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ISSUE: DISTINCTION BETWEEN:

PLURALITY OF ELDERS WITH NO SENIOR PASTOR ("NSP") AND
PLURALITY OF ELDERS WITH A SENIOR PASTOR ("SP")

OBJECTIVE

Our Heavenly Father has saved us for a purpose to transform us to be like His Son and thus bring glory to Himself. We have been called to holiness and godliness. God has not only ordained the end, but also the means. Ephesians 4:11-16 teaches that in the context of the church, God has provided the means for our spiritual growth thru gifted leaders who equip the saints to minister and then through the mutual ministry of every member of the body of Christ. Any insight into the proper functioning of these God ordained means should not be a cause for contention or insecurity, but an occasion for rejoicing in anticipation of what God will accomplish as we submit to His game plan.

The objective of this study is to investigate the Biblical teaching regarding plurality of elders to determine whether the NT model includes a special "chief spokesman" or "senior pastor" or "special leader" who is differentiated from the other elders. The presupposition is that agreement has already been reached that some form of plurality of elders (strictly at the local level) is the NT pattern for church government and that this model (to the extent to which we can determine it from Scriptures) is assumed to be normative for the Church Age rather than just the culturally expedient option for the early church. In addition to surveying the Biblical data, some practical observations regarding the outworking of these two different systems will be developed. The basis for proof cannot be expediency (i.e. "This works the best; therefore, it is right") because we are not always the best equipped to evaluate the results. God simply calls us to "Trust and Obey because there's no other way" to please Him. However, in eternity if not before, God will certainly demonstrate that His way is the most effective way.

Since my position for many years has been very strong on the side of "NSP", I have tried to avoid the "straw man" approach by presenting the arguments of John MacArthur, Jr. (a teacher whom I greatly respect) from his pamphlet "Answering The Key Questions About Elders" (referred to here as JM) as fairly representing the "SP" view. In addition, I have done my best to include whatever other arguments merit consideration.

IMPORTANCE

The position one takes on this issue tends to determine the importance of this issue. By this I mean that those who are functioning with some "special leader" emphasize the validity of the plurality structure while downplaying the significance of this particular subissue, while those who reject the "special leader" scenario believe that there are major practical ramifications involved which undermine the basic foundations of the plurality structure. The fact is that serious personal sacrifices have been invested in both directions so that the issue becomes clouded by personal bias:

1) Certainly the "senior pastor" has invested much ministry and assumed many pressures that constitute a considerable sacrifice.

It would be difficult for any senior pastor to envision "backing down" to a more equalized situation. And apart from drastically modifying the current functioning of the senior pastor and the other elders it is impossible to raise the others up to a level corresponding to "NSP". (I am not demanding or even expecting that respect and functioning must be equal across the "Board". Hopefully, the qualified "NSP" perspective will become more clear as the two positions are contrasted.)

2) On the other hand, staff positions have not been sought and opportunities for ministry may have not been as easy to come by for those who favor the other side.

NEED FOR HUMILITY

The key attitude that must govern spiritual leadership as well as studying a difficult topic such as this (a topic that often can be an emotional topic for both sides) is Humility. I approach this subject cautiously with the recognition that my understanding in this area may be faulty. I pray that I would have a teachable spirit regarding any new insights that God might direct my way.

We cannot be equally dogmatic about all points of Christian doctrine. Certainly this area of truth does not constitute one of the fundamentals of the faith. (However, it is one of the fundamentals in the area of church structure and ministry!) Also, I need to be cautious since my view is a minority one in the overall context of church history. May the Great Shepherd of the sheep, our Lord Jesus Christ, direct our minds and hearts in considering this area of "the whole counsel of God" in order that our discipling efforts might be most effective.

OUTLINE

- I. Analysis of JM's Publication on Elders
- II. Additional Support for "NSP" View
- III. Practical Problems with "SP" Method of Functioning
- IV. Practical Problems with "NSP" Method of Functioning

I. ANALYSIS OF JM'S PUBLICATION ON ELDERS

I heartily endorse the arguments presented by JM regarding the biblical norm for church leadership as being "a plurality of God ordained elders" (p.1). It is a clear presentation and makes a strong case. However, in reality he only applies these arguments to the governing authority of the elders as being equal (i.e. in the process of decision making) rather than to all areas of both ruling and ministering. My thesis is that a true plurality of shepherds will both rule and minister in all areas under the charter of "equal opportunity and responsibility, but diversified giftedness and focus."

There is no question that JM's designated "special leader" functions in a unique capacity with the major responsibility for public teaching and exhortation. What needs to be pointed out is that ministry and authority cannot

be artificially separated. If someone dominates in one area they are already more respected and weighty in the other area. In fact the argument against women teaching and exhorting the public assembly is based on their taking authority over the men. Consequently, if only one elder does the bulk of the public ministry, the rightful God given authority of the other elders is denied to some extent. Therefore, unless the same principles are applied to both governing and functioning they can be legitimately applied to neither. The union parallels that of repentance and faith. You cannot have one legitimately without the other.

