



Chapter 9 The Authority of the Senior Pastor/Shepherd?

Biblically there is no support for the role of Senior Pastor - SP. It simply doesn't exist. It is an invention of latter Church history, but it definitely is not an invention of the apostles. I know that is a bold statement, and your cultural Church history background may well chaff at it, but if you take a truly fresh look at the matter you will find there is simply no support for such a role and title.

First Amongst Equals

Those who would see the description of the SP's authority as being "*First amongst equals*," have attempted to develop as close to a true biblical concept of Church leadership as can be found within the institutional approach to the local Church. Now, what does that really mean? To begin with a "*First amongst equals*" concept requires a dimension of humility and commitment, on the part of the SP, to work together with the team of leaders who oversee a given local Church. Secondly, it implies that his input would represent a greater degree of authority and responsibility than the rest of the leadership team. It works with the corporation approach that recognizes unless one specific individual is ultimately responsible to direct the Church, and resolve all bottleneck decisions, the Church will likely end up bogged down with endless disputes and split decisions. However, this approach is ultimately just as wrong as the notion of singular authority, because the corporation model for the Church has no biblical support.

Those who champion this approach often look to the Moses model of leadership, as seen in the book of Exodus and chapter 18. It is at this place that Moses distributes his authority amongst other godly leaders and yet retains ultimate authority over all of them. However, all this had the potential of experiencing a radical adjustment, with the giving of the Law and the entire nation becoming a holy priesthood unto the Lord. I didn't say an abolishing of divinely appointed leadership, but their role of "*hearers for the people*" would have made a significant change. Follow Exodus 19:

Exodus 19:3 Then Moses went up to God, and the LORD called to him from the mountain and said, "This is what you are to say to the house of Jacob and what you are to tell the people of Israel: 4" You yourselves have seen what I did to Egypt, and how I carried you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself. 5 Now if you obey me fully and keep my covenant, then out of all nations you will be my treasured possession. Although the whole earth is mine, 6 ***you will be for me a kingdom of priests and a holy nation.***" *These are the words you are to speak to the Israelites*"

Everything could have been different if they had accepted the offer of a similar level of intimacy with God that God had given to Moses. They would all have been involved in the receiving of the Law, but chapter 20 tells us, in verses 18 & 19:

Exodus 20:18 When the people saw the thunder and lightning and heard the trumpet and saw the mountain in smoke, they trembled with fear. They stayed at a distance 19 and said to Moses, "***Speak to us yourself and we will listen. But do not have God speak to us or we will die.***"

With this act of unbelief they elevated Moses to the position of the only one who could hear from God, and they returned to their carnal lifestyles and ultimately supported the golden calf

episode in chapter 32.

Why the Church would choose to have a Moses/Senior Pastor type leader, under the New Covenant privilege of being a nation of priests, with the Holy Spirit indwelling them, is a strange choice, but mankind has always chosen to hear God through someone else, when what God always wanted was a priestly people who could have direct access to Himself. Later they rejected Samuel the prophet's position, of being the voice of God to the people, and sunk another tier deeper by asking for a king, in 1 Samuel 8.

It isn't as though the people, moving into direct intimate relationship with God, as Moses had done, would have ended the value or place of Moses, because as we see in Exodus 19 Moses would have continued to be a significant leader to Israel:

Exodus 19:9 The LORD said to Moses, "I am going to come to you in a dense cloud, so that the people will hear me speaking with you and will always put their trust in you."

It is just that Moses would have significantly changed as an intermediary between God and Israel. His leadership would have continued, but not a leadership that represented the sole method for accessing God.

In the New Covenant, once again God has offered direct access of His people to Him, but during the early years of Church history, the persecution became so intense that when Constantine gave them the opportunity to come out of the woods and catacombs, and out into the open, as long as they accepted his form of the Church, with the result that the persecution would end. It probably seemed like a fair exchange at the time. At least they wouldn't have to outright deny Christ any longer, to have freedom and safety. Unfortunately, as time developed Constantine's approach, the Church members, due to the Catholic Church, lost its direct access to God, and allowed itself to be ruled by ecclesiastical politicians who told them what to believe and how to live. However, what is shocking is that what Constantine did was really nothing more than canonizing what was already in practice.

