes up. In Matthew 9 when Jesus healed the woman who had been bleeding for twelve years, is that descriptive or prescriptive? Is it saying that person was healed, or is it suggesting or requiring us to think that all those who are sick should be healed? Those of us who suffer from a recurring or continual ailment would love that to be prescriptive, and we could receive our healing.

But what happens when, for example, we turn to the book of Acts and read about how Christians spoke in tongues? Is that descriptive or prescriptive? Is it only saying what happened, or is it telling us to do the same thing? Those of us who look at speaking in tongues with some skepticism might greatly prefer that to be descriptive and leave it in Acts. But to really figure out whether that's descriptive or prescriptive, we have to look at the book of Acts as a whole to discern

the point that Luke is making by the way he records early church history. I addressed that in messages I gave earlier this year.

But what do we do when we encounter these descriptions of the elders in the NT churches? Do we conclude that it is simply descriptive, or is it prescriptive? If it is prescriptive, then we should mold every church today to reflect as accurately as possible the leadership model we have in the NT. On the other hand, if it is only descriptive, then it gives us a great deal of freedom to implement leadership roles and put leaders in place in whatever way we see fit as long as it doesn't violate something in the Bible.

Last Christmas I shared historical details about the nativity story, including the fact that no innkeeper is mentioned because they didn't have inns that are like our hotels today. But does that mean we can't have an innkeeper in a Christmas play? No, because having the innkeeper doesn't distort the meaning of the nativity story. One can argue that by having an innkeeper in a play we are contextualizing the story for a modern audience. So I'm not asking people to edit every Christmas play ever written.

But adding to or changing the way leadership is done in church today compared to the way it was done in the NT churches is far more consequential than adding an innkeeper to a play. The way we structure and carry out leadership in the church will directly influence the way the people in the church view themselves and view God. I cannot stress that enough, because, in case we forgot, the gospel message itself is all about how we view ourselves and how we view God. That's why leadership is such an important topic. If you have heard nothing else I've said today, please hear me on that.

That's the basis for my answer on whether this stuff about the elders is descriptive or prescriptive. If it's prescriptive, then it can feel like it might limit us from putting leaders in place to fulfill some practical purpose or need that we have to address in our times. But if we take it to be only descriptive, then we can easily run with that freedom and put in place leadership structures and leaders that do not

look like the gospel and lead people to false conclusions about themselves and about God. The bottom line is that whichever way we take it we need to exercise caution and use good biblical sense.

On that note, I'd like to look at this fifth characteristic of NT elders and then wrap this up.

### **Character-based**

The elders mentioned in the New Testament were men of trusted character. If you read the qualifications in Titus 1 or 1 Tim. 3, no gifts or skills are mentioned. The elders were kingdom seekers, not empire builders.

*Mat\_6:33 But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be added to you.*

Elders were ordinary Christians, not multitalented, ultra-versatile, iconic, celebrity-like performers. They were servants, not dictators. The elders' training was not academic, formal, or theological. Instead, it was cultivated within the context of church life. Their qualification came not from professional schools or licenses, but from the Spirit of God. They didn't deem themselves qualified to oversee by acquiring a blend of accounting, public speaking, and amateur psychology skills. Their oversight was a natural outgrowth of their life in the church. The elders were not regarded as religious specialists, but as faithful and trusted brethren.

In the kingdom of God, our gifts and abilities are important, but at the end of the day character matters more than giftedness. Simple love matters more than special abilities. Sincerity matters more than performance. Leadership in the church of Jesus Christ is not about using clever strategies or impressive skills. It's about character. To be like Christ is to be like him in his character. To show Christ to others is to act out his character to others. It would do great harm to the body of Christ if someone with Christ-like character was passed over in favor of someone skilled or clever in leadership but whose character was questionable. Unbelievers will never be won by our skills. At the end of the day, our character will be the only convincing apologetic for our

faith. But that is good news because, through Christ, anyone can grow in character. Christ can teach his ways to anyone and everyone who is willing to learn and willing to change. Therefore, anyone can be his priest. Anyone can represent him. Anyone can guide other Christians by example. Any believer can minister directly to God and minister directly to another believer. In this kingdom of priests, everyone participates in ministry.

**Benediction:**

Rev 1:5b-6 To him who loves us and has freed us from our sins by his blood and made us a kingdom, priests to his God and Father, to him be glory and dominion forever and ever. Amen.