

Pastoring Together: The Privilege and Pitfalls of Team Ministry

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears. (Acts 20:28-31 ESV)

It was when he tried to talk about 'the boat' that his words began to falter and tears welled up in his eyes...Finally, watching Joe struggle for composure over and over, I realized that 'the boat' was something more than just the shell or its crew. To Joe, it encompassed but transcended both - it was something mysterious and almost beyond definition. It was a shared experience - a singular thing that had unfolded in a golden sliver of time long gone, when nine good-hearted young men strove together, pulled together as one, gave everything they had for one another, bound together forever by pride and respect and love. Joe was crying, at least in part, for the loss of that vanished moment but much more, I think, for the sheer beauty of it. Daniel James Brown, The Boys in the Boat

Goal: That God's Word on pastoral teams would renew us for faithful joy in team ministry.

1) Renew our Sense of Privilege at Pastoral Team Ministry

- a. Called by God himself into this brotherhood of shepherds
- b. Called to guard his blood-bought flock

2) Renew our Biblical Convictions about Pastoral Teams

- a. The Principle of Biblical Pastors
 - Qualifications of Eldership
 - Godly Character (1 Tim. 3:1-7, Titus 1:5-9)
 - Pastoral Character (Acts 20:17-35, 1 Thess. 2:1-11, 1 Pet. 5:1-4)
 - Pastoral Competence—able to fulfill the full pastoral office
 - Biblical Metaphors—Shepherd, Builder, Farmer—give us faith for the endurance needed and guard us from worldly definitions of leadership.
 - Guards us from ordaining “pastors/elders” with a functional authority but who are not qualified. A temptation for the sake of “mission” during seasons of peace/progress and is exposed in seasons of decline/conflict/theological dangers.
- b. The Principle of Plurality
 - “The NT provides conclusive evidence that the pastoral oversight of the apostolic churches was a team effort...” Alexander Strauch

- NT vocabulary (Note Addendum 1)
 - Jesus' model of team ministry
 - Paul's model of team ministry
 - Guards us from resorting to a single voice of functional authority for the sake of team efficiency. Experience and gifting are important, but excessive deference can lead to blind spots on a team or in a lead pastor.
- c. The Principle of a Single Office
- 1 Peter 5:1-4, Acts 20
 - Guards us from a radical specialization on a pastoral team and should caution us in installing bi-vocational elders who are unable to fulfill the full office due to time or gifting limitations
- d. The Principle of Shared Authority
- Hebrews 13:17: *"They are keeping watch...as those who will have to give an account"*
 - There should be no silent elders
 - Elders should not view the church as their singular responsibility
 - Implications for regularity, content, and dynamics of team meetings
 - Guards us from indifference or unnecessary anxiety or conflict in team decisions.
 - Note on a Biblical decision process:
 - What we must do (Biblical commands or patterns)
 - What we could do (Biblical silence or allowance in application)
 - What we can do (Pastoral team/church capacity)
 - What we will do (Wise application of resources)
- e. The Principle of Distinctions in Gifting
- Notice the examples of differences in gifting and experience among pastors in the NT.
 - 1 Cor. 12. All gifts are needed and encouraged. Qualified weaknesses are to be expected.
 - The necessity of honest and humble discussions about gifting among the pastoral team. Constant criticism and flattery are both harmful.
 - A team is not a hierarchy, with pastors "ascending a corporate ladder."
 - Right and Wrong views of the lead pastor:
 - Gifted/Experienced in preaching, theological vision, guiding the team.
 - Not the "best pastor in all areas."
 - Wrong expectations/definitions of a lead pastor lead to false guilt or autocratic pride in the lead pastor, disfunction or discontent in other

pastors, and can result in devastating conflict, division, and departures on the team.

3) **Renew our Pastoral Fellowship**

- a. Acts 20, 1 Timothy 4:14, 2 Timothy 4:10—keeping watch on ourselves and our fellow pastors
- b. A practice of formal and informal fellowship that includes encouragement, exhortation, and honesty regarding our own weaknesses. The emphasis is not evaluation of others, but seeking brotherly help for our own faithfulness.
- c. Fellowship among pastoral wives
 - Should not be held to the same standard as the pastoral team
 - Providing times of fellowship, care, and encouragement for the wives can provide enduring strength for a lifetime of ministry
- d. A pastoral team should have some ongoing awareness of the following categories of their team members:
 - Soul health and growth in godliness
 - Joy in the gospel, in the Word, and in prayer
 - Major areas of temptation
 - Current focus in sanctification
 - Peace or anxiety related to physical or financial health
 - Effort in evangelism
 - Marriage and parenting health
 - Marriage is encouraging, honest, romantic
 - Marriage conflict resolved Biblically
 - Wife is growing in the Lord, submitting her life to the Word, supportive of the church and pastoral team.
 - Major parenting burdens are known
 - Pastors should also find ways to encourage the pastor's wife and children in their support of his ministry.
 - Ministry zeal or discouragement
 - Peace or anxiety in ministry
 - Refreshed by encouragement, not crushed by criticism
 - Workload—aiming for peaceful diligence

4) **Renew our Love for our Fellow Pastors**

- a. Our character toward our team members must display the gospel
 - Gospel-Worthy Love will find expression in gratitude, faith, humility, encouragement, and honesty.

- b. Business colleagues and best friends are both unhelpful models for our relationship to our fellow pastors.
- c. Study Paul's love for his various co-workers.