Just shortly after the death of John the Apostle the leadership of the Roman Church began to lift themselves up into exalted roles of authority. It was in this Church that the distinction between bishop and elder began to take place. Previously these two titles were merely different expressions for the one role of leadership Paul the apostle established. Probably, by no later than 140 AD, the Church had already transitioned into accepting hierarchical Church leadership, and would never be the same again.

Once again, God is calling the Church to a place of direct access to Himself, and a radical adjustment or reformation of understanding the place of leadership in the body of Christ. The day of Senior Pastors will end, in the sense that they will function as absolute directors of the Church. They will return to their original function of servant leaders, whose chief responsibility of leadership is to lead by example, instead of independent authority. The unbiblical title "*Senior Pastor*" will cease, and God's choice of terms "*Shepherds after My own heart*" will come back into focus. A title that represents caring, feeding, and protecting, instead of functioning as the CEO's of God's little corporations.

The very notion of "Senior Pastor," is terribly wrong, in light of John 10:

10 "I tell you the truth, the man who does not enter the sheep pen by the gate, but climbs in by some other way, is a thief and a robber. 2 The **man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep.** 3 The watchman opens the gate for him, and **the sheep listen to his (the shepherd's) voice.** He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes on ahead of them, and **his sheep follow him because they know his voice.** 5 But **they will never follow a**

stranger; in fact, they will run away from him because they do not recognize a stranger's voice."

6 Jesus used this figure of speech, but they did not understand what he was telling them.

7 Therefore Jesus said again, "I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

11 **"I am the good shepherd.** The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. 12 The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it. 13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep.

14 **"I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me—** 15 just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep. 16 **I have other sheep that are not of this sheep pen. I must bring them also. They too will listen to my voice, and there shall be one flock and one shepherd.**

How could it be said any clearer? Just look at the last phrase "There shall be one flock (us) and one Shepherd (Jesus). What more do we need? If we are shepherds, at all, to the flock, it is only reflective shepherding. We are not chief shepherds. We are the "Watchmen," of verse 3, who open the gate for His leadership. We don't have leadership in and of ourselves. Our leadership is only as we open the way for His leadership.

Listen to 1 Peter 4:

4 And when the Chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will never fade away.

If the title "Senior Pastor" is the equivalent of "Chief Shepherd," I don't know what it is. It dishonors the true Chief Shepherd - Jesus. He alone deserves titles of "Senior," or "Chief." To use such titles for Church leadership is to imply and promote something that cannot help but become a usurping of His authority, and a lording it over God's people.

The Error of Tiers of Leadership

No one involved in Church life is to lord it over anyone else, so however leaders handle their leadership they must keep this principle in mind.

For a moment, let's take a look at the structure of leadership as set forth in Paul's teachings. While it is not within the bounds of this study to fully explore leadership structure, those who study this area carefully will discover that the terms elder, bishop, overseer and pastor/shepherd all refer to one and the same position, and one and the same authority. The early Church knew nothing of an official position of Senior Pastor. Some have argued that James, as one of the overseers in the Jerusalem Church occupied this office, but such a conclusion is based on indirect inference rather than direct statement. It could just as easily be explained that James manifested a powerful anointing and wisdom that caused his voice to be deeply respected. During the time of the Apostles no such position as Senior Pastor existed. James being the living brother of Jesus would have logically been a highly respected brother, simply due to his connection with Jesus. Add to this his own powerful conversion and growth in the things of God and we can easily see why he was so deeply respected.

Secondly, it is also evident that the elders/bishops shared equal authority as they led their flocks.

Third, there was no such thing as the role of Senior Pastor, with another group called Elders, and a third group known as Associate Pastors. Such a breakdown of leadership structure would not show up in the Church until shortly after the departure of the apostles.

Therefore, when a Senior Pastor, who claims to be the “*First amongst equals*” attempts to manifest his “*firstness*,” or to the place of ruling authority over the other elders/bishops/associate pastors, he does so without a shred of New Testament biblical authority. It is actually amazing that associate leaders have ever submitted to such a role definition, as if it was certainly a God defined role, when in reality there is no biblical support for it. I anticipate this became accepted, because it was the only means of entering into leadership at the time. We tip our hat to the deceptive work of the enemy of the Church, who so over complicated the Church, by moving it towards a corporate image, necessitating a CEO and his private staff, over which he hires, fires, and rules. It makes me chuckle to think of how ridiculous and saddening this must all look to the Lord. It is amazing that such a setup has continued to exist, in light of it having no biblical support.

