



A Church led by the Brethren

So much is made of “Leadership” in our day that one would think the major issue facing the Early Church was one of Leadership, and how leadership would look in the Church. The fact is that very little is actually said about this issue, implying that leadership was not near the issue it has been made out to be, and the Leadership of Jesus Himself, through each member of the body, was the preeminent feature of their understanding of Church leadership.

This isn't to say that the role of Elders/Bishops was insignificant, but that the role they played was far less prominent than it later in Church history came to be. It is clear the Elders/Bishops carried a measure of leadership, and as such “led,” but what was not taught by the apostles was that “all” leadership rested with any one category of believers, but was rather shared by “all.” In this sense no single Church was “led” by a single individual in any definable or observable way.

In the Church of Jesus' design there are many roles of leadership, but in all cases His leadership was the preeminent factor, and was ultimately what everyone was looking to, whether that leadership manifested through male or female, young or old, new believer or seasoned believer, Eldership or newest member. All partook of aspects of leadership as Jesus led out through them at different times.

To some degree the very gifts of the Spirit provided leadership, and those gifts manifested through all believers. Yet, there were those “more-or-less” designated as Prophets, or Teachers, Apostles, or Evangelists, who certainly carried measures of leadership, but by no means was their leadership exercised in the totalitarian manner that came into expression after the time of the apostles. In fact, were one to have visited a given House Church it is likely that after one visit it would not have been apparent who was “a leader,” as no one person “led” their time together. Jesus did so, and He did it through each of the members of the body present at that gathering.

This is a paradigm shift so radical for most of us, that we have a very hard time even imagining it. It is probably safe to say that none of us have ever experienced such a thing, and we would most likely be certain that it couldn't work. As hard as it is to hear, the reason we struggle with such a notion as this is because our view of Jesus' lordship capacity in the midst of His Church is as woefully small as it is. We just can't imagine He could pull it off. We have all grown up assuming He has left the job to us in His absence. In this regard, without realizing it, we espouse dimensions of the viewpoint of Christian Deists, who viewed Jesus' involvement with the world in a very distant manner. It was their contention that God created the world, set it in motion as one would wind up a clock, and then left it in the care of capable men whom in some nebulous sort of manner He would choose to keep things on track, while He went off on His business in heavenly realms, only remotely aware of and involved in the affairs of human experience. Most of us would reject such a philosophy, yet functionally we have accepted this view by virtue of our unwillingness to believe He could actually lead through the various members of the body, rather than needing a representative head in the form of some gifted individual. We have

so accepted such a notion, that we read it into virtually every passage of the New Testament, that even remotely discusses leadership, as though this were in fact the clear teaching of the New Testament, which it is not.

The notion that each of the brethren could actually be challenged to hear Jesus' voice, and follow His lead is functionally viewed as possible but not likely, so we leave this responsibility to a few hierarchically predisposed individuals, and then we complain that we don't like what they say they heard Him tell them to do with the Church. We'd rather complain about the leadership in our Churches than develop a deep prayer life, study the Scriptures for ourselves, and listen to Jesus teach us how to function in Church. Somehow we are just not confident we could do this, and 1850 years of Church leadership have confirmed our reticence. One wonders why. Could it be that those in leadership derive just too much from holding those positions to risk losing some of it to a mobilized laity? How messy would it become if we actually trusted Jesus to lead through the laity? We interpret New Testament passages (though few they are) that deal with Church leadership through Elders, as if the Churches were in fact under the direct control and charge of the elders, yet such teaching is no where present.

But, if we look at but one emphasized dimension of the New Testament, we will see that the New Testament, far from focusing on the roles of leadership centered in titled positions, emphasized the leadership of the "Brethren." Brothers and sisters led the early Church. Among those brethren were elders for sure, but "all" the brethren carried leadership by virtue of being the family of God. Surely the eldership were leaders, but they were not the only one's who led. The whole drama didn't revolve around them. The drama revolved around the Brethren.

Consider just a few examples of the roles of the brethren:

1. Almost all the epistles of Paul were written to "the brethren" (both male and female) of the Church, with only one reference to any leadership being the recipients. How strange is this? We would have expected exactly the opposite, in fact I've talked to folks who are convinced all the epistles were written to the Church leadership, and then read to the laity. Such is just not the case.

Romans 1:7 **To all** who are in Rome, beloved of God, called to be saints...

1 Corinthians 1:2 **To the church** of God which is at Corinth, to those who are sanctified in Christ Jesus, called **saints**, with all who in every place call on the name of Jesus Christ our Lord, both theirs and ours...

2 Corinthians 1:1 **To the church** of God which is at Corinth, with all the **saints** who are in all Achaia...

Galatians 1:2 **To the churches** of Galatia...

Ephesians 1:1 **To the saints** who are in Ephesus, and faithful in Christ Jesus...

Philippians 1:1 **To all the saints** in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, **with the bishops and deacons**... (It is important to note that this is the only New Testament epistle of Paul that even mentions elders and deacons in the initial introduction of the letter, and it is almost an incidental reference, rather than them being the primary recipients of the epistle.)

Colossians 1:2 **To the saints and faithful brethren** in Christ who are in Colosse...

1 Thessalonians 1:1 **To the church** of the Thessalonians in God the Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...

