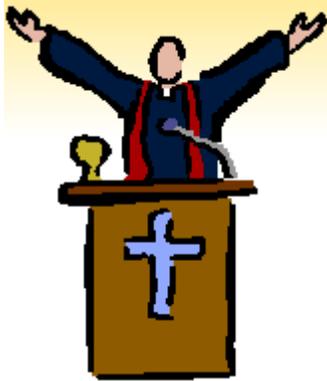


Should One Man Be The Dominant, Focal-Point Of A Church Service (i.e., "the Pastor")?

A Closer Look At A Popular Protestant Tradition

by Darryl M. Erkel



Whether we wish to admit it or not, most church meetings are centered on one man known as "the Pastor." He alone preaches and teaches from the pulpit; he alone administers the bread and cup; he alone dedicates the babies; and he alone gives the benediction at the close of the service. In fact, many churches are held together by a precarious reliance upon his ability to preach sermons. So many congregations are centered upon this one man that when the members are asked about what church they attend, they usually reply, "I go to pastor So-and-So's church."

But should one man so dominate a church service? Does the New Testament support our one-man orientation? Is our practice of focusing on one man and his gifts a denial of the priesthood right of the believer? Let's see what the Scriptures say.

1. The entire tenor of the New Testament is upon the functioning of *all* of God's people, *not merely one person*. Thus we find a "one another" theology which emerges from its pages. To give but a few of the many references, please consider the following:

Romans 12:4-8 emphasizes the importance and contribution of various spiritual gifts which are exercised whenever Christians assemble.

1 Corinthians 12:7-11 teaches that a variety of spiritual gifts have been provided by the Spirit "for the common good" (v.7). Clearly, then, our gifts are not meant to remain dormant, but actively used for strengthening the church. Within this same context, Paul directly nullifies any idea of a one-man dominance when he writes, "For the body is not one member, but many" (v.14). Sadly, when our church meetings center on one man, we end up reversing, in practice, these words and thereby suggest that "the body is not many members, but one."

1 Corinthians 14:12 encourages believers to "seek to abound for the edification of the church." Obviously, these Christians took an active and significant role within the church service. After all, why encourage them to pursue corporate edification if they have nothing to say or contribute within the service?

1 Corinthians 14:26-31 provides us with a very clear picture of what transpired within an early church meeting. Without a doubt, Paul encouraged the individual members to exercise their gifts which had been graciously given to them by the Holy Spirit. Corporate participation is evident within the terms "each one," "anyone," and "all." Paul would never speak this way if he believed that one man alone (or a select few) was to function. Incidentally, it's interesting to note that nowhere does he appeal to the Corinthian leadership to take on a domineering or controlling

role within the assembly--particularly when both the Lord's Supper (11:18-34) and spiritual gifts (14:1-40) were being abused. Paul's commands for decency and order are given corporately and he appears confident that they will be able to resolve such matters on their own. **This is not to deny the importance of leaders within the assembly. Rather, it is to demonstrate that (1) they were not the only ones who functioned; (2) they did not overly-control the gathering; and (3) the individual members were able to settle corporate problems without some clerical dominance.** As Bible commentator, Gordon Fee, has observed: "What is striking in this entire discussion is the absence of any mention of leadership or of anyone who would be responsible for seeing that these guidelines were generally adhered to. The community appears to be left to itself and the Holy Spirit" (New International Commentary on the New Testament: First Corinthians, p.691). It becomes clear that Paul saw no tension between mutual participation (v.26) and an orderly church service (v.40). Thus, we see freedom within structure.

Ephesians 5:19/Colossians 3:16 both picture a body of believers who actively "speak to one another" in psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs. While this can also occur outside of a normal church gathering, it primarily takes place when the entire body assembles. This is supported by 1 Corinthians 14:26 which permits the saints ("each one") to sing a psalm during the meeting if so prompted.

Ephesians 4:11-16 clearly pictures a functioning body, in contrast to a passive, inert believer-priesthood whose only purpose is to absorb sermons and pass the offering plate! Rather than dominate the church service, pastors have the responsibility of equipping the saints so that they can actually perform ministry (vv. 11-12). Their role is to liberate the saints for service and assist them in discovering where they can best serve the cause of Christ. Additionally, v.16 maintains that the body's growth is directly related to its members ability to function--"which every joint supplies," "the proper working of each individual part," "for the building up of itself." **How pastors can read this passage and still justify the non-participatory church structures which we weekly experience, is beyond me! Is it any wonder why so many of our churches are weak and sin-ridden? How long would your physical body last if only one or two parts were working? Should we expect it any differently in the body of Christ when only the "ordained" Minister and his staff of professionals are permitted to corporately contribute?**

Hebrews 10:24-25 is particularly interesting since the same text which we often use to promote church attendance (v.25: "not forsaking our own assembling together, as is the habit of some"), is the same one that tells us what to do when gathered: "encouraging one another; and all the more, as you see the day drawing near." Verse 24 also tells us to "consider how to stimulate one another to love and good deeds"--which presupposes that the members are permitted to interact with one another during the church service. There is no one-man orientation here.

