

THE CASE FOR THE SINGULARITY of PASTORS



With the Word to the World!

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Mary, one of my students, came into my office in tears. A girl friend with whom she had spent the weekend had told her how wrong she was to be a Baptist. Baptists, her friend insisted, are unbiblical because they only have one pastor per church, whereas the New Testament clearly stipulates a plurality of pastors for each church. Mary was confused. She thought her church was right, but her friend's arguments seemed so convincing. Could I help her?

Mary's friend is not alone in rejecting the single leader concept. With increasing frequency we see the acceptance of the calling for a plurality of elders within the local church. Dr. John MacArthur, Jr., writes: "... the biblical norm for church leadership is a plurality of God-ordained elders. Furthermore, it is the only pattern for church leadership given in the New Testament. Nowhere in Scripture do we find a local assembly ruled by majority opinion, or by one pastor."¹

So, also, in his book, *Teaching and Learning*, Professor Ron Chadwick says: "Apparently each of the New Testament churches had a plurality of elders. While we would agree that the pastor is to be one of those elders, the New Testament is conveying to us that there be more than one elder for the church in each geographical location."²

He concludes: "Whether the elders in a given local church are the ordained, paid, professional staff or whether lay elders are also considered, the norm of the New Testament requires a plurality of leadership."³

I answered Mary the best I could by suggesting some of the following points on the number of pastors. As these helped her, perhaps they will help others who are questioning the correctness of our Baptist position.

While the New Testament appears to allow for plurality of pastors in each local church, it does not necessitate this. Furthermore, the position of a single pastor in each local church is not inconsistent with the evidence of the New Testament, as will be shown. In light of Biblical testimony, the single pastor position seems to have the best support.

One. The argument from qualifications of church officers.

In Biblical interpretation it is a basic rule that the interpreter should first locate the key doctrinal passage and begin his exegesis there. The undisputed doctrinal passage on the number and qualifications of church officers is I Timothy 3. This passage must form the starting point for one's understanding of the issue. Here are given the qualifications for the only two church officers mentioned, bishops (pastors) and deacons. Both the "office of a bishop" (v. 1) and the "office of a deacon" (v. 13) are mentioned in the singular. However, when these officers are related specifically to the local church, the bishop is mentioned in the singular ("A bishop then must be blameless" [v. 2]), while deacons are referred to in the plural ("Likewise must the deacons be grave" [v. 8; cf. vv. 11, 12]).

Paul sees each church as having one bishop, but several deacons. Were a plurality of bishops and deacons in view, one would expect verse 2 to read, "Let bishops be blameless, husbands of one wife," in parallel construction with verse 13, which reads, "Let the deacons be the husbands of one wife." Only forced exegesis can make this passage teach a plurality of bishops.

Since the Holy Spirit distinguishes between a plurality of deacons and a singularity of bishops functioning in the local church, it is natural to see special significance in that and make the same distinction.

Two. The argument from messengers of the seven churches.

A good case for the singularity of pastors can be made from Revelation 2 and 3. The seven letters of the Apocalypse are addressed to seven "angels" (Rev. 2:1, 8, 12, 18; 3:1, 7, 14). These "angels" (*angelos*—literally "messengers") have been variously interpreted as angels or messengers sent to John on Patmos or renowned prelatial bishops, or the pastors who presided over the churches.

The word *angelos* can mean an angelic being or a human messenger. It is used in the latter sense, for example, in James 2:25 in reference to the two spies who came to Rahab the harlot, who "received the messengers."

It is difficult to conceive of letters written to angels. In the first place, an angel gave these seven revelations from heaven (Rev. 1:1). Were they sent right back to heaven? Furthermore, the address of angels is not generally known. Then too, as Ellicott observes concerning the angel interpretation, "It is difficult to reconcile words of warning and reproof [as in chap. ii 4,5] and of promise and encouragement [as in chap. ii 10] with such a view."⁴

There is also no evidence that messengers were sent to John from the churches. Besides, the message was sent to the messengers, not by them ("Unto the angel of the church of Ephesus write . . ." [Rev. 2:1]). Trench wonders why *angelos* was ever interpreted as the messengers sent to the churches:

But in answering a letter by a messenger, you write by, you do not usually write to him; nor is it easy to see where is the correspondence between such messengers, subordinate officials of the churches, and stars; or what the mystery of the relation between them would be, or how the Lord should set forth as an eminent prerogative of His, that He held the seven stars, that is, the seven messengers, in His right hand (Rev. 2:1). The scheme breaks down at every point, and among many lame and feeble shifts must needs be regarded as the lamest and feeblest of all. I again repeat my conviction that in these angels we are to recognize the bishops of the several churches. So many difficulties, embarrassments, improbabilities attend every other solution, all which disappear with the adoption of this, while no others rise in their room, that, were not other interests, often no doubt unconsciously, at work, it would be very hard to understand how any could have ever arrived at a different conclusion.⁵

