

A Biblical Theology and Pastor Survey on Local Church Leadership

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INTRODUCTION

Jesus inaugurated a fresh move in God's mission on the day of Pentecost, bringing the church into existence by the power of his Holy Spirit.¹ The gospel took the world by storm in the first century, and in the 2,000 years since, the church has steadily grown around the world. Today vibrant expressions of the body of Christ can be seen in each of the 194 countries across the planet.² The church is especially vital to the Global South and in

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² For instance, Patrick Johnstone's painstaking research traces the relatively even spread of the church throughout the globe, with places like Africa experiencing explosive growth over the past 100 years. See Patrick Johnstone, "The Future of the Global Church," accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.thefutureoftheglobalchurch.org/digital-collection/chapter-eight-missions>. See also Jessica Martinez, "Study: 2.6 Billion of World Population Expected to Be Christian by 2020," *The Christian Post*, July 13, 2013, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.christianpost.com/news/study-2-6-billion-of-world-population-expected-to-be-christian-by-2020-100402>.

Pacific Rim countries.³ Lamin Sanneh claims the explosion of the Christ-movement in the non-Western world amounts to a third great awakening.⁴ Truly, Jesus' prophetic word about the church, "The gates of hell shall not prevail against it," has come true when viewed at the macro level (Matt 16:18).

At the same time, demographers and pollsters in America have increasingly sounded the alarm that church attendance in the West is declining and in some places precipitously.⁵ While different pollsters offer different reasons, increasingly observers

³ William Lane Craig, "On Being a World Christian: A Challenge to Christians to Become Involved in the Task of Bringing the Message of the Gospel to the Entire World," accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.reasonablefaith.org/on-being-a-world-christian>.

⁴ Lamin Sanneh, *Disciples of All Nations: Pillars of World Christianity* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2008), 274.

⁵ Not every pollster agrees that the church is in crisis. For instance, Ed Stetzer believes that many respondents who checked they were Christians a decade ago, were in fact, cultural Christians. He suggests that *cultural* Christianity— not Christianity—is dying in America. When asked about their faith more recently, they did not mind shedding the label. Ed Stetzer, "The State of the Church in America: Hint: It's Not Dying." *The Exchange: A Blog by Ed Stetzer*, October 2013, accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.christianitytoday.com/edstetzer/2013/october/state-of-american-church.html>. Moreover, Philip Jenkins believes that the U.S. has become a *more* Christian country. "What we are rather seeing is *How Mass Immigration Ensured That a Christian Country Has Become an Even More Christian Country* (emphasis his). Philip Jenkins, *The Next Christendom: The Coming of Global Christianity, Rev. and Expanded* (New York, NY: Oxford UP, 2007), 124. For an example of an author who takes the decline seriously see David T. Olson, *The American Church in Crisis: Groundbreaking Research Based on a National Database of over 200,000 Churches* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2008). For a more recent example see, "America's Changing Religious Landscape: Christians Decline Sharply as Share of Population: Pew Research Center, "Unaffiliated and Other Faiths Continue to Grow," accessed May 15, 2015, <http://www.pewforum.org>.

of the Western church, point to the quality of the leaders.⁶ Are local churches producing leaders with the vision to lead as Jesus commanded in the Great Commission? And if so, are they building leadership structures that promote consistent disciple-making?

This article examines the leadership structure of churches led by 223 graduates of a conservative theological seminary (Dallas Theological Seminary, henceforth DTS) and how they assess the health of their own churches, especially their elder and deacon boards. In this article we will (1) review the biblical theology of local church leadership, a theology that is broadly consistent with historical-grammatical approach to interpreting New Testament passages, (2) report the results of a recent survey of DTS graduates conducted by the authors about the health of their church leadership structures, and (3) offer specific suggestions for how pastors can better equip church leaders in post-Christian America.

A BIBLICAL THEOLOGY OF LEADERSHIP

Leadership Paradigms

Servant

Servanthood is a deeply embedded leadership paradigm in Scripture. Moses is repeatedly called the servant of God.⁷ Isaiah

⁶ Rodney Stark goes so far as to say that the decline in many churches is due to “clergy disbelief in the essentials of Christianity and the clergy’s unquestioned faith in radical politics.” See Rodney Stark, *America’s Blessings: How Religion Benefits Everyone, Including Atheists* (West Conshohocken, PA: Templeton P, 2013), 305, Kindle. Likewise, Stark argues that growing churches are those that place higher demands on their members. His work is consistent with Jesus’ admonition that believers count the cost of discipleship. See Rodney Stark, *What Americans Really Believe* (Waco, TX: Baylor UP, 2008), 456, Kindle.