1 Peter 4:10-11 likewise pictures a participatory church meeting where each one is to employ his or her gift in ministering to one another. In fact, to do so is to be "good stewards of the manifold grace of God" (v.10). One wonders, however, whether we are being "good stewards" of our spiritual gifts when we are not expected or even permitted to exercise them within the gathering. The phrase "whoever speaks" (v.11) makes no sense if only pastors verbally contributed to the service.

2. The New Testament pictures more than just pastors being allowed to instruct the congregation. While corporate instruction is limited to men (1 Timothy 2:11-12), they are not necessarily required to be pastor-elders or seminary trained. 1 Corinthians 14:26 permits those who have a teaching to give it--and there is nothing to suggest that Paul is speaking of pastors! Acts 13:1 describes the church at Antioch as having numerous prophets and teachers. Both Romans 12:7 and 1 Corinthians 12:29 speaks of those who possess the gift of teaching and, again, there is no reason to believe that only pastors are indicated. **This being true, why would any church limit public instruction to "ordained" clergymen? How many pastors consciously consider the gifted and knowledgeable men within their congregations for the task of corporate teaching?**

3. In contrast to our inherited traditions, the New Testament does not limit corporate teaching to one pastor. For example, 1 Timothy 5:17 speaks of "those" (not "him") who work hard at "preaching and teaching." 1 Thessalonians 5:12, likewise, mentions "those" (not "him") who "give you instruction." Titus was given the task of appointing elders in every city (Titus 1:5); and such elders were to "be able both to exhort in sound doctrine and refute those who contradict" (v.9). This responsibility was not given to one man alone, but to a *plurality* of qualified elders (which is always the New Testament norm; cf. Acts 14:23; 20:17,28; James 5:14; Hebrews 13:17; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Collectively, their job was to exhort, teach, and rebuke those who taught contrary doctrine. The overseers of the congregation are to be "able to teach" (1 Timothy 3:2), which makes no sense if corporate instruction is limited to one man alone.

4. The local church is greatly benefited when it utilizes the teaching skills of a plurality of elders. Allow me to briefly mention some of them:

A. No man, no matter how gifted or eloquent, can speak to all the spiritual needs within a church. The congregation needs the wisdom and scriptural insight which a plurality of godly men can provide.

B. A church is less likely to fall into cultic doctrine when a plurality of informed teachers are present and accountable to each other for what they publicly say.

C. A plurality of corporate teachers helps to doctrinally balance a church and keep it from the theological fringe. The different perspectives which each teacher brings helps to sharpen a church's understanding of God's truth, broaden their grasp of theology, and demonstrate that biblical exegesis requires hard work (2 Timothy 2:15). It helps a congregation from reaching simplistic conclusions about the meaning of Scripture, since they will sometimes hear another interpretation. ***But won't this confuse the flock? No; on the contrary, it will actually help to bring them to greater doctrinal maturity. If the saints are taught: (1) to test everything by the Word of God; (2) instructed in how to do basic Bible interpretation; (3) made aware that there are a variety of acceptable interpretations (within the pale of orthodoxy) on many theological issues; (4) cautioned to not come to rash or simplistic solutions on any doctrinal matter; and (5) told that while the Bible wasn't written for scholars, neither was it written for lazy people; and, therefore, God expects each one of them to be diligent in the study of Scripture.***

D. A plurality of teachers within the corporate setting helps to reduce the possibility of a personality-cult forming around one man.

E. A plurality of teachers reduces the possibility of pastor burn-out--a syndrome which many pastors fall into because they are expected to take on the entire load of public teaching. With very little time allowed for deep reflection upon what is learned, and with the pressing need to crank out another message before the end of the week, along with a multiplicity of other tasks, it's no wonder that the average pastor's sermon is often forced or simplistic.

