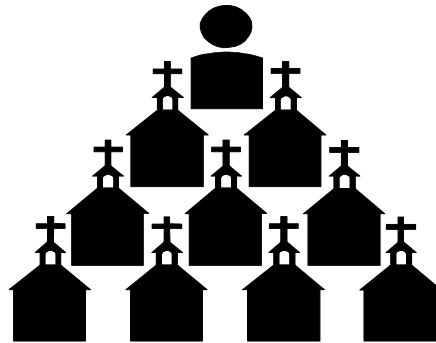


# MINISTERIAL PAPERS

presented at  
EFCA Ministerial Association's  
Midwinter 2002  
Theological Discussion

## Leadership in the Local Church:



## Biblical and Theological Considerations

January 24 & 25, 2002

# the shepherd's head

In the New Testament we read about pastors. We read about elders. We read about the congregation (Acts 6:5). How do these roles fit together in a balanced church government that makes for a healthy church? Isaiah 33:22 gives insight into the functions of *civil government* and I believe that we can apply some of these insights to *church government* too.

*The Lord is our judge; the Lord is our lawgiver; the Lord is our king;  
It is He who will save us (Isaiah 33:22).*

I first noticed this verse in a message on the faith of America's Founding Fathers. I can't remember the speaker, but he said our founding fathers deeply believed in the depravity of man and the destruction that occurs when the power of the judge, the power of the parliament and the power of the king all reside in one man. *Only the Lord can be judge, lawgiver, and King!* With sinful men, there must be branches of government and a division of power and responsibility. The British government unites its executive and legislative branches. The prime minister and members of the Cabinet are also members of Parliament and function under its authority. America set forth a principle of the separation of powers into the President, Congress, and Federal Courts to prevent any single branch of government from becoming too powerful.

Indeed, what is true for civil government is also true of church government. In some local churches there is no separation of powers. Some times a powerful pastor or elite elders rule. But, the healthiest approach in the local church, in my view, is a balance of responsibility in different branches of church government that includes the executive function of the king, the legislative function of the lawgivers, and the judicial function of the judge. The New Testament speaks of elders (1 Timothy 5:17, Titus 1:5), pastors (Ephesians 4:11), an overseer (1 Timothy 3:1), deacons (1 Timothy 3:8) as well as apostles and prophets and evangelists and many others. There is no "New Testament" church structure or organizational chart. Church history records multiple combinations that have experienced the blessing of God. The most functional church governments I have seen embody the wisdom of Isaiah.

## *JESUS CHRIST IS KING, LAWGIVER, AND JUDGE*

<u><i>His Executive Branch</i></u>	<u><i>The Legislative Branch</i></u>	<u><i>The Judicial Branch</i></u>
<i>The Pastoral Staff</i>	<i>The Elder Board</i>	<i>The Congregation</i>

### *The Judicial Branch*

The judicial function is not to write constitutions or laws, but to uphold the constitution and apply the laws to a particular problem by giving a judgment. Judges make the final call in difficult decisions. The New Testament pictures the judicial function of the congregation, not on every detail, but concerning major moves.

- *The selection of leaders* (Matthias in Acts 1 and the Seven in Acts 6) "...chose from among you..." The New Testament is not a picture of papal decree or elder rule.
- *The sending of missionaries* (Paul and Barnabas in Acts 13) "...while they were worshipping the Lord and fasting..." The selection was not in the hands of a few.
- *The discipline of disobedience* ("...tell it to the church..." (Matthew 18:17) and "...when you are assembled in the name of our Lord Jesus. (1 Corinthians 5:4). Church discipline was not just the action of an elder board or a strong pastor.
- *The care of financial resources* (Titus and the gifts for Jerusalem were decided by the church; "...he was chosen by the churches to accompany us...(2 Corinthians 8:19)." Money was in the hands of the whole even though a smaller, selected circle handled it.

Elder rule advocates that the elders of the church are to fulfill the judicial function of the church. The godly leaders must choose more godly leaders. But, in Acts 6, the apostles did not make the choice of new leaders. The congregation was charged to *choose from among yourselves*. The apostles honored the judicial function of the priesthood of all the believers refusing to usurp this authority for themselves. (The assembly/the congregation) *presented these men to the apostles, who prayed and laid their hands on them. So the word of God spread (Acts 6:6,7a)*. There must be unity agreement among the branches of church government and so the whole group chose 7 and presented these men to the apostles for their advice and consent with prayer and the laying on of hands.

The apostles could have chosen the 7, but they honored the judicial function of the congregation...*choose seven men from among you who are known to be full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom*. The apostles could have controlled who entered the circle of leadership, but they protected the responsibility and ownership of the entire congregation. *This proposal pleased the whole group. They chose Steven...* We are not told how they did it. The qualifications are given in Scripture, but not the decision making process. The style of decision-making can change from culture to culture, but the principle of the judicial function of the congregation is fixed.

In Acts 13, the elders alone did not choose the first missionaries. The Holy Spirit spoke to the congregation as they worshipped and fasted. When there was to be discipline in the early church, the final step was "*tell it to the church!*" The final step in church discipline did not belong to the elders. The final step in church discipline belongs to the whole church because the judicial function resides in the priesthood of all the believers in the congregation for major moves like leadership, missionaries, church discipline, and budgets and buildings. For elders or pastors to make the call in these areas is to usurp the judicial function from the priesthood of all believers. The gifts for Jerusalem were decided by the church; "...he was chosen by the churches to accompany us...(2 Corinthians 8:19)." Money was in the hands of the whole though handled by a smaller, selected circle.