⁷ See for example Exodus 14:31 and Joshua 1:1. Moses is also called the servant in the NT (Rev 15:3).

predicted that the coming Messiah would be the servant.⁸ As Jesus develops his ministry, he comes as the quintessential servant and makes service integral to his mission (Mark 10:45). Moreover, Jesus exhibits his ministry of service in the Lord's Supper in a highly tangible way. While the disciples are arguing over who is going to be the greatest in the kingdom (Luke 22:24), Jesus wraps himself in a towel and models humble service, gently and yet firmly washing the disciples' feet, including Peter (John 13:3-10). This act foreshadowed his ultimate example of serving: his substitutionary death on the cross (Matt 20:28).

By appropriating the image of the servant, the Bible shows God's grand pattern to reverse worldly values: "By worldly standards servanthood is something ignominious, but in the economics of the kingdom the epithet 'servant of the Lord Jesus Christ' becomes an honorific title."⁹

Any biblical theology of church leadership must begin, therefore, with an overall orientation of serving as Jesus served. Spiritual leaders are other-centered disciples who attend to the needs of others, often sacrificially and without seeking notoriety. This is certainly a reversal of popular approaches to ecclesiastic practices in America.

Shepherd

A second leadership paradigm that permeates Scripture is the shepherd. While Moses is called the servant of the Lord over 75 times,¹⁰ he is also called a shepherd in Isa 63:11 and Psalm

⁸ Isaiah's five "Servant Songs" are presented in 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; 52:13—53:12; and 61:1-3.

⁹ Leland Ryken et al., *Dictionary of Biblical Imagery* (Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity P, 2000), 774. See also, James 1:1; Colossians 1:7; 4:7.

¹⁰ Moses spent roughly one third of his life as a shepherd (Exodus 2:15—3:1), and he metaphorically led his people as a shepherd through the Red Sea (Ps 77:20). Likewise, David started his leadership career as a shepherd (1 Sam 17:34), and also metaphorically led his people like a flock (Ps 78:70-72). When Israel was leaderless it was as if they had no

77:30. Later in Israel's history, David learned dynamics of spiritual leadership as a shepherd in the fields outside Bethlehem (1 Sam 17:34-27; Psa 23:1-6). OT prophecies about God's Messiah suggested he would be shepherd to his people.¹¹ Jesus describes himself as the Good Shepherd (John 10:11, 14). And when Jesus restores Peter to his place as leader of the disciples, he uses the language of shepherding to reinstate Peter: "tend my sheep" (John 21:15-17). Not surprisingly, Peter would use the same metaphor to instruct leaders of local churches: "Shepherd the flock of God among you."¹²

This leadership paradigm is distinctly different from other common paradigms of leadership both in the ancient and modern world such as coach, general, union boss, or CEO. Jesus, from his ascended place in heaven, serves as the ultimate shepherd and therefore the supreme example to follow as leaders (Heb 13:20).

The shepherd paradigm assumes that leaders will be firm but gentle, skillful but kind, and that they will develop loving personal relationships with their flock. This paradigm also assumes that local church members will often stray and get into trouble. Clearly a spiritual leader should like being around sheep and not be overly frustrated, impatient, or surprised when they fail.

Elder and Overseer

A third leadership paradigm is specifically related to the offices of local church leaders. Two words are used

shepherd (1 Kgs 22:17). Isaiah prophesies that Cyrus will be a shepherd to Israel (Isa 44:28). God himself is regarded as a shepherd (Psa 23:1; Ezek 34:12).

¹¹ Prophetically, the coming Messiah is called a shepherd (Zech 13:7).

¹² In 1 Peter 5:1-5 elders are commanded to exercise their oversight with a view to their ultimate evaluation by the risen Christ. Paul likewise encourages elders to "watch carefully over themselves and the flock" (Acts 20:28-29).

interchangeably for local church leaders:¹³ *elder* (referring to the person's spiritual maturity) and *overseer* (referring to the person's ability to "watch over" the affairs of the church). As Stott observed, "In sum, 'the title' *episkopos* denotes the function, *presbyteros* the dignity, the former was borrowed from Greek institutions, the latter from the Jewish."¹⁴ Peter is quick to qualify how this oversight is designed to take place in spiritual leadership: it must happen with willing enthusiasm (1 Pet 5:2),¹⁵ and it must be an oversight that is accountable to the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4).

