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The Unity Of Brotherhood in the African Church: Establishing a Biblical Self-identity in the Shared Leadership of Elders

DR. J. R. MILLER

Abstract

The continent of Africa has an enduring Christian legacy; both in what has been penned in the annals of history, and in the future that has yet to be written. Writing as an observer from the West, it is my hope that the Church in Africa can build on recent progress and overcome the errors of history to build a strong church on the foundation of the historic biblical faith she helped foster in the early centuries of Christianity. The African Church can grow stronger through the establishment of local congregations founded on shared leadership (more than one man leading the church), the equality of every believer functioning as spiritual-siblings, and a plurality of elders—which is the tradition given to us in the Scripture. Embracing a shared leadership structures using multiple elders in local churches can help the African Church reach two important goals. First, embracing biblical shared leadership will help each congregation overcome the abuse of power reflected in the “Pastor as CEO” model, where the church is run more like a business, and replace it with a biblical model of family-leadership. Second, building local churches on a family-model of shared leadership will position the African Church as a world influencer.

KEY WORDS: Leadership, African Christianity, eldership, Western Christianity, Ministry teams

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Introduction

The Christian church in the West has, in the past century, shifted her leadership structures to reflect the typical business model of for-profit corporations. This model elevates the senior pastor to the role of Chief Executive Officer (CEO) who rules over the church as the sole-authority above all others.¹ Joe Hellerman gives examples in his book, *Embracing Shared Ministry*, of a pervasive “corporate mentality that views the senior pastor as a CEO and his associate staff as employees.”² In contrast to the pastor as CEO, the New Testament church was built on the idea of multiple leaders (elders) overseeing the church and sharing in all of the decisions and responsibility for leadership. These Elders who share leadership function more like the older “big brothers” of the church—lovingly guiding God’s family into holiness and fulfilling the Gospel mission.³ In the following pages, I hope to show how a return to the New Testament focus on the local church as a family can help revitalize the church in the West and inspire the church in Africa.

The Continent of Africa has an enduring Christian legacy—both in what has been penned in the annals of history and in the future that has yet to be written. The New Testament verse from Acts 6:9 offers an account from the early days of Christianity where the people of Africa played an important role in shaping the Faith. By the middle of the first century, Christianity began to see converts in Egypt and the surrounding nations, symbolized in part by the conversion account of the Ethiopian eunuch (Acts 8:26–40).⁴ African influence grew over the decades as their theological insight helped shape the nascent church: “African theologians in the first four centuries of Christianity made a vital contribution to the development of theology in the universal church. Those early African theologians include Origen, Athanasius, Tertullian, and Augustine.”⁵

As the centuries passed, the influence of African Christianity waned, but returned in the 19th century. Between the 1870s and 1900, European colonization expanded such that by “1900 much of Africa had been colonized by seven European powers—Britain, France, Germany, Belgium, Spain,

¹ Os Guinness, *Dining with the Devil: The Megachurch Movement Flirts with Modernity* (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1993), 52–53.

² Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power & Authority In The Early Church And Why It Matters Today* (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Publications, 2013), 8.

³ A strong case for the New Testament church as God’s Family in these two works by Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family* (B&H Publishing, 2009). and his follow-up work, *The Ancient Church As Family* (Fortress Fortress, 2001).

⁴ William L. Petersen, “Christianity: North African Christianity,” ed. David Noel Freedman, *The Anchor Yale Bible Dictionary* (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 966.

⁵ Byang H. Kato, “Theological Issues in Africa,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 133 (1976): 146.

Portugal, and Italy.”⁶ Through colonization, Christianity came back to Africa, but “the structure by and large was patterned after the mother or the sending country.”⁷ In the past century, much progress has been made toward a self-sustaining Christianity in Africa. The African continent has seen tremendous growth in the Christian population and in the manifold movements of Faith. With numerical growth has come an increase in Africans themselves assuming leadership, and a search for a clear ecclesiastical and theological identity.⁸ In this search for a biblical self-identity, Africa has also been flooded by false teachers that leveraged traditional African values to form a syncretized brand of Christianity.⁹ In the case of Pentecostalism, Africa’s church growth has produced congregations that serve under the leadership of one “big man,” who is able to exploit the congregation for his own gain.¹⁰ More research is needed to determine how much of the “Big-Man” leadership is attributable to the Pentecostal theology, the influence of the Western style business models, and how much of it has derived from indigenous tribal values. Regardless of the exact source, the result is that in many regions of Africa there has been an emphasis on the one man as sole leader over the church.

Writing as an observer from the West, it is my hope that the church in Africa can learn from the West’s experience, resist the influence of any leadership model which elevates the senior pastor to the rank of sole authority, and build a strong church on the foundation of the historic biblical faith they helped foster in the early days of Christianity. In the pages to come, this paper explores the topic of elder-led churches and how implementing the values of shared leadership among the elders, as opposed to the one-man leadership model, can help establish an independent and biblical self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating, and self-identifying church,¹¹ while fostering a brotherhood of faith among African nations and with the church worldwide.

⁶ Ehiedu E. G. Iweriebor, “The Colonization of Africa.” African Age: The Schomburg Center for Research in Black Culture, The New York Public Library and the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation, accessed June. 2, 2016, <http://exhibitions.nypl.org/africanaage/essay-colonization-of-africa.html>.

⁷ Tokunboh Adeyemo, “The African Church and Selfhood,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 5, no. 2 (1981) 218.

⁸ Kato, “Theological Issues in Africa”, 144.

⁹ “Anatomy of an Explosion: How Africans Made The Gospel Their Own,” *Christian History Magazine*, no. 79 (2003), Logos Bible Software.

¹⁰ John F. McCauley, “Pentecostalism as an Informal Political Institution: Experimental Evidence from Ghana,” *Politics and Religion* 7, no. 4 (December 2014): 762, accessed June 23, 2016, doi:10.1017/S1755048314000480.