2 Thessalonians 1:1 **To the church** of the Thessalonians in God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ...

2. The so called "Pastoral" epistles were written to specific individuals, who were not permanently localized within any particular fellowship of believers, but were Paul's traveling companions in ministry.
3. The other epistles, not authored by Paul, evidence a similar pattern of addressing their letters to the entire Church.

Hebrews 13:22 And **I appeal to you, brethren**, bear with the word of exhortation, for I have written to you in few words. 23 Know that our brother Timothy has been set free, with whom I shall see you if he comes shortly. 24 **Greet all those who are exercising leadership among you, and all the saints.** (Once again, those having specialized functions of leadership are almost addressed incidentally rather than being the primary recipients of this letter.)

James 1:1 **To the twelve tribes** which are scattered abroad...

1 Peter 1:1 **To the pilgrims** of the Dispersion...

2 Peter 1:1 **To those who have obtained like precious faith** with us...

1 John 1:5 5 This is the message which we have heard from Him and **declare to you...** (All the believers are addressed)

2 John vs.1 **To the elect lady and her children...** (Appears to be the sister in whose house the Church gathered. Reference is made equally to her and the saints)

3 John vs.1 To the beloved Gaius... (This appears to be the only New Testament epistle written to anyone who appears to be a leader in a Church. It's rather interesting that in this epistle John addresses a concern over a specific leader who exercises an authority over the believers that he says is improper, in 3 John vs.9 I wrote to the church, but Diotrephes, **who loves to have the preeminence among them**, does not receive us.)

Jude vs.1 **To those who are called, sanctified** by God the Father, and preserved in Jesus Christ...

Revelation 1:4 John, **to the seven churches which are in Asia...**

4. On the day of Pentecost Peter spoke the Gospel to the brethren, not just the leadership.

Acts 1:15 And in those days Peter stood up in the midst of the disciples (altogether the number of names was about a hundred and twenty), and said, 16" **Men and brethren...**

5. The task of finding suitable servants to the Church was given to "the brethren" not just

the leadership.

Acts 6:3“ Therefore, **brethren**, seek out from among you seven men of good reputation, full of the Holy Spirit and wisdom, whom we may appoint over this business...

6. The brethren were involved in directing Paul’s ministry and protecting him.

Acts 9:30 When the **brethren** found out, they brought him down to Caesarea and sent him out to Tarsus.

Acts 17:10 Then the **brethren** immediately sent Paul and Silas away by night to Berea.

Acts 17:14Then immediately the **brethren** sent Paul away, to go to the sea; but both Silas and Timothy remained there

7. Brethren accompanied Paul on his journeys.

Acts 10: 23 Then he invited them in and lodged them. On the next day Peter went away with them, and **some brethren** from Joppa accompanied him.

8. Peter wanted a message to be given to both James (a leader) and the brethren.

Acts 12:And he said, “Go, tell these things to James and to the brethren.”

9. Notice that apostles and elders in the Jerusalem Church sent a letter to the brethren (not the apostles and elders) in Antioch.

Acts 15:22Then it pleased the apostles and elders, with the whole church, to send chosen men of their own company to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas, namely, Judas who was also named Barsabas, and Silas, leading men among the brethren. 23They wrote this letter by them: The apostles, the elders, and the brethren, **To the brethren** who are of the Gentiles in Antioch, Syria, and Cilicia: Greetings.

10. Notice, it was the opinion of the brethren that held weight on the value of a person’s ministry.

Acts 16:1Then he came to Derbe and Lystra. And behold, a certain disciple was there, named Timothy, the son of a certain Jewish woman who believed, but his father was Greek. 2He was well spoken of **by the brethren** who were at Lystra and Iconium.

11. Paul’s life was among the brethren.

Acts 18:8 So Paul still remained a good while. Then he took leave of the **brethren** and sailed for Syria, and Priscilla and Aquila were with him.

12. In Acts and the Epistles, the word brethren appears about 115 times, while there are only 13 references to Elders.

Just the comparison is weighty in and of itself. Clearly the weight of discussion lies on the subject of the role of the brethren, rather than the leadership of the early Church. You would think, by the emphasis that “leadership” gets in the modern Church, that

90% of the New Testament dealt with this issue, but not so. Far greater focus was given to the life and leadership of the brethren.

13. The brethren encouraged Paul on his journey to Roman imprisonment.

Acts 28:15 The **brothers** there had heard that we were coming, and they traveled as far as the Forum of Appius and the Three Taverns to meet us. At the sight of these **men** Paul thanked God and was encouraged.

14. In Paul's discussion of the function of gathered Church life, in 1 Corinthians 14, it is interesting to note that nowhere in this chapter are any specific leadership roles or titles mentioned. It is the life of the brethren gathered unto Jesus, Who is the focus and the source of the giftings that manifest in the gathering. In fact Paul's entire focus from chapter 12 through 14, when discussing body life, is on the value and input of each member, rather than some over emphasis on the role of leadership.

It is clear from the emphasis of the New Testament that life in the early Church was far more a "brethren" thing than a "leadership" thing. Certainly leadership existed in both body life and specific leaders, but the exercise of leadership from within the body and the focus of Church life on the body far outweighs the mentioning of specific leadership roles.