Consequently, elders are seasoned spiritual leaders who wisely watch over the affairs of a local church using the relational style of Jesus and with a sense of being watched over by the risen Christ who passionately loves his sheep (John 10:11).

Power through Grace

The predominant power source for spiritual leadership is the presence of the invisible resurrected Christ who promises to be with his leaders as they carry out the Great Commission (Matt 28:18-20). While Matthew incorporates the entire Trinitarian fellowship into his version of the Great Commission, Jesus is the member of the Trinity specifically mentioned as the power source for discipleship (Matt 28:20). Luke, however, mentions the Holy Spirit as the specific power source for leadership and witness in his writings (Luke 24:29; Acts 1:8; 10:35).

¹³ John R. W. Stott, *Guard the Truth: The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus* (Downers Grove, IL: Intervarsity, 1996), 90. For the relevant biblical data, see Acts 20:17:28; Titus 1:5, 7.

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

¹⁵ The parallelism in 1 Peter 5:2b suggests that willingness (or intentionality) and enthusiasm (or alacrity) are the positive attitudes that counter the negative attitudes of compulsion ("have to") and shameful gain ("what's in it for me"). The mindset that will keep elders in this positive frame of mind is an eternal one: an elder's service will be reviewed by the Chief Shepherd.

The Triune God extends power for spiritual leadership through the principle of grace (2 Tim 2:1-2); that is, "God enables us to do what we cannot do on our own strength."¹⁶ This gracious power is mediated to the post-Pentecostal church through his Holy Spirit (Acts 4:31), although the other members of the Trinity are also involved (Rom 8:15).

Summary

Combining these basic ideas (servant, shepherd, elder/overseer, operating in grace), one could say that biblical spiritual leadership takes place when a leader, consciously living in God's presence, exercises skillful servant-influence, through the Spirit's power. Spiritual leadership is, therefore, markedly different from secular forms of leadership precisely because of the *spiritual* component. This deeply spiritual component must be emphasized as part of the culture of the local church. As Lewis S. Chafer says, "A supernatural power is provided for the ... execution of ... life under grace. There is no aspect of the teachings of grace which is more vital than this."¹⁷

However, as soon as the notion of power is introduced, one must also introduce the necessity of character. The two go hand-in-hand.

¹⁶ This specific wording comes from Dallas Willard. "Willard Words," accessed April 22, 2015, <http://www.dwillard.org/resources/WillardWords.asp>.

¹⁷ Lewis Sperry Chafer, *Grace: The Glorious Theme* (Philadelphia: Sunday School Times, 1922), 200. Walvoord would seem to agree when he says, "Such ministry [of the Holy Spirit] brings for the time being a control of the believer's life by the Holy Spirit, and the infusion of spiritual power, enabling a Christian to do far more than he or she could do naturally." See John F. Walvoord, "The Augustinian-Dispensational Perspective," in *Five Views on Sanctification* ed. Stanley E. Gundry (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1987), 215.

Leadership Character

All forms of power tend to have a corrupting influence on fallen humans.¹⁸ Leaders with underdeveloped or immature character can use even spiritual power inappropriately.¹⁹ Local church leaders understand they will possess real power by virtue of their position in Christ and the fullness of the Spirit. Even within the most committed spiritual leader, temptations abound to misuse power.²⁰

If redeemed leaders are going to lead well, they must have a portfolio of character traits that enlighten their leadership, so that they maintain the humble demeanor of a servant-shepherd, while at the same time exhibiting growing levels of the Spirit's strength.

General Qualities

General character qualities for spiritual leadership are mentioned in Exodus 18:21-22 and Acts 6:3. Both are central passages on leadership, and both stress the God-centeredness of

¹⁸ This famous quotation, widely attributed to Abraham Lincoln (but probably actually penned by Thomas Carlyle), says, "Nearly all men can stand adversity, but if you want to test a man's character, give him power." Lord Acton (1834-1902) penned a similar concept: "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely. Great men are almost always bad men."