¹¹ Ngoni Sengwe, “Identity Crisis in the African Church,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 7, no. 2 (1983): 241.

The Cult of “Power-Leadership”

Sadly, when it comes to the role of pastor, the church in the West has provided a very poor example for the church in Africa. The Western church has made too many decisions based on culture and not enough from the scriptures. We have borrowed from the world of business a system that treats the pastor as CEO of an organization and then forced that system back onto the scriptures.¹² Until this problem of power-leadership is corrected, we will continue to fight against false teachers who abuse their place of authority and hinder the bond of brotherhood in the Church. Looking at the problem of power leadership in Africa, Ayodeji Abodunde, the author of *A Heritage of Faith: A History of Christianity in Nigeria*, has observed:

There is a worrisome trend in churches across the country: many leaders/pastors are perceived as infallible; their words, actions and instructions are considered to be sacrosanct.... It continues to be an unfortunate reality of history that God gives us leaders, but then we turn around and make them our gods. No leader, his stature notwithstanding, should be followed beyond God's word. The statement is true: the best of men are men at the very best. We have an epidemic of strange doctrines in Nigeria today and this has been sustained because of the myth of the infallible leader.¹³

Abodunde is not alone in this observation. McCauley has observed this problem in his own research on the politics and leadership of Africa.

Since Marshall Sahlins' seminal typology of local leadership in Melanesia, the concept of the 'Big-Man' has featured prominently in descriptions of politics in the developing world. This is particularly true of scholarship on sub-Saharan Africa, where the combination of pre-colonial norms, post-colonial institutions, and weak states created opportunities for personal rulers to gain and maintain power by virtue of informal relationships with local masses. The typical underpinning of big-man rule in Africa has been the kinship ties that bind leaders to their followers and serve as a heuristic cue for both sides in the intricate exchange of resources for loyalty.¹⁶

¹² Maxie D. Dunnam, Gordon MacDonald and Donald W. McCullough, *Mastering Personal Growth* (Sisters, OR: Multnomah, 1992), 174.

¹³ Ayodeji Abodunde, “Seven Myths that Endanger the Future of Christianity in Nigeria (I),” *On Faith, Culture, and Leadership in Africa*, August 1, 2010, accessed June. 1, 2016, <http://www.dejiabodunde.com/seven-myths-that-endanger-the-future-of-christianity-in-nigeria-i-2/>

¹⁴ John F. McCauley. “Africa's New Big-Man Rule? Pentecostalism And Patronage in Ghana,” *African Affairs* 112, no. 446, pp. 1-2, December 6, 2012, doi:10.1093/afraf/

This problem McCauley describes plays on the worst traits of culture and humanity, but it is certainly not unique to Africa. What Abodunde calls “the myth of the infallible leader” and McCauley calls “big-man rule,” this article refers to as the “Pastor as CEO” model of leadership which is nowhere found in the New Testament church. Based on observation over the past three decades, the following lists a few of the drawbacks I have found in churches that use this structure of power-leadership:

- The structure looks less like a family and more like a company and therefore tends to put the interests of the institution above the interests of the individual.
- The Pastor-as-CEO model tends to focus on the man at the top instead of the mission for the people.
- This model puts enormous responsibility on one man (typically called the senior pastor but the title is of secondary importance) who more often than not gets burned out or burned over.
- This model can isolate and hurt the senior pastor who does not have the proper support or accountability from his peers (i.e. brothers in Christ).

Leadership in much of the church has become simply a code word for power and opportunity for abuse. Even the word “team” has become meaningless in some circles. The results, over time, have proven disastrous in the West with some of the most prominent leaders abusing their power, seeking personal fame, and abusing the people. In one recent high-profile case, the list of charges against one senior pastor by the board of elders included the following,

- Abandonment of genuine biblical community (Titus 1:8)
- Refusal of personal accountability (failure to be a fellow elder according to 1 Peter 5:1)
- Lack of self-control (1 Timothy 3:2)
- Manipulation and lying (Titus 1:8)
- Domineering over those in his charge (1 Peter 5:3)
- Misuse of power/authority (1 Peter 5:3)
- A history of building his identity through ministry and media platforms (necessity to be “sober-minded” in 1 Timothy 3:2 and avoid selfish gain in 1 Peter 5:2)¹⁵

ads072.

¹⁵ I am reticent to include the names of the fallen leaders as this tends to derail the conversation. Those with a morbid curiosity can search the internet for the bullet items listed, but I chose not to include the source to keep the argument from becoming an ad hominem. The failure is not alone with the man who succumbed to sin, it is the system the church has created that allow pastors to function as Popes.

These cases show that regardless of the titles we choose, the structure of the church's leadership matters. As Meisinger observes, "When one man arrogates to himself sole final authority in a church, he creates a dependent congregation, looking to him for all guidance and wisdom. He in practice may become an autocrat, a replicate pope."¹⁶ The hope of overcoming this destructive form of power-leadership is found in a return to the New Testament form of shared leadership. In the scriptures, we find examples of shared leadership in both the brotherhood of elders and also in the team ministry of the apostle Paul.

Paul and the Ministry of Teams

Although writers often speak of apostle Paul's success in church planting as a solo-accomplishment, his success was clearly a team effort (Acts 15:36-41; Acts 16:1-5; Acts 18:18-19; Acts 19:29; Acts 20:4). Paul continued in the tradition of Jesus, exemplified through the other apostles, and used teams in his long-term strategy for planting churches. Of the seventeen references to Paul's ministry in the book of Acts, thirteen contain references to the team members who served with him.¹⁷ Paul also demonstrated a consistent respect for the existing leadership within each locality of the church.