## *The Legislative Branch*

The legislative branch of government writes the laws. They are the lawgivers. The legislature passes the laws and the executive branch enforces the laws. The legislative branch sets policy and parameters. The executive branch operates within these parameters as they carry out the laws and policies of the land. Although there is a separation of powers, a healthy government has branches that work together. The executive makes partnerships, but the legislative branch must give advice and consent. The executive appoints workers, but the legislative branch gives advice and consent.

The legislative branch of church government is the church board. Some churches call it 'the elder board,' or 'the deacon board' or a 'servant leadership team.' Whatever it is called, these are the leaders (elders) who together with the overseer pastor(s) serve as shepherds of God's flock (1 Peter 5:2).

I interpret the word *elders* to be a general term for *leaders*. In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul in essence is addressing the *leaders* as he writes, "*The elders who direct the affairs of the church are worthy of double honor...*" Therefore, 1 Timothy 5:17 paraphrased says, *The elders (leaders) who direct the affairs of the church well are worthy of double honor*. 1 Timothy 5:19 continues, *Do not entertain an accusation against an elder (leader) unless it is brought by two or three witnesses*. Therefore, I understand the New Testament admonitions to *the elders* to be commands for *all the leaders* of the local church whether it would be a member of the legislative (church board) or the executive branch (pastoral staff).

When Peter addresses his fellow elders in his first epistle he is writing to the leaders—the executive and the legislative branches of church government. *To the elders among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory to be revealed: Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as overseers...(1 Peter 5:12a)*. In this way the church of Jesus Christ is unique from church government. The elders of the local church are not just lawgivers. They are shepherds of God's flock that is under their care. Elders in the local church must fulfill the functions of a shepherd and not just a lawgiver.

From Miletus, when Paul sends for the *elders* of Ephesus in Acts 20:17 he is sending for all the leaders. He is sending for the executive and the legislative branches of church government. *Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit had made you overseers.*

- *Shepherds feed God's flock!* You know that I have not hesitated to preach anything that would be helpful to you but have taught you publicly and from house to house. I have declared to both Jews and Greeks that they must turn to God in repentance and have faith in our Lord Jesus (Acts 20:20,21).
- *Shepherds bleed for God's flock!* And now, compelled by the Spirit, I am going to Jerusalem, now knowing what will happen to me there. I only know that in every city the Holy Spirit warns me that prison and hardships are facing me...(Acts 20:22,23).
- *Shepherds heed for (guard) God's flock!* Keep watch over yourselves and all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers. Be shepherds of the church of God which he bought with his own blood (Acts 20:28).
- *Shepherds intercede for God's flock!* When he had said this, he knelt down with all of them and prayed (Acts 20:36).
- *Shepherds lead the sheep!* He tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and he carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young (Isaiah 40:11). "In everything I did, I showed you...Acts 20:35...being an example...1 Pet. 5:3...

## *The Executive Branch*

I interpret the word *elders* to be a general term for the executive branch and the legislative branch leaders together as those who *direct the affairs of the church*. I understand ...*especially those whose work is preaching and teaching* (1 Timothy 5:17) to be a reference to the executive branch of church government, which we usually call the pastor and the pastoral staff. The specific qualifications for the office of overseer (senior pastor) are given in 1 Timothy 3:1-7.

A primary difference between the overseer and the other leaders is that he has the primary responsibility for preaching and teaching. In the qualifications of the overseer in 1 Timothy 3:1-7, he must be *able to teach*. This is not required for the deacons. They must *keep hold of the deep truths of the faith with a clear conscience* (1 Timothy 3:8-10). The primary role of the pastor and his staff (the executive branch of church government) is the preaching and teaching ministry of the local church. The first responsibility of the executive branch of church government is not policies and parameters like the legislative branch of church government, but prayer and the ministry of the word like the apostles (Acts 6:4). Woe to the church who calls a pastor as overseer who is not able to teach!

The first responsibility of the executive branch of church government is the ministry of the word in preaching and teaching. This was even true of the executive branch of government in Israel-the King. Wasn't it wrong for Israel to have a king? The attitude of being "like all the nations around us" was wrong, but the office of king was not wrong. It was provided for in the Law of Moses and God chose the King. *When you enter the land the Lord your God is giving you and have taken possession of it and settled in it, and you say, 'Let us set a king over us like all the nations around us,' be sure to appoint over you the king the Lord your God chooses. He must be from among your own brothers* (Deuteronomy 17:14-15a).

The second great responsibility of the executive branch of government is initiating leadership. Executive leadership is initiating leadership. In our federal government, leaders of the legislative branch of government ask the executive branch led by the president to provide a budget and specific proposals for the needed reform. This is wise. The executive and the legislative branches work together and come to agreement on what is best for the country, with the approval of the courts if needed. In the local church, the pastoral staff must thoroughly discuss the needs and strategies for progress in the church. The pastor and his staff must prayerfully under Christ develop clear, specific proposals which are then presented to the elders for their prayerful advice and finally for their consent. The really big moves come to the congregation for ownership and approval. When there is agreement between the branches of church government the church moves ahead in unity. This is balanced, healthy church government under the Lordship of Jesus Christ.