The leader who uses his calling to develop an assumed authority, and to squelch the concerns of others in the eldership, for a given policy or direction of the Church, is ultimately seeding his field with the seeds of division and discord. If fellow leaders don't sense that their opinion and their concerns matter to a strong leader, then it won't be long before they are either going to be looking over the wall for a Church to identify with, where a strong leader is less controlling and more humble in his approach to leadership, or they will wrestle with the temptation to take all the disgruntled sheep in the fellowship and start a new gathering.

Certainly we recognize that a given fellowship may have more than one elder in their midst, and among those elders one elder may manifest a stronger leadership authority than the others, but this does not justify him being considered the SP or a senior elder, or having any greater say than the others. If anything, it puts a greater responsibility upon him to more accurately communicate the mind of Christ.

The stronger elder must keep in mind that the leadership team are in the trenches on a daily basis, fielding the concerns of the people, and if they are being forced to maintain policies and beliefs that they don't agree with, and at the same time are being told to uphold them without further questions, then that strong elder is slowly but surely driving the leaders towards either disloyalty or departure. There is absolutely no New Testament biblical precedent for this type of authority, and because of it, over time, it will erode the life of the fellowship, causing stress, disunity, and perhaps division.

Relationship is Critical

If there are concerns great enough for an elder to feel his conscience is being compromised by the belief of a strong elder, then that strong elder needs to recognize that either he is being too strong about his belief, or he needs to take as much time as is necessary to resolve the concern and come to a unity of mind. Such concerns must not be ignored and allowed to become a point of stress. The flock is always watching on, looking for unity in the leadership. If they detect that the leaders and the stronger elder are at odds with each other it creates an inner tension and confusion. Sheep have a need to see their leaders all in agreement on where they are leading the Church. When they don't see this agreement it creates anxiety which will erupt into division if not handled properly.

The leading elder - LE has the responsibility to soothe the concerns of the other leaders, rather than roll over them in a demanding and unresponsive manner. Support leadership, by the very nature of their position, wrestle with a fear that because they aren't as persuasive they don't really have any say at all. In most cases this is not a realistic concern, but it behooves the LE to continually go out of his way to communicate to the other leaders that he respects their opinions, is open to correction, knows he can be wrong at times, and cares what the other elder leadership are thinking and feeling, even to the point of being willing to suspend his viewpoint until greater

unanimity takes place.

When the principle of *“What takes place at the top will always trickle down,”* is kept in mind, then LE will keep in mind that joy in the Church will never be any greater than the degree of joy in the leadership. Joy in the leadership is generally in direct proportion to the degree of respect that is accorded to them by the LE. When lording it over takes place, the leadership become restless and anxious of spirit. Mutual respect is a major key to joy in the leadership and ultimately joy in the congregation.

LEs, if they are to exist at all, must recognize one of their chief responsibilities is to keep the unity of the leadership strong. To do so requires a strong commitment to relationship, building trust, showing mutual respect, and spending time listening to the concerns of leaders. He must regularly be emphasizing their team involvement, and consciously resist any temptation to communicating to the leaders that he is in charge. Because of this, the role of the LE is requires a high level of personal security in his emotional sense of value and personhood. Insecurity is commonly exhibited in LEs who regularly make it clear to the leadership that they are the boss. This can be done by direct statement, or by exercising decision making apart from the knowledge of the leadership team. LEs are not one man teams, they are men who carry the greatest degree of responsibility for the unity and joy of the fellowship, and know it is best maintained by a happy and affirmed leadership team.

Let's come back to the matter of relationship between the LE and his leadership team. The LE must maintain, as one of his highest priorities, a close friendship relationship with each of the leaders, their wives and family. The Church will never be more relationally intimate and joyful than they see modeled in their leadership. If the LE is a lone ranger, and distant emotionally, empathically, and relationally the Church will struggle more with unrest in its people and generally a lack of intimate relationships in the body. I know this can feel like a straight jacket to a LE, who is by nature relationally withdrawn, but if you can hear this and recognize how much your leadership team needs this from you then you will stretch yourself to become the kind of LE that is comfortable with intimate relationship with the team. Add to this the fact that if you will develop and maintain this intimacy you will find that when you strongly believe the Church needs to go in a particular direction the leaders will be far more inclined to agree with you without a lot of debate about it, because they already trust you. For a leader trust is a key. You will never be able to influence the team beyond their trust in you, and trust can never be built by just being a man of integrity. It takes relational intimacy and solid respect to create trust. Community among the leadership is just as important as community among the flock. At all levels we must be moving towards community if we hope to walk in health and unity.