¹⁹ For instance, in Numbers 20:8-12, Moses abuses his power by hitting the rock instead of speaking to the rock as God had commanded. Moreover, he seems to take credit, along with God, for the miracle (20:10). Additionally, Moses puts a veil over his face so that the Israelites might not see that the glory was fading (Exod 34:35; 2 Cor 3:13, 15).

²⁰ Peter assumes this when he says, "[Lead] not for shameful gain...not domineering over those in your charge" (1 Pet 5:2b, 3a). It must have been possible, therefore, to lead with improper motives. Moreover, the example of many OT leaders is that they started well, but spiritual passion slowly eroded, and they did not finish well. King Uzziah is a vivid example (2 Chr 26:16-19).

the task. A common theme in both is the necessity of a vibrant immediate relationship with God: "fear God" (Exod 18:21) and be "full of the Spirit" (Acts 6:3).²¹

Specific Qualities

More specific character qualities for local church leaders are enumerated in 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and in Titus 1:5-9. Although there are some minor emphases in the two lists, they are essentially the same. At the head of the list is the quality of being above reproach. This does not mean perfect or without sin, but rather someone of a generally good reputation in the community, both among believers and nonbelievers.²²

After the overall quality of being above-reproach, there appear to be three sets of qualifications in the two main NT character passages: (1) character with respect to the family (a microcosm of the church), (2) character with respect to personal life, and (3) character with respect to using God's Word to empower growth.²³ One key quality is the ability to manage emotions in the face of conflict, an issue that tripped up many spiritual leaders in the OT.²⁴

²¹ Fear of God in Exodus 18:21 presumably meant reverence for the localized presence of God as seen in the glory cloud. "Full of the Holy Spirit" would refer to the localized presence of God that was resident in each believer post-Pentecost. In both cases, the leadership perspective was profoundly God-centered.

²² Gene Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church*, Chicago, IL: Moody, 2003). Notice that even the best leaders are not always regarded by *everyone* as being above reproach. In Luke 7:34 Jesus was criticized as a "friend of tax collectors and sinners," but he was also the sinless Son of God.

²³ John Stott employs this basic three-part schema in his exegesis of the Titus passage in *Guard the Truth*, 175-78.

²⁴ See 1 Timothy 3:3 and Titus 1:7. Moses, for instance, was prohibited from entering the land of promise because he disobeyed God in Numbers 20:8-12 and hit the rock in anger.

Summary

If one combines the empowered servant-shepherd paradigm with the character qualities found in the Pastoral Epistles, the resulting leadership concept might be synthesized this way: For spiritual leaders to use their spiritual power well, they must consistently manifest the character of God toward the people they lead, beginning with their families.

Leadership Structure

Combining Acts with the Pastoral Epistles, it is possible, to gain a helpful understanding of how the churches were planted and elders established. As Paul and Barnabas circle back to the cities visited in the first missionary journey, they began to establish elders in every city. Three principles emerge from their work.

Decentralization

First, church leadership was decentralized. While more hierarchal forms of leadership emerged by the early second century,²⁵ a strong case can be made for a biblical pattern where local churches were led by a plurality of elders who establish "self-governing independent local churches."²⁶ Acts 14:23 shows

²⁵ The Didache (late first or very early second century) seems to assume that local congregations were independent and self-governing. It even includes qualifications for elders and deacons that mirror 1 Timothy 3 and Titus 1. See Thomas O'Loughlin, *The Didache: A Window on the Earliest Christians* (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2010). However, more hierarchal forms of church governance quickly emerged in response to questions of authority. See Paul Johnson, *History of Christianity* (New York: Atheneum, 1985), 56. See also John D. Hannah, *Our Legacy: The History of Christian Doctrine* (Colorado Springs, CO: Navpress, 2001), 260.

²⁶ Norman L. Geisler. *Systematic Theology, Volume Four: Church, Last Things* (Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2005).

that the movement toward an independent self-governing structure took place from the very beginning. Retracing their steps on their first missionary journey Paul and Barnabas, "appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." That Paul continued this pattern as is clear from Paul's command in Titus 1:5: "This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you." Elders were established in every church and in every city. But it seemed to be a decentralized structure, led by gifted laypeople functioning as believer-priests.²⁷ A decentralized structure would, ideally, motivate leaders to rely on Jesus as the Chief Shepherd to provide highly targeted ministries to the indigenous needs of those specific cities.²⁸

²⁷ This mindset was lost in the Middle-Ages but wonderfully recovered by Martin Luther during the Protestant Reformation. "It follows then that there is no basic true difference between lay people, priests, princes and bishops, between the spiritual and the secular, except for their office and work and not on the basis of their status" (Martin Luther, "Appeal to the Nobility of the German Nation," in *The Christian Theology Reader, Second Ed.* [Oxford, UK: Blackwell Publishing, 2001], 477-78).