Paul began his team ministry in the local church in Antioch at the invitation of Barnabas.¹⁸ Eventually he was called by the Holy Spirit away from Antioch to take the gospel to the gentile world. Paul's commission was then affirmed through the blessing of the church in Antioch, which soon became the center for sending church planting teams throughout the gentile world (Acts 13). When Paul encountered divisive teachers, he relied upon his unity with the church in Jerusalem to validate his divinely ordained mission (Acts 15; Galatians 2). While most of the time Paul supported himself by making tents (1 The. 2:9), he and the other apostles also received financial support from established churches (1 Cor. 9; 2 Corinthians 8:1-5). Paul recognized that this financial support was a tangible way the churches could participate in the team-effort to take the gospel of Jesus to the world (Philippians 4:14-19). Each of these unique instances recorded demonstrate the power of unity in fulfilling the mission of the church.

Bard Pillette, who spent many years as a missionary in central Mexico, has done extensive research into teams in the New Testament. He is currently involved in an assembly in Medford, Oregon, which has a ministry of

¹⁶ George E. Meisinger, "Elders: How Many?" *Chafer Theological Seminary Journal* 10, no. 1 (2004): 24.

¹⁷ Gene A. Getz, *Elders and Leaders: God's Plan for Leading the Church: A Biblical, Historical, and Cultural Perspective* (Chicago: Moody Publishers, 2003), 222.

¹⁸ Larry Richards, *Every Man in the Bible* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 1999), 205; see Acts 11:22.

evangelism and Bible teaching to Hispanics. He makes the following observation about Paul's approach to team development:

It is rather surprising that no fellow worker spent more than fifty percent of his time physically present with Paul. Teamwork did not always mean being together in the same city. It is actually possible that the most trusted fellow workers were delegated difficult tasks in other cities and thus spent less time with Paul.¹⁹

Based on his study, Pillette makes several salient observations about the amount of time Paul spent with his different ministry partners. Table 1 below summarizes the time Paul spent with various key leaders over the total time of their association.

Person	Years Associated	Years Together in Same Place	Percentage of Time Physically Present
Titus	25	13	50
Timothy	19	9	50
Luke	18	6.5	30
Aristarchus	11-17	6.5	30
Aquila and Priscilla	17	4	25
Tychicus	14	4	25
Trophimus	14	2	15
Mark	20	2.5	10
Erastus	16	16	10

Table 1: Paul's Long Term Partnerships in Church Planting²⁰

This table shows that Paul's associations were long held, yet he trusted each leader to work independently to fulfill their mission.

A second aspect of Paul's approach to team was how he spread his teams out to accomplish the work allowing each the ability to develop their own teams and partnerships for effective planting. Pillette summarizes his research as follows.

The average number of partners Paul had at any one time was two, but he often had only one co-worker present with him. The curious part in all this

¹⁹ Bard Pillette, "Paul and His Fellow Workers - Chapter 3," *Emmaus Journal* 6, no. 1 (1997): 120.

²⁰ *Ibid.* 121.

is that Paul’s favorite co-workers, Timothy and Titus, were seldom together with Paul as a trio. The three can be put together only a few times for a total of a few months. As a consequence, there was no long-term necessity to meld together the various personalities.²¹

Pillette demonstrates his observation in Table 2 below which shows how many team members Paul worked with and for how long.

Number of Persons with Paul	Length of Time with Paul	Names
2	3 months	Barnabas, Mark
1	1 year 2 months	Barnabas
1	7 months	Barnabas (Antioch)
1	1 month	Silas
2	2 months	Silas, Timothy
3	4 months	Silas, Timothy, Luke
2	5 months	Silas, Timothy
2	1 month	Aquila, Priscilla
4	1 year 6 months	Silas, Timothy, Aquila, Priscilla
2	6 months	Timothy, Titus(?) (Antioch)
13 (off and on)	3 years 6 months	(Ephesus)
10 (off and on)	1 month	(Trip to Jerusalem)
1	2 years	(Imprisonment in Rome)
1	6 months	Timothy (Ephesus)
1	2 years (?)	Timothy (Ephesus)
1	2 years (?)	Titus (Spain?)
5 (off and on)	4 months	Timothy, Tychicus, Artemus, Apollos, Zenas, (Asia Minor of Greece)
5 (off and on)	1 year	Titus, Erastus (?), Trophimus (?) (Nicopolis)
5 (off and on)	6 months	(Imprisonment in Rome)

Table 2: Paul's Ministry Partnerships²²

The importance of this research shows that teams can be fluid and changing

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., 122.

when there is a strong trust in each member to function when working on their own. Based on Pillette's study, there are several concrete applications for church planters and their core team.

First, Paul's approach to team development placed little emphasis on titles that distinguished him from his co-laborers. Pillette provides an important observation regarding Paul's use of teams:

[Paul] almost never reserved a title for himself alone. There was no attempt to distinguish himself from his co-workers as some might today when they use qualifying phrases such as "senior" and "assistant" to distinguish between pastors. Sometimes it is stated that a certain person is the pastor while other leaders in the same church are called elders or deacons. In contrast to our modern use of titles, Paul used designations that showed his partners were of equal value in the work (1 Thess. 2:6; 3:2). Even the designation apostle is shared with his workers in the sense that they were all messengers. He was uniquely commissioned but did not make that an issue by calling himself the senior apostle.²³

Titles often get in the way of a team's ultimate purpose. Joe Westbury of the North American Missions board builds on this very point:

The First Century church planting movement was carried on the shoulders of the laity. There was no such thing as the clergy; believers were called equally and gifted accordingly. That's the way it began, and that's the way it should continue to be.