Be Courageous - Ask your Leadership How they are doing

If you, as a LE aren't sure where you sit with the other elders on this score, I strongly suggest that you get alone with each of them and their families and ask them. Your transparency and openness will go a long way. Do more listening than talking. They need to believe that you really want to know how they feel. If they have been struggling with this for quite some time they will likely be fearful of expressing their concerns and may need your extra encouragement to do so. If you make them feel safe enough you may find out that they have been struggling with some hurts that you didn't even know about, but which had been draining their strength for ministry and stifling their joy. The LE simply must take the responsibility for setting the tone of the whole Church, from the leadership into the body. With authority comes responsibility, and relationship is a major responsibility for the LE.

It is both exciting and challenging to be the LE, but if the LE handles his authority properly he should find that with each passing year the team will become more and more solid and able to accomplish greater and greater tasks for the kingdom of God.

Why have Senior Pastors at all?

For a moment we will return to one of my original premises, “*Why have Senior Pastors at all?*” While this is controversial, and the revelation of God’s purposes are only just beginning to gain attention, it is well within the bounds of this document to make a few comments about where the Church will soon be led.

The day will come, when the corporation, CEO, institutional Church will complete a transition towards the House Church, or better defined as the biblical Church. Already the movement or reformation is gaining ground, to the tune of around fifty million in the U.S. alone. It will continue, and in time will replace the current approach to Church and leadership.

The Church Jesus will identify most closely with will be led by Apostles, Prophets, Elders and Teachers, as Paul indicates in 1 Corinthians 12 and 1 Timothy 3:

1 Corinthians 12:27(NIV) Now you are the body of Christ, and each one of you is a part of it. 28And in the Church God has appointed **first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers**, then workers of miracles, also those having gifts of healing, those able to help others, those with gifts of administration, and those speaking in different kinds of tongues.

1 Timothy 3:1 Here is a trustworthy saying: If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer, he desires a noble task.

It was not until the Catholic Church (authorized and constructed by Constantine) moved the Church away from this leadership approach, that leadership concepts other than what the Scripture writing Apostles (authorized by Jesus Christ) taught, even came into existence. And what a shame too.

The day the Church moved towards an institution, made up of natural stones and timbers, rather than a living organism, made up of living stones and living timbers, it began to lose its understanding of New Testament leadership and the beauty of the Church, as it was in the first century, and has rarely been seen since.

The day will come when the term “*shepherd servant*” will return, and “*Pastor*” will fade away.

J.W. McGarvey writes: “The third and last official title which we shall notice is pastor or shepherd. This term, in the substantive form, is used but once in the New Testament with reference to **Church officials**. It is in the well known passage, Eph. 4:11, where pastors are enumerated among the gifts bestowed upon the Church by Christ. The evidence that this term designates the overseers or elders, is conclusive, and may be briefly stated. The Greek term for shepherd is *poimeen*, and the verb *poimaino* means to do the work of a shepherd. Now, he to whom this verb applies is a shepherd, just as he who sows is a sower, he who reaps is a reaper, he who speaks is a speaker, he who sings is a singer, &c., &c. But Paul exhorts the overseers in Ephesus “to be shepherds to the Church.” Acts 20: 28; and Peter exhorts the elders of the Churches to which he writes, “Be shepherds to the flock of God which is among you,” and promise that when the “chief shepherd” shall appear, they shall receive a crown of glory. They then, were shepherds and Christ, the chief shepherd.

The, term pastor, the Latin for shepherd, has come into common use from the influence of the Latin version of the Scriptures. **There is one all sufficient reason for preferring our own Anglo Saxon term shepherd. It is found in the fact that pastor has become perverted by sectarian usage, and designates in popular phraseology, an entirely different office from the one to whom it is applied in the Scriptures. It has become a synonym for a settled preacher, and is often used for the purpose of distinguishing the preacher from those who are Scripturally called the pastors of the Church. It will perhaps be impossible to recover the term from this abuse, and therefore, it is better to throw it away.**

Another good reason for preferring shepherd is, that its primary meaning is familiar to the most illiterate reader, and the metaphor by which the overseer is thus styled is perfectly intelligible to every one; whereas, the term pastor is known to the masses only in its appropriated sense.”