²⁸ Seeking to discover God's work in specific indigenous situations has been an important feature of the recent missional church movement. Note the following definition: "A missional church is a highly unified body of believers, intent on being God's missionary presence to the indigenous community that surrounds them, recognizing that God is already at work." Rod MacIvaine, "Select Case Studies in How Senior Leaders Cultivate Missional Change in Contemporary Churches" [D.Min. diss., Dallas Theological Seminary, 2009], 10-11).

Plurality

Second, biblical examples consistently show plurality of elders in each location.²⁹ The plurality-of-overseers concept advances the notion that the resurrected and ever-present Jesus is dynamically and spiritually operative among local church leaders as the Chief Shepherd.³⁰ Leaders in these churches would thus have had to expend much spiritual energy in prayer over various matters. Later these questions were often handled by hierarchal clerical leaders and dictated on the basis of authority, but not at first. Moreover, a plurality of leaders would have clearly offset the weaknesses of individual elders to ensure that the church operated on the principle of spiritual gifts (Eph 4:11-13; 1 Cor 12:12-31).

Common Tasks

Third, church leaders, regardless of geographic location, were charged with common tasks. These included (1) Seeking God in prayer,³¹ (2) making doctrinal/policy decisions based on Scripture (Acts 15:6-7), (3) guiding the flock (Acts 20:25-28; 1 Pet 5:1-5), (4) stewarding financial resources,³² (5) comforting and praying for the sick (Jas 5:14-15), (6) guarding themselves in

²⁹ The notion of plurality is present in the many places such as Acts 14:23; Philippians 1:1; 1 Timothy 4:4; Titus 1:5; 1 Peter 5:1, 5; James 5:14.

³⁰ See Matthew 28:20; 1 Peter 5:4 This notion of Jesus' supernatural presence among the churches is also brought forth in Revelation 1:12-20 as Jesus is depicted as walking among the lampstands.

³¹ See Acts 6:4. While this principle specifically applies to apostles in context, by application a similar pattern would apply to elders of local churches.

³² See Acts 11:29-30. Also, since the family seems to be regarded as a microcosm of the local church, paying attention to finances seems to be a vital role for elders. See 1 Timothy 3:4-5.

acts of self-care,³³ (7) declaring the whole counsel of God (Acts 20:27), and (8) engaging in church discipline (Matt 18:15-20; 1 Cor 5:1-2).

Assisted by Deacons

Fourth, elders were aided by deacons. While the terms *elder* and *overseer* are clearly terms that came from well-known leadership structures in late antiquity,³⁴ the term *deacon* appears to be an innovation of the early church.³⁵ While some deacons, like Phoebe, appear to be unofficial servants,³⁶ it seems certain that other deacons occupied an official office (Phil 1:1; 1 Tim 3:8-10).

Comparing the pericope on the qualifications for elders with the section on the qualifications for deacons, one can conclude that the deacons “functioned under the general oversight of the elders” but with the same high levels of character, to serve the specific needs of the church as determined by the elders.³⁷

Summary

“A church officer is someone who has been publicly recognized as having the right and responsibility to perform certain functions for the benefit of the whole church.”³⁸ This

³³ See Acts 20:29-31. The idea of leaders needing self-care is also brought forth in 1 Samuel 30:6 as David “strengthens himself in the Lord his God.”

³⁴ Stott, *Guard the Truth*, 90.

³⁵ Charles C. Ryrie, *Biblical Theology of the New Testament* (Dubuque, IA: ECS Ministries, 2005), chapter 4.

³⁶ See Romans 16:1-2.

³⁷ Ryrie, chapter 4.

³⁸ Wayne A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Inter-Varsity), 905.

leader, living in the presence of the resurrected Christ, exercises skillful servant-influence, through the Spirit's power.

Although a strong case is made for an elder-led approach to ecclesiastical leadership, the biblical data is sufficiently broad to allow for various interpretations of church governance. Indeed, four types of church government emerged from late antiquity onward: hierarchal (or Episcopalian),³⁹ Presbyterian,⁴⁰ congregational, and independent local elder-ruled. Down through the years, evangelical churches have used all four.