5. Some elders choose to "defer" their corporate teaching responsibilities to one elder (usually the "Senior Pastor") who may be uniquely gifted in communication. At first, this sounds good and noble. But, in reality, it is contrary to the Word of God and is a disservice to the members who need insight and instruction from a plurality of men. ***After all, why make any church expositionally dependent upon one man when other gifted teachers are available?***

Furthermore, churches which practice this kind of eldership subtly instill into the minds of the saints that the man who teaches them, week after week, is really "the" pastor. This often leads right into the charismatic, super-pastor mentality (a common problem within our churches). Thus, instead of having the eldership enhanced, it is reduced. ***But how can a church do this if it only has one gifted pastor-teacher? I have found that, in most congregations, there are usually a couple of men able and eager to teach the Scriptures (and I'm not talking about new converts!), but who are never given the opportunity to do so because they are not seminary trained, "ordained," or "dynamic" speakers. This robs the church of gifted teachers as well as robs the potential teacher of developing his public communication skills. Let's face it, most pastors do not even consider the men already within their congregations for the eldership, let alone the idea of having non-clerical teachers who will share their pulpits!***

6. One of the most difficult things for pastors to realize is that *God has not called them to dominate church gatherings--and certainly not to the point of being virtually the only one who teaches or ministers on Sunday mornings!* Such pastoral dominance fosters a spectator mentality and clergy dependence. Greg Ogden explains why the dependency model continues to plague our churches:

A chief reason why the dependency model of ministry is still dominant is that many pastors' sense of worth and value is derived from being a benevolent lord reigning over the little fiefdom. From a psychological view we would be appalled at parents who assert their authority by keeping their children dependent upon them even though they are adults. Yet we do not evidence the same disgust at anemic churches made up of perennial spiritual children who are not allowed by their parent pastors to grow up. Underlying the dependency model of ministry is a distorted and unhealthy means of seeking value. Pastor and people are co-conspirators denying the addiction and fostering the sickness (*The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* [Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990] p.89).

To deny the dependency model, however, is not to assert that pastors should not lead or do not possess a certain amount of authority. Nevertheless, *their job is to lead, not lord; equip, not dominate; persuade, not force; and liberate for meaningful ministry as opposed to perpetuating a system which keeps the sheep in an infantile state!*

I have presented what I believe to be compelling reasons for disavowing our traditional Protestant practice of one-man orientation within the Sunday service. It simply cannot be supported from the pages of the New Testament and is, in fact, *contradicted* by a host of verses.

Church leaders who take the Scriptures seriously must deal with the texts and arguments presented in this paper. My guess is that a pastor will, most likely, respond in one of the following ways: (1) Ignore the biblical references and rationale of my position. In this case, he will continue the status-quo and, perhaps, consider what I have written to be a mere "quibbling over words." (2) Consider my paper to be "sectarian" in doctrine and surmise that I am a "troublers in Israel." (3) Assume that he is already doing the things set forth in my paper because he periodically shares his pulpit with a guest speaker and because he also periodically allows a sharing and testimony time during the Sunday evening service (although never on Sunday morning!). (4) Change the present philosophy and direction of his pastoral ministry. Because he recognizes that all theological truth has practical implications, he will begin to open up church meetings to all of the saints and see himself primarily as an equipper. He will shun the clerical spotlight and see the people whom he shepherds as genuine ministers of Christ.

Our churches are so used to having one man, or a few people, do everything, that the idea of every member having something necessary to contribute (Ephesians 4:16) is foreign to our practice. We have acted as though the body is one part instead of many parts (1 Corinthians 12:14). Priests are to function, and elders are to watch over and equip the priesthood (1 Peter 2:5; Ephesians 4:11-12). There is no evidence anywhere in the New Testament for the primacy of one man's gifts. There is evidence 58 times in the New Testament for the importance of mutual care and multiple gifts: "Love one another ... admonish one another ... edify one another ... comfort one another ... forgive one another ... give to one another ... pray for one another." Why are our churches marked by obvious emphasis on "the pastor," but very little--if any--concern for the cultivation of mutual relationships? We have exalted that for which there is no evidence, and neglected that for which there is abundant evidence. We are used to pawning off our responsibilities on someone else. We want the church to minister to us, but we think very little as to how we can minister to the needs of others (Jon Zens, *The Pastor*, p.5).

Common Questions & Objections:

If everyone is permitted to speak and share during the church service, wouldn't just everyone's ignorance be displayed?

The underlying assumption behind this question is that the "laity" does not really have anything of spiritual substance to contribute to the church meeting. Therefore, genuine communication must be left to the professionals (i.e., the Pastor and his staff). But such thinking is surely misguided and reveals a lack of trust toward the people of God to effectively minister to one another. Such misgivings toward the saints stands in stark contrast to that of the apostle Paul in Romans 15:14, "And concerning you, my brethren, I myself also am convinced that *you yourselves are full of goodness, filled with all knowledge, and able also to admonish one another.*" Granted, someone may indeed reveal his or her ignorance of Scripture or spiritual matters. But, on the other hand, some may reveal their depth of biblical understanding and may even be more informed than their pastor!