It's time for laypeople to reclaim their rightful role in evangelism and church planting. It's time for them to become co-laborers in the field with their pastors and missionaries as healthy, reproducing churches are begun.²⁴

Effective teams, asserts Westbury, eschew unnecessary distinctions that prevent each person from functioning as full co-workers in Christ. From Paul's example, church planting teams are built around the power of the so-called laity who are called and equipped for the work of the gospel. The synergy of roles defined through the use of gifts produces strong momentum for the team.²⁵

²³ Ibid., 124.

²⁴ Joe Westbury, *Who Me? Help Start a Church? An Adult Strategy for Lay Church Planting: Participant's Handbook*, ed. Melissa Williams, *Who Me? Help Start a Church?* (Alpharetta, GA: North American Missions Board, 2001), 6.

²⁵ Lester J. Hirst, III, "Urban Church Planting Missionary Teams: A Study of Member Characteristics and Experiences Related to Teamwork Competencies" (Ed.D., Trinity Evangelical Divinity School, 1994), 8.

Second, Paul used the power of consensus leadership to develop teams. His consensus approach, summarized by Pillette, allowed teams to grow stronger by recognizing that each person was responsible for the life and health of the church.

[Paul] used the first person plural to show consensus (1 Thess. 2:18; 3:1–4). There was no distinction between his will (“When I could endure it no longer, I also sent . . .,” 1 Thess. 3:5), and that of his fellow workers (“When we could endure it no longer . . . we sent . . .,” 1 Thess. 3:1–2). He assigned to his partners the same feelings, the same logic, and the same productivity in the work. In fact, he sent Timothy, a convert of just two years and a worker of only a few months, to encourage the Thessalonians to withstand opposition. He also relied on Timothy’s observations there to make a response to issues within the Thessalonian church. That is surely treating others as equals.²⁶

Consensus leadership does not preclude the need for good decision making, but rather it puts an emphasis on each person as an equal. Based on a shared history of ministry, Paul trusted young workers to work with others to build the unity necessary for planting and growing strong churches. John MacArthur shares a similar thought in his book on leadership:

It should be apparent, then, that the biblical concept of team leadership does not demand an artificial or absolute equality. There’s nothing wrong, in other words, with a church’s appointing a senior pastor, or a pastor-teacher. Those who claim otherwise have misunderstood the biblical approach to plural leadership.

Still, the undeniable biblical pattern is for multiple elders, team leadership, and shared responsibility—never one-man rule. And leadership by a plurality of godly men has several strong advantages. Proverbs 11:14 says, “Where there is no counsel, the people fall; but in the multitude of counselors there is safety.” The sharing of the leadership burden also increases accountability and helps ensure that the decisions of leadership are not self-willed or self-serving.²⁷

MacArthur suggests that there is a right use of titles and authority within the context of a team. Within the team of elders, there are people who can make decisions, but always there is an emphasis on the power of working in unity. Unlike the Pastor-as-CEO model, in plurality of eldership, each one is equal in

²⁶ Pillette: 124.

²⁷ John MacArthur, *The Book on Leadership: The Power of a Godly Influence* (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 2004), 169.

authority and no one elder holds power over the others. Consensus leadership in the practices of teaching and leading ultimately builds a stronger team and stronger church.²⁸

Third, Paul developed teams that he could trust with difficult decisions. He did not have to override their decisions because he relied upon his training and the equipping of the Holy Spirit to ensure that the church would stay strong. Pillette says,

Paul seldom had to override his fellow workers' decisions. In Acts 21:10–14, Paul's age, experience, and special commission were given preference. In the end, his partners allowed Paul's convictions to take priority. On the other hand, there are cases where Paul gave preference to a fellow worker's contrary opinion (1 Cor. 16:12). Paul and Apollos agreed on the need for a trip to Corinth but disagreed on the timing. Paul apparently was persuaded by Apollos's logic and feelings on the matter.²⁹

Each of these passages listed above demonstrate a clear pattern in Paul's value and preference for team leadership in the church.

Fourth, Paul demonstrated flexibility within team roles. After Paul was converted on the road to Damascus (Acts 9), Barnabas brought the newly converted Paul to the church in Antioch where they ministered together for more than a year (Acts 11:21-25). While the church fasted and prayed together, the Holy Spirit called Barnabas and Paul, the prophet and teacher,³⁰ to their first missionary journey. With the blessing of the church, the team, led by Barnabas, began their long church planting journey through the region of Galatia (Acts 13:1-3). Along the line, we see a shift in roles within the team.

²⁸ Marshall Shelley, *Changing Lives through Preaching and Worship: 30 Strategies for Powerful Communication*, (Nashville, TN.: Moorings, 1995), 260.

²⁹ Pillette, 125.

³⁰ Walter A. Ellwell, *Evangelical Commentary on the Bible*. Electronic ed. Baker Reference Library 3. Grand Rapids, MI: (Baker Book House, 1989). Logos Bible Software. This passage in Acts 13:8-13 has implications for how we build our teams. The full exploration is beyond the scope of this dissertation, but Ellwell's comment referenced above is worthy of further investigation. Ellwell writes, "In his account of the inception of the mission (13:1–3), Luke lists the primary workers at the church in Antioch and classifies them as prophets and teachers (v. 1). In the original Greek, two grammatical particles usually translated "both... and" appear, the "both" prior to the names of Barnabas, Simeon, and Lucius, and the "and" in connection with the names of Manaen and Saul. Thus Luke divides the names into two groups which correspond with the two classifications, prophets and teachers. This means that Barnabas, Simeon, and Lucius functioned as prophets, while Manaen and Saul functioned as teachers. The emphasis would be revelation and exhortation for the prophets and instruction and application for the teachers."

After standing firm against Elymas the magician, Paul becomes the team leader of the growing band of missionaries.³¹ As Paul and his team planted churches, they ensured that the model of shared leadership would be carried out by appointing a team of elders³² to lead each of the churches (Acts 14:23). Once their mission was fulfilled, Paul and Barnabas returned to Antioch and gave a report. Their actions demonstrate that even after great success and the passage of time, Paul and his team still valued the partnership of the church that first affirmed their call from the Holy Spirit.