Albert Barnes, after a thorough discussion of the various interpretations of the term *angelos*, states:

The conclusion then to which we have come is that the "angel of the church" was the pastor, or the presiding presbyter in the church; the minister who had the pastoral charge of it, and who was therefore a proper

representative of it. He was a man who, in some respects, performed the functions which the angels of God do; that is, who was appointed to execute his will, to communicate his message, and to convey important intimations of his purposes to his people. To no one could the communications in this book, intended for the church, be more properly entrusted than to such an one; for to no one now would a communication be more properly entrusted than to a pastor.

The best interpretation sees *angelos* as God's messenger to the church. The personal words of warning ["I have somewhat against thee" (2:4)]; reproof ["Remember therefore from whence thou art fallen" (2:5)]; censure ["I know thy works, that thou hast a name that thou livest, and art dead" (3:1)]; "I know thy works, that thou art neither cold nor hot" (3:15)]; and encouragement ["Fear none of these things" (2:10)] best fit the pastor of each local church rather than an holy angel.

Church history tells us who some of these pastors and their successors were. For example, the church of Smyrna was pastored by the distinguished apostolic father, Polycarp. Polycarp was bishop of Smyrna at the time Ignatius of Antioch passed through that city on his way to suffer martyrdom at Rome around A.D. 108. His ministry lasted nearly fifty years in Smyrna and he was martyred in A.D. 156.

Polycarp was personally ordained by the apostle John, and while the words concerning tribulation, martyrdom and a crown of life (Rev. 2:10) were probably addressed to Polycarp's predecessor at Smyrna, they were wonderfully fulfilled in Polycarp's life. As Ellicott notes, "Polycarp is the living example of the language of the epistle."⁸

Whatever the situation might have been in the early church, at the end of the first century each church is seen to be headed by one responsible individual, the pastor, who according to these letters is charged with the oversight of the congregation and accountable to God for it.

Seiss explains why the word "messenger" is used for the pastor:

From this peculiarity in these Epistles, we may also trace something of the nature and responsibility of the ministerial office. It is not a lordship, but a service; not a service to be commanded of man, but of God. It is the business of the angel to hear for the Church, which has been committed to his care. He is its chief, its guardian, its watchman, the under-shepherd of the flock. He is to receive the word at the mouth of the Lord, and at the hands of His inspired servants, and to present it faithfully to his people, and to see that it is accepted, observed and obeyed according to the true intent of its divine Author.⁹

Three. The argument from nature of the pastorate.

Closely related to the matter of the number of pastors in the local church is the question of the names for the pastor and the nature of the pastorate. Biblically, the titles of "pastor," "bishop," and "elder" refer to the same office in the local church. The elders of Ephesus (Acts 17:20) are charged by Paul to be bishops whose function is to feed (shepherd, pastor) the flock (20:18). In I Peter 5:1, 2, Peter exhorts the elders to feed (shepherd) the flock and take the oversight (bishopric). Paul admonishes Titus to ordain elders in each church (Titus 1:5) and stipulates that these individuals, also known as bishops (1:7), must meet certain qualifications.

The same spiritually mature individual (elder) who is entrusted with the responsibility to feed the flock through teaching (pastoring) is given the responsibility to oversee the flock (bishop).

The term "elder" (*presbyteros*) speaks of the dignity of the office; the term "bishop" (*episkopos*) refers to the duties of the office; and the term "shepherd" (*poimene*) relates to the ministry of feeding and protecting.

Various problems exist because of the nomenclature for "pastor" used in the New Testament. Some churches have a pastor but also a board of elders. Since the terms "pastor," "elder" and "bishop" are applied to the same persons, and therefore indicate the same office, it is best to reserve the name "elder" for the leader or pastor of the church and speak of his spiritual helpers by their Biblical name of "deacons." Charles Haddon Spurgeon, the prince of Baptist preachers, had elders in his church; but as Charles Wagner points out in his incisive analysis, "It should be understood that Spurgeon considered his elders the way the Baptist church today would consider deacons."¹⁰

Others suggest there should be teaching elders and ruling elders in every church. However, every pastor is to be a teacher (Eph. 4:11, pastor-teachers) and the office of the pastor involves both ruling and teaching. This ruling is to be done not in a dictatorial fashion, but by example (I Pet. 5:3).

A passage commonly cited to show support for the teaching elder and ruling elder as two separate individuals is I Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine."

