



The Case for the Singularity of Pastors

by Manfred E. Kober

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?

I answered her the best I could by suggesting some of the following points on the number of pastors. As these helped Mary, 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.

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 1

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.

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 prelatical 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."¹

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 correspondency between such messengers, subordinate offi-

cials 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.²

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 purpose 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.³

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. 156.⁴

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, "Poly-

carp is the living example of the language of the epistle."⁵

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.

"The idea that a church functions better with one overseer is exactly what Baptists have historically believed and what they believe the Bible teaches."

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 undershepherd 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.⁶

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 1 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."⁷

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 (1 Pet. 5:3).

A passage commonly cited to show support for the teaching elder and ruling elder as two separate individuals is 1 Timothy 5:17, "Let the elders that rule well be counted worthy of double honour, especially they who labour in the word and doctrine."

Homer Kent correctly remarks:

This verse does not give sufficient warrant for the Reformed view of two classes of leaders, those who ruled and those who taught. Every elder is engaged in teaching (3:2). However, some would do so with more energy and excellence than others. The differentiation in this verse is between those who do the work perfunctorily and those who labor to the end of strength in performing their function.⁸

Thus we have an explanation of what it means to rule well; namely, to labor in the Word and doctrine. Most churches with a plurality of elders, however, have elders who are untrained and unqualified to teach God's Word. Churches that make a distinction between teaching elders and ruling elders do so without Biblical justification. A pastor's qualifications include both teaching and ruling. Proper ruling involves sound teaching.

It has been argued that the term "elder" is of Jewish derivation, where it was used of the governing body of the synagogue. Since each synagogue had a plurality of presbyters, the same system must have been adopted by the early Jewish-Christian congregation. Even if this controversial derivation could be shown to be correct, that "the existing structure of the synagogue with its plurality of elders is paralleled by the New Testament church organization," it would be pointed out that even in the synagogue there was a "head of the synagogue" known as the *archisynagogos* (ruler of the synagogue). "The plurality in this case would not forbid the predominant leadership of one elder."⁹

THE ARGUMENT FROM REFERENCE TO INDIVIDUAL PASTORS

The New Testament repeatedly makes reference to local churches. In each case in which the pastor of the local congregation is mentioned by name, there appears to be one pastor-bishop-elder responsible for the congregation. There might have been a plurality of pastors in each church, but the evidence points to one prominent individual in each case:

Passage	Person	Place
1 Timothy 1:2, 3	Timothy	Ephesus
Acts 15:13	James	Jerusalem
Colossians 4:12	Epaphras	Colosse
Philemon 23		
Philippians 2:25	Epaphroditus	Philippi
Titus 1:4, 5	Titus	Crete

It can be argued, of course, that not all these individuals were pastors in the contemporary sense of the word. James was an apostle. Timothy and Titus were apostolic messengers appointed and sent by the apostle Paul. However, in essence they functioned as pastors. Epaphras most certainly was the pastor at Colosse. Paul wrote of him as "a faithful minister of Christ" profitable for them in Colosse (Col. 1:7). That does not exclude other pastors in Colosse, but it is strange that they are not specifically mentioned as equals and co-workers in the same locality. When pastors are mentioned by name, they appear to be the leaders of the church. Wagner underscores the prominence that James enjoyed in Jerusalem:

In a consideration of the church and its development in Acts 15, James seems to come to the forefront and is perhaps the nearest thing in the early church to what we consider a pastor today. By no stretch of the imagination could he simply be considered a moderator. After several of the congregation speak, including Peter, Paul and Barnabas, James exerts his "pastoral leadership," sums up the situation and makes a spiritual judgment (Acts 15:19-21).¹⁰

After citing other cases of James's pastoral leadership, Wagner concludes:

It is no coincidence that James as a singular person is identified with the local church at Jerusalem. It must be conceded that while there were many elders in the church and while the apostles still had a degree of authority there, we begin to see signs of one man's coming to the forefront in a place of leadership (not a dictatorial hierarchy) and being recognized as such.¹¹

THE ARGUMENT FROM BEGINNING OF THE ASIATIC CHURCHES

Of the seven churches of Asia Minor addressed in Revelation 2 and 3, only the beginning of the church of Ephesus is known (Acts 18:18, 19; 19:10). Paul spent three years at Ephesus. Many people of that city responded to the gos-

pel (Acts 19:18), and from there the gospel spread throughout most of Asia (19:26).

Under the prolonged ministry of Paul "mightily grew the word of God and prevailed" (19:20) so that "many that believed came, and confessed, and shewed their deeds" (19:18). It is safe to assume there were hundreds of believers worshipping in dozens of house churches. House churches are specifically and repeatedly mentioned in the New Testament.

When the church at Jerusalem began, the apostles met with believers and broke "bread from house to house" (Acts 2:46). While Peter was imprisoned, the saints were gathered for prayer in the house of Mary, the mother of John Mark (Acts 12:12). The godly couple Priscilla and Aquila had a church in their house in two separate locations (Rom. 16:3, 5; 1 Cor. 16:19). In Colosse the church met in the house of Nymphas (Col. 4:15) as well as in the house of Philemon (Philemon 2).