Fifth, following the example of Jesus, Paul knew that successful leadership was defined by the ability to invest in other people who could in turn invest in other people and establish a chain of transgenerational leadership. Paul encouraged the older generation to teach the younger generation.³³ Paul's teaching created an expectation that those who were mature in faith would become like older siblings or parents who could guide the young in faith into maturity through both strong teaching and "informal, one-on-one encouragement."³⁴ Paul treating Timothy as his spiritual son exemplifies the relationship of generational training necessary for church planting (1 Timothy 1:2). Douglas Milne, writing in the *Focus on the Bible Commentary* explores the depth of this relationship between Paul and Timothy:

Timothy was already a Christian disciple when Paul first met him (Acts 16:1) and took him to be his helper in the service of the gospel (Acts 19:22). The relationship so deepened that they became like a father and son, full of mutual affection and trust ("my true son", Phil. 2:22; 1 Tim. 1:18). In spite of Timothy's youth and his recurring ill-health (1 Tim. 4:12; 5:23; 2 Tim. 1:6f), Paul respected and recommended him before all his other helpers because of his selfless motives (Phil. 2:19ff.). As a result Paul sent him on some difficult assignments (1 Thess. 3:2; 1 Cor. 16:10ff). This close working relationship between the two men grew out of their shared faith in the Lord Jesus Christ in spite of their age difference. This shows that there need be no generation gap in the Christian church, and that the one thing needful is a common commitment to the same Lord and his message of truth.³⁵

³¹ Stanley D. Toussant, "Acts," in *The Bible Knowledge Commentary: An Exposition of the Scriptures: New Testament*, ed. by John F. Walvoord and Roy B. Zuck (Wheaton, IL: Victor Books, 1985), 388.

³² MacArthur, *The Book on Leadership*, 167.

³³ William MacDonald and Arthur L. Farstad, *Believers Bible Commentary. New Testament*, rev. ed. (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson Publishers, 1990), Tit 2:4.

³⁴ William D. Mounce, *Pastoral Epistles*, 59 vols.; *Word Biblical Commentary*, vol. 46 (Nashville, TN: T. Nelson, 2000), 410.

³⁵ Douglas J.W. Milne, 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus, *Focus on the Bible 5*

Paul grew to love Timothy as a son. Just as important, Paul built on this relationship and entrusted Timothy with key leadership roles building churches and passing on the faith to the next generation. Paul's same strategy for team building can help address the lack of generational disciple-making that is lacking in many of the churches in Africa.³⁶

Finally, it is impossible to leave this section without mentioning the centrality of Jesus Christ throughout the mission of the church. The momentum of the Great Commission was begun in Acts and fulfilled in Paul.³⁷ Craig Van Gelder in his book, *The Ministry of The Missional Church*, summarizes Paul's view as the "missio Dei."

The missional church reorients our thinking about the church in regard to God's activity in the world. The Triune God becomes the primary acting subject rather than the church. God has a mission in the world, what is usually referred to as the *missio Dei* (the mission of God). In understanding the *missio Dei*, we find that God as a creating God also creates the church through the Spirit, who calls, gathers, and sends the church into the world to participate in God's mission. . . . The redemptive reign of God in Christ is inherently connected to the *missio Dei*, which means that God is seeking to bring back into right relationship all of creation. Or as Paul put it in 2 Corinthians, "In Christ God was reconciling the world to himself" (5:19). The Spirit-led, missional church is responsible to participate in this reconciling work by bearing witness to the redemptive reign of God in Christ as good news, and through inviting everyone everywhere to become reconciled to the living and true God.³⁸

Teams were a tool used by Paul to create vibrant communities of Spirit-empowered disciples who were equipped to fulfill the Gospel commission and the mission of divine reconciliation. Douglas Moo summarizes Paul's view of Christ's leadership of the church in his commentary on the book of Colossians.

Few texts in the New Testament make the case so clearly that Christian living must be rooted in Christ. He is the "head" who supplies power to the whole body (2:19). It is by our existence "in him," the "new self," or "new man," that renewal in the image of God takes place (3:10). He is the repository of all wisdom (2:3), the "reality" or "substance" of new covenant

(Escondido: Ephesians Four Group, 2003), 1 Tim 1:1, Logos Bible Software.

³⁶ Eugene I. Ukaoha "Re-Imagining the Church in Nigeria," *Think Up: The Church in Africa Engaging Plurality* 1, no. 1 (Winter 2013), 161.

³⁷ Noble, 28.

³⁸ Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church*, 18.

³⁹ Douglas J. Moo, *The Letters to the Colossians and to Philemon*. (Grand Rapids, MI: William B. Eerdmans, 2008), 69.

truth (2:17). Our very mind-set must be governed by “the things above,” where Christ is and with whom we have been raised to new life (3:1–2).³⁹

The headship of the church was, and is, Christ alone who forms the thoughts and mission of the church. Paul built churches that were independent of his direct leadership and indigenous leadership-teams were capable of self-replication and growth—the very thing needed in both the Western church and the African church. Paul's practice fit in with his organic view of church and followed in the pattern established by Jesus himself. Church planting, church-growth, and building a strong self-identity then must flow from this idea that “the church does what it is!”⁴⁰

This study of the apostle Paul provides some insight into the kind of leadership one should experience in the church. It is important to note that Paul as an apostle was not functioning as an elder. Despite this unique calling, he did model many of the qualities the church should expect in elders. The apostle Paul and the prophet Barnabas were commissioned by the church in Antioch to plant churches among the Gentiles.