The historical-grammatical hermeneutic consistently taught at many conservative seminaries, (including DTS) has resulted in a significant number of graduates who generally trend toward the final view.⁴¹ This view can be stated as follows: Individual local churches are governed by a board of elders (either chosen by existing elders or by the congregation) who exercise humble leadership in the power of the risen Christ, with Jesus as Chief Shepherd and organic power source.⁴²

³⁹ James, Timothy, and Titus are often (erroneously in our view) used as examples of proto-bishops in a hierarchal structure, rather than as apostolic representatives. See Robert L. Saucy, *The Church in God's Program* (Chicago: Moody, 1972), 106-107.

⁴⁰ Hayes argues, "Elder rule was based originally on John Calvin's concepts of church organization. He said the church has four offices—pastors, elders, teachers, and deacons—and he based this representative style of Presbyterianism on Romans 12:8; 1 Corinthians 12:28; and 1 Timothy 5:17. See Edward L. Hayes, "The Church: The Body of Christ in the World Today," *Understanding Christian Theology* ed. Charles R. Swindoll and Roy B. Zuck (Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003), 1165.

⁴¹ This is an impression that many have of DTS because of the popular works of Ray C. Steadman in the 1970s and the work of Gene Getz in the decades following. Both pastors inspired independent churches based on the local elder-rule model.

⁴² Various word-pictures in the NT vividly describe Jesus' organic relationship to the church and underscore the nature of his life-giving power including vine-branches (John 15:1-5), groom-bride (Eph 5:22-

How then do pastors of conservative churches feel that this construct is working in their respective churches, and is this really the structure wherein which they function most often?

THE TELEIOS STUDY

Background

The DTS alumni relations department in cooperation with Teleios Research (www.teleiosresearch.com) conducted a study in January-February of 2015 to assess how DTS graduates view their relationships with their elder boards.

The purpose of the leadership survey was to examine existing leadership structures and their effectiveness within churches pastored by graduates of DTS. Surveys were sent twice over a two-week period to a non-biased random sampling of graduates through the Alumni Office. The RAND formula in Microsoft Excel was used to select a random sample of 1000 from 2500 alumni. The survey was performed anonymously online.⁴³ To our knowledge it was the first ever church-based leadership survey to examine leadership structure, training, and quality.

Of the 1000 surveyed, 228 responded, but five were excluded for not being pastors. This provided 223 responses (22%).

General Insights

In general, the highest percent of respondents were located in the south/southeast portion of the United States and serve in primarily non-denominational churches almost always located in their own free-standing facility. Most were senior pastors and had been at their church for 10 to 20 years. The most common degree was the Th.M., and the average weekly church attendance

33), cornerstone-stone (1 Pet 2:6), and head-body (1 Cor 12:12-26; Eph 4:15).

⁴³ A summary of the survey could be made available upon written request.

was between 200-500; however, 18% of pastors reported attendance of more than a thousand.

The most frequent form of church government was elder-led (congregants electing elders), but pure elder-led (elders appointing new elders) and congregational forms were also common. The average number of elders was seven, but a wide range existed among the churches. The great majority of churches consistently kept their elder positions filled.

Specific Findings

The survey revealed that elders were most typically chosen by the current elder board and senior pastor and then approved by the congregation. New elder training was almost always offered, and that training was either based entirely on Scripture, or extra-biblical material was developed and taught by members of the pastoral staff.

Elders fill a wide variety of spiritual and administrative functions, most commonly teaching, leading small groups, and pastoral as well as church oversight. Pastors are most appreciative of elders for their commitment to God's Word and the support of the pastor. However, the survey revealed that two things concerned the pastors: (1) an elders' lack of biblical knowledge and (2) a need for further developing their respective leadership skills.

In contrast, deacons were utilized by just two-thirds of the congregations. The average number of deacons was 12; this number varied widely among the churches. The most common activities performed by deacons consisted of caring for the physical needs of the church and the sick as well as any activities delegated by the elders.

Deacon training was similar to that of the elders in that it is usually provided by either direct teaching from the Bible, or extra-biblical resources, or training prepared from the pastoral staff.