This situation makes it understandable how Paul could summon the elders of the church of Ephesus (Acts 20:17). The church would here be a reference to all believers in Ephesus, organized into house churches, each with its own elder. That this is not an unusual usage for the term "church" is seen from Acts 9:31 (NIV), "Then the church throughout Judea, Galilee and Samaria enjoyed a time of peace."

It is correct that elders are addressed in the plural in certain localities such as Ephesus (Acts 20:17), Jerusalem (Acts 16:4) and Philippi (Phil. 1:1), but these were large cities where the Word of God had prospered and where there might well have been several house churches. Or it might mean that some churches had a plurality of elders at first while others did not. Strong makes an interesting observation on this point:

In certain of the New Testament churches there appears to have been a plurality of elders (Acts 20:17; Phil. 1:1; Titus 1:5). There is, however, no evidence that the number of elders was uniform, or that the plurality which frequently existed was due to any other cause than the size of the churches for which these elders cared. The New Testament example, while it permits the multiplication of assistant pastors according to need, does not require a plural eldership in every case; nor does it render this eldership, where it exists, of coordinate authority with the church. There are indications, moreover, that, at least in certain churches, the pastor was one, while the deacons were more than one, in number.¹²

The evidence from Acts could be used both ways—in support of singularity or plurality. However, the doctrinal passage speaks of one bishop and several

deacons in the local church, and by the end of the New Testament this is precisely the situation in the seven churches. Furthermore, when a plurality of elders is seen in a local church, it can be satisfactorily explained. It does not need to be understood as a functioning plurality in that local congregation.

We know, for example, that Paul ordained elders in every church (Acts 14:23) and instructed Titus to do likewise (Titus 1:5). But were these elders to minister in the churches in which they were ordained or were they sent from there as missionaries?

We know how the church at Ephesus began, but what about Smyrna, Pergamos, Thyatira, Sardis, Philadelphia, Laodicea? Is it not reasonable to suppose these churches were established by elders Paul ordained in Ephesus? Luke reports that during their two years in Ephesus "all they which dwell in Asia heard the word of the Lord Jesus" (Acts 19:10). Some knowledge of the beginning of the church of Colosse is possible. Guthrie suggests that Epaphras, the founder of the church, was saved under Paul, ordained and sent by him:

From the references to Epaphras it would seem reasonable to suppose that the church originated as a result of his ministry. In i. 7 Paul says, "As you also learned of Epaphras our dear fellowservant, who is for you a faithful minister of Christ," which suggests that he was responsible for the instruction of these Christians. In iv. 12, 13 he is described as "one of you," i.e., he was a Colossian, and Paul testifies to his great zeal for his own people and for the neighbouring Christians in the Lycus valley. Although no definite statement is made to this effect there is strong probability that Epaphras was converted to Christianity as a result of Paul's ministry at Ephesus (cf. Acts xix. 10).¹³

It is certainly possible that the elders who were ordained in every church by Paul, Titus and others stayed in these churches to minister as a plurality. It is more probable that they were sent from there, like Epaphras, to the surrounding area to reach out in missionary and evangelistic work. Only thus can it be explained how these six churches of the Apocalypse were established. This method of evangelism explains how a few individuals could "have turned the world upside down" (Acts 17:6).

The concept of ordaining elders in every church parallels the present-day practice of ordaining missionaries, who are certainly elders and leave their membership in their home church while they go to home or foreign fields to establish local churches. In this case, a church like Ephesus would have a plurality of elders but they would not all function in that church.

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ones, a life that radiates love. This is the love; a friend reminded me, that says, "I can always go one more mile."

"And now abideth faith, hope, [love], these three; but the greatest of these is [love]" (1 Cor. 13:13). Let love be your summertime word from the Lord—*not just this month of love but all your life. Beloved, let us love!* ■

Singularity of Pastors

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It should be observed that at times the term "elder" could be used in a nontechnical sense such as it most certainly is in 1 Timothy 5:1 ("Rebuke not an elder, but intreat him as a father"), whereas in verse 17 it is employed in a technical sense.¹⁴ Perhaps the reference to elders in the church in James 5:14 is such a nontechnical usage, referring to older, spiritually mature men. It could be a reference to the pastors in the entire locality or in the local church. In no case does the New Testament yield absolute proof of a plurality of elders in a given local church; consequently, it does not demand that each local church today have a plurality of pastors to be Scriptural.

THE ARGUMENT FROM SYMBOLISM OF CHIEF SHEPHERD AND THE FLOCK

In 1 Peter 5:4 Christ is pictured as the Chief Shepherd Who has charge over His flock. In John's Gospel He presents Himself as the Good Shepherd (10:11) and speaks of the fact that there is just "one fold, and one shepherd" (10:16). As Christ, the "one shepherd," is the only Head over the universal church, "the one flock," so the pastor as the undershepherd is the only shepherd over the local church and solely responsible for it (1 Pet. 5:2, 3).