The Church of Jesus Christ has many gifted and competent "lay" people who would be most effective in ministering to their local body, yet, sadly, are never encouraged to share or even given an opportunity to speak. Furthermore, when the saints are taught to prepare for each Sunday with something they learned from their personal Bible reading and prayer time, the likelihood of aimless communication is reduced. We must never forget that Christianity, from its very beginnings, was a "lay" movement.

As the Senior Pastor of our church, it is my responsibility to do the preaching and teaching. To share this task with elders is to intrude in a realm which has only been given to the office of Pastor.

The only "Senior Pastor" that the New Testament speaks of is Jesus Christ (1 Peter 5:4). He alone is "the great Shepherd of the sheep" (Hebrews 13:20; cf. John 10:11,14,16; Ephesians 5:23). Those who serve in a leadership function within the local church are undershepherds. They are humble servants of the sheep (Matthew 23:8-12; Mark 10:42-45; 1 Corinthians 3:5; 4:1; 2 Corinthians 4:5), not lords who reign over their fiefdom (1 Peter 5:3).

Moreover, the most frequently used terms to describe congregational leaders are *elder* (Acts 14:23; 20:17; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5; James 5:14), *overseer* (1 Timothy 3:1), and *pastor* (Ephesians 4:11). In the case of "pastor," however, the term is primarily used to describe their *function of leading and feeding* (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:2), in contrast to an official title. It is quite arrogant, in my opinion, to take on the honorific title of "Senior Pastor" when Scripture reserves this for Jesus Christ alone! Even the apostle Peter merely referred to himself as a "fellow elder" (1 Peter 5:1).

Such terms, then, as *elder, overseer, and pastor are functional terms (not official titles) and are all used interchangeably within the New Testament when referring to church leaders*. Thus, to make the "office" of pastor separate from the eldership is to mishandle God's Word and impose artificial distinctions within a congregation's leadership structure. All elders have the responsibility of teaching and shepherding the flock (Acts 20:17,28; 1 Timothy 5:17; Titus 1:5-9; James 5:14; 1 Peter 5:1-4). Together, they *equally* oversee the congregation (although it is true that some may be gifted differently or excel in certain pastoral tasks). ***In no instance, however, does Paul single out one man called "the Pastor" who is required to have a unique "calling" and training (i.e., seminary training)***. For those wishing to study this matter further, I highly recommend: Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1986). His appraisal and arguments are devastating to the one-man-rule and clerical hierarchy which exists in most "evangelical" churches.

The Christian apologist, J.P. Moreland, has wisely written:

The local church in the New Testament contained a plurality of elders (see Acts 14:23, 20:28; Philippians 1:1; Hebrews 13:17). *The New Testament knows nothing about a senior pastor. In my opinion, the emergence of the senior pastor in the local church is one of the factors that has most significantly undermined the development of healthy churches ...* Given these facts, the senior pastor model actually produces a codependence that often feeds the egos of senior pastors while allowing the parishioners to remain passive. None of this is intentional, but the effects are still

real. The senior pastor model tends to create a situation in which we identify the church as "Pastor Smith's church" and parishioners come to support *his* ministry. If a visitor asks where the minister is, instead of pointing to the entire congregation (as the New Testament would indicate, since we are all ministers of the New Covenant), we actually point to Pastor Smith ... The local church should be *led and taught by a plurality of voices called elders, and these voices should be equal*. If so-called lay elders (I dislike the word *lay!*), do not have the seminary training possessed by those paid to be in "full-time" local church ministry, then the church needs to develop a long-term plan to give them that training in the church itself or elsewhere. *No one person has enough gifts, perspective, and maturity to be given the opportunity disproportionately to shape the personality and texture of a local church*. If Christ is actually the head of the church, our church structures ought to reflect that fact, and a group of undershepherds, not a senior pastor, should collectively seek His guidance in leading the congregation (*Love Your God With All Your Mind* [Colorado Springs, CO: NavPress Publishing, 1997] pp. 190-191).

If our church allowed a plurality of public teachers, the saints would be confused--particularly when different viewpoints are presented. Who would they know to believe?