Now there were in the church at Antioch prophets and teachers, Barnabas, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a lifelong friend of Herod the tetrarch, and Saul. While they were worshipping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit said, “Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.” Then after fasting and praying they laid their hands on them and sent them off. (Acts 13:1–3, ESV)

Called and commissioned to their first missionary journey by the predominantly Jewish church, Paul and Barnabas made sure to appoint elders for each young church in the Gentile region of Galatia.

“When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God. And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed.” (Acts 14:21–23, ESV)

Similar to the tradition of the Old Testament, a plurality of elders consistently played a God-ordained role sharing leadership. However, the uniqueness of the elders in the church compared to the Jewish counterpart in

⁴⁰ Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids, MI.: Baker Books, 2007), 18.

the Old Testament, the synagogue, and even the Greco-Roman society cannot be overlooked. As Hugh Scott observes, “While we find abundant evidence of both Jewish elders and Christian elders, the latter must not be considered as an imitation of the former, because when their position and duties are examined they are found to be too dissimilar to be the result of such a process.”⁴¹

Elders in the church were not selected based on social status, power or wealth. In a rejection of cultural expectation, the church followed the teaching of Jesus and the apostolic tradition of selecting elders based on moral character, sound theology, and the ability to lead their families in love. Elders in the New Testament era were uniquely called to guide the church toward maturity and recognized by the Apostles as essential to the leadership of each congregation.⁴²

The African Church and The Ministry of Teams

The implications for Paul's approach to building teams to plant churches has an immediate application in how churches should restructure their leadership. There are many kinds of teams used in the church today. There are teams for evangelism, teams for assimilation of new believers, teams for missions, and teams for local outreach. Teams are a big part of who the church is and how the church operates. Bohannon argues that church-planting teams are the necessary precursor to establishing a healthy team-ministry in the church:

The logos or appeal to reason and logic for a church-planting team model can be illustrated by examining a metaphor from nature—a flock of geese. Much can be extrapolated, about the value of teams and leadership, from observing a flock of geese flying in formation.

Geese naturally accomplish more and benefit immensely from operating out of their God-given design and purpose to work together as a team. Likewise, leadership teams which have been given a God-given task have the capacity to accomplish more and enjoy greater benefits when working together as one (John 17:20–23).⁴³

⁴¹ Hugh M. Scott, “Recent Investigations into the Organization of the Apostolic and Post-Apostolic Churches,” 233–234. See this article for Scott's argument about the uniqueness of Deacons in the church, “Kühl urges further against the Jewish origin of the early Church polity the fact, that the deacon, an officer peculiar to Christians, cannot possibly be traced to the *ἄρχιερέως* of the synagogue; for this latter was merely an official of worship, while the former was active in the whole benevolent life of the congregation. The deacons were not servants, but were peculiarly endowed men, who had received a special *χάρισμα* for their work.” Hugh M. Scott, 235.

⁴² Benjamin Merkle. *Why Elders?* (Kindle Locations 225-236).

⁴³ John S. Bohannon, “Church-Planting Teams: A Proposed New Hermeneutic for Church-Planting Strategy,” *Faith and Mission* 22, no. 2 (2005): 39.

Bohannon's main point is that the church cannot begin with a flock of one. If the goal is to build disciples who can function in healthy teams, then the church must begin with men and women who are experienced in team-based ministry and who can pass along that ability to establish more local congregations.⁴⁴ The vision for independent and biblical self-governing, self-supporting, self-propagating and self-identifying churches in Africa begins with building strong teams that reproduce themselves in the next generation of leaders.

Elders are one clear example of teams in the scriptures that are necessary to sustain the long-term health of the church after it is planted.⁴⁵ This section will look specifically at the New Testament example of elders and how they functioned in the church. Even for those churches who do not use an elder-polity, there is value in this study. As Frederick Finks writes, the church must use the guidelines of the scripture to help develop "spiritual leadership."⁴⁶ Gary Demarest clarifies the applicability of eldership to all churches regardless of polity when he writes:

Whether the form of government is congregational and autonomous, or episcopal with more centralized authority, the quality of the leadership determines the quality of the life of the congregation. And leadership is always a shared responsibility of pastor and people. Whether it's a vestry, session, or board, the principle is the same. Whether the authority is vested in the clergy or the laity, the principle still holds.⁴⁷

A clear understanding of the mission, qualifications and principles that guided the New Testament elders is required so that the reader can determine the quality and expectation of her leaders. Therefore, as the Western church seeks to mature beyond the pastor-as-CEO model and the African church works to mature beyond the "big-man" model, faithful leaders must embark on a thorough study of elders in the New Testament to gain insight into the kind of spiritual leadership needed to establish a healthy reproducing church. Rather than focusing attention on an organization chart, the focus in this paper

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, 41-42. The direct focus on Bohannon's article is that multiple pastors should function as a team to plant. However, he does suggest that some members on the team may be full-time or part-time workers. Regardless of the status then, his main assertion is valid in that the core team must prepare the way for the permanent team of elders who will eventually lead the church.

⁴⁵ Getz, 181.

⁴⁶ Frederick J. Finks, "Leadership Profile— New Testament Style," *Ashland Theological Journal* 16, no. (1983), 25.

⁴⁷ Gary W. Demarest, 1, 2 Thessalonians, 1, 2 Timothy, Titus, *The Preacher's Commentary* 32, ed. Lloyd J. Ogilvie (Nashville, TN: Thomas Nelson, 1984), 313.

is on the qualitative aspects of leadership that allow for the mission of the church to take place. In other words, rather than build an organizational structure, the church must focus on a missional structure that helps us reach the lost with the Gospel. The early apostles recognized, through divine revelation, that the old Jewish form of presidential leadership,⁴⁸ which is akin to the pastor-as-CEO model, would restrict the spread of the Gospel in several ways. First, the synagogue model relied on the civil and political power of the president and was therefore less adaptable to diverse and changing cultures.⁴⁹ Second, the synagogue model hindered rapid growth and expansion because there were fewer leaders modeling and equipping the younger in faith. And third, the synagogue model had a limited attraction because it only drew in people who were connected with the president.