Pastors expressed their greatest gratitude for the deacons' commitment to God and support of church programs. However,

as with the elders, their main concern was their inability to lead and teach and their lack of biblical knowledge.⁴⁴

Church Structures

Seventy-eight percent of churches led by DTS graduates maintain a system of small groups. Further, in over 90% of these churches the small groups are led not just by pastoral staff and elders, but by spiritually mature lay leaders. However, pastors reported that less spiritually developed (but socially mature) laypersons were also active in small group leadership.

The training for small group leaders is most often prepared by the pastoral staff, especially in larger churches. This leadership is seen as being crucial since small group leaders undertake a wide variety of spiritual and social functions that mirror those of elders.

Pastors express the most gratitude for the small group leaders' (1) commitment to God, (2) fidelity to the small group structure, and (3) incorporating new members into the church. However, the pastors' most frequent concerns about the small group leaders was (1) their inability to incorporate new members in to the church and (2) their lack of biblical knowledge.

Summary

The Teleios survey suggests six important findings: First, the churches in this study generally employed an independent and local elder-rule form of government. Additionally, they utilized a small group structure to meet the leadership, spiritual, and social needs of the church.

Second, the job duties of the small group leader appear similar to those of elders, but these leaders often do not have the full-orbed character qualities of elders.

⁴⁴ Participants in this study indicated at least one elder in each local church. More research could examine further the distinctions between churches that have deacons *only*, in contrast to those with deacons *and* elders.

Third, a deacon structure is used less often, and deacons receive more limited spiritual responsibilities, even than small group leaders.

Fourth, training is derived from a variety of sources including, directly from the Bible, extra-biblical resources and from the material developed from the church staff.

Fifth, the greatest complaint among pastors for all three lay leadership groups (elders, deacons, and small group leaders) is the lack of leadership skills and biblical knowledge.

Sixth, the data indicate that elders are used by the vast majority of conservative evangelical churches and tend to accept the biblically prescribed tasks delegated to them by Scripture. Pastoral leaders seem to consider their elder boards integral to spiritual and administrative function of their respective churches.

Teleios did not repeat the survey over time to evaluate the long-term consistency of the findings, nor did it analyze any of the suggestions and conclusions discussed in this article in a well-controlled, randomized prospective study.

Much more research is required to determine the best training methods for church leaders as well as different advantages among common church government types.

CONCLUSION

Based upon the biblical theological material and the survey data, the authors offer the following four applications.

First, local churches seeking to strengthen their elder/deacon boards and their small group leaders should consider establishing a well-designed discipleship program broadly throughout the church that concentrates on Jesus' words to "[teach] them to observe all things that I commanded you" (Matt 28:20). This ministry would raise biblical and leadership skills broadly among church members and would likely surface far more qualified candidates for the three crucial positions identified by DTS pastors.

Second, elder boards could potentially benefit from developing specific biblical training that directly applies to

independent elder-led churches.⁴⁵ Although the Teleios survey did not address this question specifically, anecdotally, the authors have observed that many elder boards feel that their current materials could be improved, but they have not taken the time because of pressing ministry demands. Attention to this priority would significantly strengthen the leadership culture of an elder board.

Third, local church leaders should consider the reality of resource limitations and recognize the value of Bible-based seminaries. Clergy can consider seminary training not only for themselves, but also for their lay leaders. Today, there are various options ranging from online, one-year certifications in Bible to robust masters degree programs in a variety of residential, online and hybrid customizations. Never before in the history of the church has quality theological education been more accessible for pastors and laypersons alike. What can be more strategic than for local churches to harness seminary educational programs to complement their existing and future ministries?

Finally, all three types of leaders (elders, deacons, and small group leaders) need periodic times of spiritual renewal. If Jesus is truly the Chief Shepherd (1 Pet 5:4) and the Great Shepherd (Heb 13:20), and if believers are seated in the heavenly places in Christ (Eph 2:6), then he is immediately spiritually available and has the power to strongly intervene and lead elders. Elders who are serving in a plurality of leadership can find refreshment through mutual prayer, scheduled retreat, and regular seasons of rest. This may empower leaders with increased creativity as they make critical decisions and work with vision.

⁴⁵ For a good place to begin with this, see Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: A Biblical, Historical and Cultural Perspective* (Chicago: Moody, 2003). See also Aubrey Malphurs, *Leading Leaders: Empowering Church Boards for Ministry Excellence*, (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker, 2005).

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