The underlying assumption in this objection is that God's people can't be trusted to understand Scripture or ferret out a diversity of exegetical opinions. However, if a local church is going to be brought to maturity, they must be taught that a variety of viewpoints exist within the pale of historic orthodoxy, and that there is nothing unspiritual about critically weighing different interpretations. *After all, do we really want a group of mindless people who have to be spoon-fed everything? Shouldn't we want their senses "trained to discern good and evil" (Hebrews 5:14)?* The people whom we shepherd should be encouraged to think through issues carefully in the light of Scripture and to accept no person's word simply upon his authority as "pastor." The apostle Paul saw no problem with differences of opinion so long as the saints were charitable toward one another: "For there must also be differences among you, in order that those who are approved may have become evident among you" (1 Corinthians 11:19; cf. Ephesians 4:14-15). 1 John 4:1 corporately commands all believers to "test the spirits to see whether they are from God." 1 Thessalonians 5:21 tells us to "examine everything carefully and to hold fast to that which is good." *The local church, therefore, is a discerning community which filters any opinions by the standard of apostolic doctrine*. While all of this may not be what we are accustomed to (or even comfortable with), it is still most beneficial to expose our congregations to other orthodox Bible teachers. Perhaps this helps to demonstrate how far we have departed from New Testament ecclesiology.

As a pastor, I periodically allow our people to stand up and share a testimony or praise report. Isn't that enough?

That is certainly a good start. But pastors must be willing to do more to encourage their members to actively and fully build up one another. To simply allow a fifteen minute opportunity for people to share on a monthly or bi-weekly basis, though good, is not enough. Church leaders must work diligently to equip the saints and foster a context where mutual ministry can take place. If a pastor thinks that having a periodic time of sharing is simply a nice addition to the "real" ministry (i.e., his pulpit sermons), he is thinking wrongly about his pastoral role and how the local church is to function. In his efforts to be the focal-point of the church meeting, he is

unwittingly robbing the saints of their right to minister to the body. As I see it, although pastor-elders must teach and equip God's people for ministry (Ephesians 4:11-12; 1 Timothy 4:13,16; 5:17; 2 Timothy 2:2; 4:2), they must never dominate them or usurp their responsibility of edification which rightfully belongs to them. The mainstay of the meeting, therefore, should be that which every member contributes to the strengthening of the local body (1 Corinthians 14:12,26; Ephesians 4:16; 1 Peter 4:10-11).

All of this sounds new and of recent origin. Are there others, particularly respectable New Testament scholars, who would hold such opinions?

My arguments against the Protestant clerical system are not new and many others throughout church history have similarly maintained these truths. My position has been carefully exegeted from Scripture and I do not see how one can evade the force of their meaning and implications. Obviously, some will not be convinced no matter how persuasively I argue my case nor how many passages are cited. But, to use the words of Paul in Romans 9:6, "it is not as though the Word of God has failed." Even still, others have reached the same conclusions that I have presented in this paper (though not all of them would necessarily agree with every detail or implication). I am thinking of such writers as R. Paul Stevens, a professor at Regent College; Robert Banks, a professor at Fuller Theological Seminary; Christian Smith, assistant professor of sociology at Gordon College; James Dunn, one of the foremost contemporary New Testament scholars; Gordon Fee, a highly respected New Testament scholar and commentator; Howard Snyder, a writer and pastoral coordinator of the Irving Park Free Methodist Church in Chicago; Greg Ogden, a writer and pastor in California; Jon Zens, a writer and pastor in Wisconsin; the late Bible commentator, William Barclay; Carl Hoch, Jr., professor of New Testament at Grand Rapids Baptist Seminary; Craig Evans, professor of New Testament at Trinity Western College; Alexander Strauch, a writer and pastor in Colorado; Eric Svendsen, adjunct faculty member at Columbia Evangelical Seminary; and a host of others who have written on themes similar to the items that I have addressed. The real issue, of course, is not whether there are Bible scholars who agree with me, but whether the issues and arguments raised in this paper are grounded in Scripture. Only you can decide that.

Recommended Reading:

- Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community* (Peabody, Massachusetts, 1994 [Revised]). A fine work which carefully examines the early house churches in their historical setting. Shows what the early church services were really like!
- Lawrence O. Richards & Clyde Hoeldtke, *Church Leadership* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1980). One of the best books written on New Testament style of congregational leadership.
- Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership* (Littleton, CO: Lewis & Roth Publishers, 1986). This is, perhaps, the best book ever written on church eldership.
- R. Paul Stevens, *Liberating the Laity* (Downers Grove, IL: Inter-Varsity Press, 1985). A good book demonstrating the importance of involving all of God's people in the task of ministry. It calls for pastors to return to their primary role as equippers.

- Greg Ogden, *The New Reformation: Returning the Ministry to the People of God* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1990). The title says it all.
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