Del Birkey says it well in his book *The House Church* (Scottsdale: Herald Press, 1988), 89:

There resides in no one an inherent right to control another in Christ's Church. Nowhere in the New Testament are Church leaders instructed to exercise authority over the people of God. Any ecclesial authority is always the authority of the whole (Acts15). Ecclesial authority is never prepackaged according to sex or status, nor is it ever given to any one clergy or federation....

Eldership is always a matter of ministering, not administering. The authority of elders is therefore functional-relational rather than positional-institutional.

A quote from House Church.Org is helpful in this area:

“They (the early Church and the apostles) understood each Church to be an extended family unit (the idea of Churches being institutions or organizations would have been totally alien to them), and practiced non-hierarchical plural male leadership that had arisen from within the Church they would subsequently lead. This indigenous eldership (elder, pastor/shepherd, bishop/overseer being synonymous terms in the New Testament) sought to lead consensually wherever possible, and was understood to be purely functional and not in any way positional.”

Dr John Drane, *“Introducing the New Testament”*. Chapter 22 and the section on The Institutional Church on page 397 Published by Lion. Revised 1999 Edition:

“Instead of the community of the Spirit that it had originally been, the Church came to be seen as a vast organization. Instead of relying on the Spirit's direct guidance it was controlled by an hierarchy of ordained men, following strict rules and regulations which covered every conceivable aspect of belief and behavior, and when the Spirit featured in this scheme it was taken for granted that what the leaders decided was what the Spirit was saying. By the middle of the 2nd Century the change was complete. At the beginning, the only qualification for membership of the Church had been a life changed by the Holy Spirit. Indeed, at the start there had been no concept of Church 'membership' at all...But by the end of the 1st Century things were rather different. Now the key to membership of the Church not found in inspiration by the Spirit, but in acceptance of ecclesiastical dogma and discipline. And to make sure that all new members had a good grasp of what that meant, baptism itself was no longer the spontaneous expression of faith in Jesus as it had originally been. Now it was the culmination of a more or less extended period of formal instruction and teaching about the Christian faith. And in all this we can see how the life of the Spirit was gradually squeezed out of the Body of Christ, to be replaced as the Church's driving force by the more predictable if less exciting movement of organized ecclesiastical machinery.”

It should be obvious that our Lord never intended for this term “*Shepherd*” to become a term synonymous with the CEO director of an institutionalized form of his Church. The New Testament never anticipates Church staffs, with CEO corporate leadership, who oversee buildings, employees, and make policies. This is an aberration attributed to the Catholic Church and Constantine. The term was originally one used to describe the action and behavior of one who teaches the body of Christ the Word of God and leads them into green pastures of safe and godly living.

When the Church has done with its institutions and has returned to the simplicity of the House Church, then 90% of the current job descriptions of the Senior Pastor will be non-existent, and he will simply function as a servant shepherd to God’s people, without all of the additional elements of a CEO to a corporation. His role will simplify to its original intent of being one who, through godly example and wise teaching, leads the people of God to understand the ways of God and intimacy with Christ. No longer will the shepherd be consumed with details of Church administration (salaries, policies, vision statements, employees, buildings to build and maintain, etc.). He will finally be able to return to what he was originally called to do, I.e. study the Word of God, pray, train up other leaders, and instruct the people of God in God’s Word. What a glorious and productive day that will be. When shepherds are finally examples of working well in the common workplace of mankind, strong in prayer, study of the Word, and godly character, again the Church will begin to flourish. The average pastor, according to reliable polls, rarely spends more than 5 minutes per day in focused prayer. The majority of his day is spent in extraneous duties of administration and policy making. What a sad state of affairs.

If you asked the average pastor if he would like to be done with all of the administrative details of his life, and be allowed to spend multiplied hours in prayer and the study of the Word he would likely swoon at the thought, feelings of heaven would sweep over him, but alas they would be short-lived as he returns to his reality and the slavery to matters of administration he is involved in. All hail the institutional Church, long live CEO’s, prayerlessness, lack of power in preaching, nearly non-existent miraculous manifestations through Church leadership, stress, anxiety, tight budgets, frustrated staffs, strained marriages and families, decaying buildings, and endless meetings. Aren’t we glad we left the early Church pattern?