In place of the one-man model, the apostles established the church using a missional structure, which included a plurality of elders that could change, grow, morph and adapt to the needs of each culture.⁵⁰ In other words, the plurality of elders allowed the church to grow and expand in ways not possible through one-man rule. This missional structure is a positive reflection of the following four elements: 1) the church as the divine family with one God and Father over all; 2) the family as a living group instead of a legal organization; 3) elimination of structures that hinder mission and building of structures that empower people; and 4) building of a church driven by divine mission, not by organizational hierarchy, personalities, or personal agendas.

⁴⁸ David A. Mappes writes, “While most scholars agree that the church borrowed the concept of *πρεσβύτερος* from the Jewish synagogue, they disagree on the similarities between the Jewish synagogal eldership and church eldership. Some scholars, such as Rayburn, argue for a complete analogous relationship between the church and the synagogue, while others argue for a relationship in name only. The present writer concludes that while the church is distinct from the synagogue, there are enough similarities between them to substantiate the synagogal influence on the early church.” See David A. Mappes, “The ‘Elder’ in the Old and New Testaments,” in *Vital Church Issues: Examining Principles and Practices in Church Leadership*, ed. by Roy B. Zuck (Grand Rapids, MI: Kregel Resources, 1998), 80; adapted from David A. Mappes, “The ‘Elder’ in the Old and New Testaments,” *Bibliotheca Sacra* 154, no. 613 (1997): 89.

⁴⁹ Mappes, 81.

⁵⁰ Morey has an insightful chapter that also includes a long discussion of the role of omen in church leadership through the first few centuries of the church. He writes, “The Church’s dynamic approach to positions of honor and ministry enabled it to transcend all cultural boundaries. While being careful to maintain such supra-cultural permanent offices as elder and deacon, the Church can set up culturally conditioned positions as a valid way to relate to every culture and civilization.” See Robert A. Morey, *The Encyclopedia of Practical Christianity* (Las Vegas, NV: Christian Scholars Press, 2004), 424.

Elders as Mature Big Brothers in the African Church

The goal of establishing an African church with a strong biblical self-identity, must be the same goal for the church in the West. The process for all of us begins with recognizing the brotherhood of all believers in Christ and allowing that truth to shape our leadership.⁵¹ For the church in the West, this is a transition from a business model to a family model of leadership. For the church in Africa, it is a rejection of the “big-man” rule, and replacing it with the ideal of shared leadership through teams of elders. This ideal of shared leadership through a family model does find roots in the African tradition:

African traditional life is largely built on the community. Since the church is also a community of those who have faith in Jesus Christ, hence this overlapping concept in terms of the family, the relatives, the neighbours, the departed, the question of mutual interdependence and the sustaining of one another in times of need.⁵²

While there is significant diversity among the many nations and tribes on the African continent, “there is a common thread for the value of community.”⁵³ Establishing shared leadership, rooted in the biblical teaching and nurtured in the African culture, is a necessary first step in overcoming the reputation for pride and abuse that persists in many places.⁵⁴

Eldership demands demonstration of humility and accountability, often not seen in the traditional senior pastor-as-CEO model. As Hellerman observes: “Just where do I get the credibility, Sunday after Sunday, to tell my people to love one another, if I am a CEO senior pastor who answers to no one during the week? If I answer to no one in the church office, how can I credibly tell others that they need to answer to one another in the pews? I can't. Not with any real integrity, at any rate.”⁵⁵ In contrast to this model, mature elders live life in front of the church as the older brother. I use the term “big brother” in context of both Jesus' teaching and in contrast to the Roman Catholic tradition of Priest as “Father” and Pope as “Holy Father.”⁵⁶ The Roman Catholic Church used the

⁵¹ Hellerman, *Ancient Church as Family*, 126.

⁵² John S. Mbiti, “Christianity and African Culture,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 3, no. 2 (1979): 189.

⁵³ Time Tienou, “Christianity and African Culture a Review,” *Evangelical Review of Theology* 3, no. 3 (1979): 200.

⁵⁴ Danny McCain, “Re-Imagining the Church in Nigeria,” *Think Up: The Church in Africa Engaging Plurality* 1, no. 1 (2013): 120.

⁵⁵ Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Leadership*, 339-340.

⁵⁶ John Thein, *Ecclesiastical Dictionary: Containing, in Concise Form, Information upon Ecclesiastical, Biblical, Archeological, and Historical Subjects* (New York; Cincinnati; Chicago: Benziger Brothers, 1900), 684. Logos Bible Software.

terminology of priest as “Father” to create a hierarchy in the church and a division between priest and people. Jesus, in stark contrast, said that the church was to live as a gathering of brothers and sisters with only one Father, who is God. The apostle Matthew records for us the following,

While he was still speaking to the people, behold, his mother and his brothers stood outside, asking to speak to him. But he replied to the man who told him, “Who is my mother, and who are my brothers?” And stretching out his hand toward his disciples, he said, “Here are my mother and my brothers! For whoever does the will of my Father in heaven is my brother and sister and mother.” (Matthew 12:46–50, ESV)

In this brief exchange the reader can discern the heart of God that elders must serve as the big brothers of God's family and lead each individual into relationship with our Heavenly Father. The sibling relationship is not one of hierarchy but maturity. Elders as big brothers are selected as they demonstrate a maturity of faith that others should emulate, not to take power and rule over the congregation.