Greet Prisca and Aquila, my fellow workers in Christ Jesus, who risked their necks for my life, to whom not only I give thanks but all the churches of the Gentiles give thanks as well. Romans 16:3-4

When Timothy comes, see that you put him at ease among you, for he is doing the work of the Lord, as I am. So let no one despise him. Help him on his way in peace, that he may return to me, for I am expecting him with the brothers. 1 Corinthians 16:10-11

When I came to Troas to preach the gospel of Christ, even though a door was opened for me in the Lord, my spirit was not at rest because I did not find my brother Titus there. So I took leave of them and went on to Macedonia. 2 Corinthians 2:12-13

So that you also may know how I am and what I am doing, Tychicus the beloved brother and faithful minister in the Lord will tell you everything. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know how we are, and that he may encourage your hearts. Ephesians 6:21-22

But you know Timothy's proven worth, how as a son with a father he has served with me in the gospel. Phil. 2:2

I have thought it necessary to send to you Epaphroditus my brother and fellow worker and fellow soldier, and your messenger and minister to my need, for he has been longing for you all and has been distressed because you heard that he was ill. Indeed he was ill, near to death. But God had mercy on him, and not only on him but on me also, lest I should have sorrow upon sorrow. Phil 2:25-27

Conclusion: God loves pastoral teams and he has bestowed on us the honor of ministering with his own shepherds. God's plan is that our pastoral teams should be governed by Biblical principles, thrilled and sobered by the high privilege of our calling, and motivated by gospel-worthy love. Pastoring in plurality is not merely the incidental circumstance of our pastoral calling; it is the divine design for it. The Lord has put sufficient teaching in his Word to give us faith and joy for all aspects of team ministry, such that both we and our fellow pastors can hear "well done."

Addendum 1: The Word on Plurality

God loves pastoral teams. The New Testament makes this love quite clear. It is not that churches cannot exist without a plurality of pastors, and churches have been founded without pastors at all. We must also never demote the biblical priority of pastoral qualifications in order to achieve plurality. Better to have one pastor (or none) than disqualified men operating in this role. But the pattern below makes God's plan for Biblical plurality quite clear. These Scriptures specifically reference a plurality of elders in a single church.

- *And when they had appointed elders (Gk. plural) for them in every church (Gk. singular), with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. Acts 14:23*
- *When they came to Jerusalem, they were welcomed by the church (Gk. singular) and the apostles and the elders (Gk. plural), and they declared all that God had done with them. Acts 15:4*
- *Then it seemed good to the apostles and the elders (Gk. plural), with the whole church (Gk. singular), to choose men from among them and send them to Antioch with Paul and Barnabas. They sent Judas called Barsabbas, and Silas, leading men among the brothers, Acts 15:22*
- *Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders (Gk. plural) of the church (Gk. singular) to come to him. Acts 21:1*
- *Pay careful attention to yourselves (Gk. plural) and to all the flock (Gk. singular), in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers (Gk. plural) **28** to care for the church (Gk. singular) of God, which he obtained with his own blood. Acts 20:27-28*
- *When we had come to Jerusalem, the brothers received us gladly. On the following day Paul went in with us to James, and all the elders were present. Acts 21:17-18*
- *Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons. Philippians 1:1*
- *We ask you, brothers, to respect those (Gk. plural) who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work. Be at peace among yourselves. 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13*
- *Do not neglect the gift you have, which was given you by prophecy when the council of elders laid their hands on you. 1 Timothy 4:14 (Note: The word "council of elders" is singular here in the Greek, but both other times it is used in the NT it references a Jewish council of elders in which the clear reference is to multiple elders operating in a single body. It seems highly likely that this is referring to a moment when the elders of a local church laid their hands on Timothy.)*
- *Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. 1 Tim. 5:17 (Note: It is possible that Paul is speaking to Timothy here as an apostolic delegate, with directions for multiple churches, but since chapter 1 references why Paul left Timothy in Ephesus, the most transparent circumstance refers to the multiple elders in the Ephesian church.)*

- *This is why I left you in Crete, so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders (Gk. plural) in every town (Gk. singular) as I directed you. Titus 1:5*
- *Is anyone among you sick? Let him call for the elders (Gk. plural) of the church (Gk. singular), and let them pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord. James 5:14*

Significant credit for highlighting this pattern should go to Alexander Strauch and his book Biblical Eldership. As Strauch decisively comments, “On a local church level, the New Testament plainly witnesses to a consistent pattern of shared pastoral leadership. Therefore, leadership by a plurality of elders is a sound biblical practice.”

To put it another way, consider the following of what we know of the church leadership in the New Testament.

- 1) The church in Jerusalem—led by a plurality of elders (and apostles).
- 2) The church in Antioch—led by a plurality called prophets and teachers, some (all?) of whom we can presume were elders (Acts 13:1-3)
- 3) The churches at Lystra, Iconium, and Antioch in Pisidia—led by a plurality of elders. (Acts 14:21-23)
- 4) The church at Ephesus—led by a plurality of elders. (Acts 20, 1 Timothy 5:17)
- 5) The church at Philippi—led by a plurality of elders. (Phil. 1:1)
- 6) The church at Thessalonica—led by a plurality, presumably of elders.
- 7) The churches of Crete—each church led by a plurality of elders (Titus 1:5)
- 8) The churches addressed by James, the “twelve tribes in the Dispersion”—each church led by a plurality of elders. (James 5:14)

And, put in contrast, Bruce Stabbert writes, “there is not one passage which describes a church being governed by one pastor.” Now, it’s time to reiterate the opening caveats. This overwhelming pattern must be complemented by the Biblical requirements of qualified pastors and the record that churches were often planted in the NT without an established eldership. But the clear implication of the pattern above is that God loves pastoral teams. This New Testament pattern is not an accident, nor merely an incidental church history fact. This pattern must inform our practice and shape our hearts.