If the symbolism holds true, and we are convinced it does, as there is just one universal shepherd there should be only one local shepherd. The symbolism does not prove the singularity of pastors, but certainly points to it.

Many of our churches have a type of plurality of pastors with assistant pastors, pastors of visitation, evangelism, Christian education, youth and so forth. Perhaps the titles are not the best and a "pastor of evangelism," for example, might be better referred to as the "director of evangelism." However, Baptist churches have historically had one man who bore the responsibility of the oversight, which would be true even in those churches that have assistant pastors for specific areas of ministry. This leadership by one man appears to be Biblically sound and practically wise.

The frequent charge that single leadership leads to dictatorship should be

countered with the observation that a group of leaders can likewise abuse their power. The answer is not to multiply the number of leaders but to stress the Biblical nature of the leader. His task is not to lord but to lead by example (1 Pet. 5:3). The issue is this: What is the Biblical pattern for leadership in the local church? Some argue that a plurality of pastors can minister much better to the needs of a congregation than can one pastor. This position, while sounding cogent, actually fails to understand the nature of the ministry. The New Testament neither teaches that one man ministers to all the needs of a congregation nor suggests a plurality of men to minister to these needs. The Holy Spirit assigns to each member of the church a specific place to

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minister in an area for which he is uniquely gifted and prepared (1 Cor. 12:12-28). The pastor is God's gift to the church to prepare the saints so they can carry on "the work of the ministry, for the edifying of the body of Christ" (Eph. 4:12). No one person or group of persons is capable of supplying all the spiritual help a congregation needs. It is the "whole body fitly joined together" (Eph. 4:16) that brings nourishment, increase and edification under the Lordship of Christ and the pastor as undershepherd providing spiritual food and special oversight.

Even those churches that advocate plurality of pastors admit people naturally look up to one leader. Stabbert and Johnston, who have written a forceful defense of the plurality of elder position, suggest the practicality of one leader even amidst a plurality.

It may be nice, where several pastors are working together, to have a chairman who can superintend the internal affairs of the board. As an equal and perhaps as one who has the specific gift of leading or administration (Rom. 12:8; 1 Cor. 12:28), he could keep the team functioning in an orderly manner and provide insights as to how they might work together more effectively.¹⁵

Does this not remind one of the Biblical office of a bishop (overseer)?

Even Gene Getz, the mentor of many of the assemblies with a plurality of

elders, admits that in the assemblies he started in Dallas, there is present a strong pastor-leader. He says of these assemblies that their success is due in part to

... a strong pastor/leader, the man in the pulpit, the one who sets the tone for the ministry. What upsets many people is the claim by some that certain successful churches don't have such a leader. I maintain they all do. He may be "laid back" in style, but he still leads.¹⁶

When the major proponents of the plurality of elders view make such admissions they are simply realizing the headship of one individual in the local church, a man called of God, His messenger to that church. The idea that a church functions better with one overseer is exactly what Baptists have historically believed and what they believe the Bible teaches. A body functions better with one head than with several. Christ as the Chief Shepherd has called an undershepherd for each flock. He leads his sheep by example. He feeds them with the Word. He rules them, not as a dictator but as a delegate from the Lord. For his faithfulness he deserves double honor on earth and has reserved the elder's crown in glory. ■

¹Charles John Ellicott, *A Bible Commentary for Students* (London and Edinburgh: Marshall Brothers, Ltd., n.d.), VIII, 539.

²Richard Chenevix Trench, *Commentary on the Epistles to the Seven Churches in Asia* (New York: Charles Scribner, 1862), pp. 82, 83.

³Albert Barnes, *Notes on the New Testament* (Grand Rapids: Kregel Publications, 1966), p. 1551.

⁴McClintock and Strong, *Cyclopaedia of Biblical, Theological and Ecclesiastical Literature* (New York: Harper & Brothers, 1894), VIII, 361.

⁵Ellicott, p. 542.

⁶J. A. Seiss, *The Apocalypse* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1964), p. 69.

⁷Charles U. Wagner, "... And He Gave Some ... Pastors" (Tacoma, Washington: Northwest Baptist Seminary Press, 1977), p. 18.

⁸Homer A. Kent, *The Pastoral Epistles* (Chicago: Moody Press, 1958), pp. 181, 182.

⁹Merrill C. Tenney, *Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible* (Zondervan Publishing House, 1975), p. 267.

¹⁰Wagner, p. 5.

¹¹Wagner, p. 5.

¹²Augustus H. Strong, *Systematic Theology* (New York: A. C. Armstrong and Son, 1896), p. 510.

¹³Donald Guthrie, *The Pauline Epistles: New Testament Introduction* (London: The Tyndale Press, 1963), p. 161.

¹⁴A. T. Robertson, *Word Pictures in the New Testament* (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1931), IV, 583, 587.

¹⁵Bruce Stabbert and Dennis Johnston, *Team Ministry: A Case for Plurality in Church Leadership* (Monograph, 1977), p. 103.

¹⁶Larry Richards and Gene Getz, "A Biblical Style of Leadership?" *Leadership* (1981, Vol. II, No. 2), p. 77.