Across cultures and times, it seems inherent to mankind's thinking that “brother” is reserved for an equal and “father” for a superior.⁵⁷ Reflecting this common understanding, and also, the teaching of Jesus, the apostles saw themselves as brothers to all the saints in every church (2 Peter 3:15; Rev. 1:9). The saints of the New Testament church recognized each other as brothers and sisters—each person gifted uniquely by the Spirit to serve the good of all yet in their diversity there persisted a divine equality. Leaders in the church were not “fathers”. “There is only one Father who is God” (Matt. 23:9). Leaders in the church were brothers and sisters, called to a place of authority based on maturity of faith and demonstration of service.

The early church knew nothing of elders as Father.⁵⁸ However, as the church grew, the sibling relationship was replaced with an institutionalized relationship of power and control. As Carl F.H. Henry laments,

⁵⁷ George Aaron Barton, “Salutations,” in *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*, ed. James Hastings, John A. Selbie, and Louis H. Gray (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1908–1926), 107. Barton notes, “Most of the letters from the time of the Neo-Babylonian and early Persian empires (c. 550–450 B.C.) are somewhat more elaborate. An equal is addressed as ‘brother,’ a priest as ‘father.’”

⁵⁸ It is noteworthy that Paul does refer to Timothy as his true son in the faith (1 Tim. 1:2), and some have derived from this the idea that elders are fathers. However, this reads into the text a hierarchical relationship that is not intended by Paul. Paul's writings nowhere establish an office of “Father”, but instead emphasized a relationship of loving care between two men who shared a special bond of kinship.

[A]s medieval Christianity became institutionalized and the ecclesiastical hierarchy declared sacraments to be salvific, the experience of God's fatherhood was pushed more and more into the background. The priest as father, and the pope as father of fathers, rather than God as Father and Christ as great high priest, came to hold center stage.⁵⁹

This is an important reminder of how we must experience elders. In God's church, elders are not a special class of Christians held to a higher standard of morality or service. Elders are not the "clergy" and everyone else the "laity."⁶⁰ Elders are the spiritual big brothers who model the maturity and devotion to the family that every sibling should strive to emulate.

Just as Paul could say, "Be imitators of me as I am of Christ" (1 Cor. 11:1; cf. 2 Tim. 3:10–11), and just as he could command Timothy to "set the believers an example in speech and conduct, in love, in faith, in purity" (1 Tim. 4:12), and just as he could tell Titus, "Show yourself in all respects a model of good deeds and in your teaching show integrity, gravity, and sound speech that cannot be censured" (Titus 2:7), so the pattern is to be continued in the lives of all church leaders today. It is not optional that their lives be examples for others to follow; it is a requirement.⁶¹

As big brothers, each younger brother and sister is expected to model the behavior of the mature "older sibling." The elder walks in such a way that each and every member of the family can emulate his dedication to Christ.

Conclusion

Establishing churches that value shared leadership in a plurality of elders is the tradition given to us in the scriptures. There is certainly work to be done in applying the principles of shared leadership where the church operates closer to a family model. Many churches and denominations will seek to apply these values within the context of their own traditions. Writing from the West, I think the greatest benefit comes in casting a vision for the qualitative nature of

⁵⁹ Carl F. H. Henry, *God, Revelation, and Authority*, vol. 6 (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1999), 320.

⁶⁰ Certainly there are some who make this argument that there must be a distinction made between clergy and laity and they attempt to draw this distinction from the earliest days of the New Testament church through the tradition of the early church Fathers. While I find this argument lacking, it is presented in some length by Charles Hodge, "Theories of the Eldership—The Constitutional View of the Presbyterian Church," *The Biblical Repertory and Princeton Review* 32, no. 3 (1860): 467 cf.

⁶¹ W. A. Grudem, *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 1994), 918-919.

leadership through a plurality of elders more than giving lists of how this must be done in each unique African context. If individual congregations chooses to embrace shared leadership structures in their local church, the African Church as a whole can achieve two important goals.

First, embracing biblical shared leadership will help the each church overcome an abuse of power and replace it with a universal brotherhood that can unify both the African church and connect her to the church around the world. Tokunboh Adeyemo, in his article, "The African Church and Selfhood," points us in this very direction:

African church leaders are then saying that the church in Africa must be a place to feel at home. But it should be remembered that it is an existence in a community; in other words, the African Church cannot isolate itself from the rest of Christendom. We cannot exclaim that we do not belong to others, because we do. We are the Church of Jesus Christ in Africa because there is the Church of Jesus Christ elsewhere.⁶²

God's church was established in brotherhood with Christ and with God as our one Father. God's church, when organized as a family and lead by the mature big brothers, can provide the much needed self-identity the African church is destined to achieve.

Second, Africa is positioned to no longer be the simple object of Western influence, but to become a world influencer. Keith Ferdinando observes in his article, "Christian Identity in the African Context":

The dramatic shift in the center of gravity of global Christianity in the last fifty years is now universally recognized. As a result the African church has become a major influence in the world Christian movement, which makes it increasingly important to keep abreast of Christian reflection and debate on the African continent.⁶³

This paper offers insight from lessons the church is learning in the West about the shortcomings of the pastor-as-CEO related to the African big-man model, with the hope that readers will advance the scholarship and faithfully apply it to the unique, and diverse, African context.

This paper reviewed the shortcomings of the Western church's leadership model called the "Pastor as CEO," relating it to its African counterpart, the big-

⁶² Tokunboh Adeyemo, "The African Church and Selfhood," *Evangelical Review of Theology* 5, no. 2 (1981): 219.

⁶³ Keith Ferdinando, "Christian Identity in the African Context: Reflections On Kwame Bediako's Theology And Identity," *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* 50, no. 1 (2007): 119.

man model, in the hopes of starting a dialogue, advancing scholarship in biblical church leadership, and helping churches to faithfully apply an elder-model of church leadership in a unique and diverse African context. It presents the ideal of the unity of brotherhood amongst all Christians of every nation as a path to building a self-supporting, self-governing, and self-extending African church rooted on the solid foundation of the shared leadership of elders.

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