It is my contention that JM's same Biblical arguments demonstrate how the entire plurality should consistently function. Let's review JM's arguments from this new perspective:

1) "Elder was the only commonly used Jewish term for leadership that was free from any connotation of either the monarchy or the priesthood" (p.6). "NSP" best pictures this emphasis while "SP" confuses the picture and can look very much like both a monarchy and a special priesthood. Despite what might be taught in terms of theory, the congregation views one man as leading the worship and the preaching on a consistent basis.

2) Paul "is listed in Acts 13:1 as one of that church's teachers" (p.7). It is evident that there were a number of gifted teachers who were prominent in the church rather than the main public teaching and preaching ministry being focused on one individual.

3) "The New Testament bishop, or overseer, is in a unique leadership role in the church, specifically responsible for teaching (1 Timothy 3:2), feeding, protecting, and generally nurturing the flock (Acts 20:28). Biblically, there is no difference in the role of an elder and that of a bishop; the two terms refer to the same group of leaders. 'Episkopos' emphasizes the function; 'presbuteros', the character" (p.10). We should expect all the bishops to be actively involved in fulfilling these capacities rather than delegating the major doctrinal focus to one special spokesman.

4) "'Poimen', then, emphasizes the pastoral role of caring and feeding, although the concept of leadership is also inherent in the picture of a shepherd" (p.10). All of the elders are pastors. There needs to be some discussion whether all are gifted as "pastor-teachers" (Ephes. 4:11), but there certainly has not been any prescription set forth that each church should have one teacher who is in a class by himself and can be ambiguously referred to as "the pastor" while at the same time all of the elders are to be called "pastors" in a more restricted sense.

5) "So the term 'elder' emphasized who the man is. 'Bishop' speaks of what he does. And 'pastor' deals with how he feels. All three terms are used of the same church leaders, and all three identify those who feed and lead the church, but each has a unique emphasis.... (All) The elders were charged with the care and feeding, as well as the spiritual guidance, of the entire church" (p.11). Once again, this more naturally sounds like "NSP" on the surface.

6) The teaching responsibilities of all the elders are more fully outlined (with Biblical references) on p.12-13.

7) Conclusion: "So elders are a group of specially called and ordained men with a great desire to lead and feed the flock of God" (p.23). It seems like a big assumption to jump from this consistent picture of the plurality of elders

involved in public teaching to the "SP" format for the main gathering of the assembly every Sunday, despite the many behind the scenes activities of the other elders or the fact that occasionally they might fill the pulpit on isolated, special occasions (such as when the senior pastor is away). It is important for the assembly as a whole to see their elders performing these functions in the assembly so that respect and honor due them is based on their character and ministry rather than simply on their office.

8) JM demonstrates that all elders have the same right to receive support, or to support themselves (pp.24-25). This section was especially helpful: "Either way, it does not affect the man's status as an elder ... there is biblically no difference between a lay elder and a pastor. Each elder is charged with the oversight, care, feeding, protection, and teaching of the flock. All the elders together constitute the leadership and example for the rest of the church. All have been ordained by the church, called by God, and set apart by God to a shepherding function as defined in the Scriptures. They are all called to the same level of commitment and to the same office."

9) "One-man leadership is characteristic of cults, not of the church" (p.27). The same could be said of situations where the only leadership consists of one strong, "chief spokesman", discipler and those men who have been disciplined under his ministry. If everyone bears a dependent relationship to this one man, despite being subsequently recognized as elders equal in authority, there is a danger that the checks and balances provided by the plurality system will not function properly.

At this point one might do well to try to summarize the weight of argumentation on the side of either "SP" or "NSP". It is entirely one-sided in favor of "NSP"! That is why JM feels obligated to include a special chapter (Chap.9 -- "Does government by elders eliminate the role of a special leader?") to justify the "SP" structure. Any logical thinker should sit up and take notice at such a totally unexpected thesis -- one that in no way grows out of the line of thought that JM has been developing thus far. That is not to imply that this conclusion can just be rejected outright, but it certainly precludes us from just accepting it outright -- which is exactly what JM asks us to do! He starts out simply stating his conclusion as fact and then makes a number of observations, which although true in many respects, do not prove his point. Certainly this chapter should be studied very closely with the burden of proof definitely falling in the camp of "SP".

JM's Arguments In Favor of a Special Leader:

1) "Within the framework of elders' ministries there will be great diversity as each exercises his unique gifts." While this is certainly true it does not support the SP structure as opposed to the "NSP" structure. Both systems maintain this truth. The point is that the unique focus of each elder must develop from the free exercise of his gifts rather than one special position already allocated to one man.

Why establish a pattern of functioning that eliminates the possibility of elders being equally gifted in the highly visible gifts of teaching and exhortation? Even if the level of giftedness is not equal, Why make it almost an all-or-nothing proposition in terms of the frequency of preaching? Shouldn't you expect to see varying amounts of leadership exercised rather than a total delegation to the one special leader? What happens in the situation where the church has someone who is as gifted in public teaching as the senior pastor? Should he have to go to another assembly to look for opportunities to use his

gift or content himself with subordinate contexts (such as Sunday School teaching or the evening service)? If these are viewed as proving grounds for the testing of one's gift, what happens when one passes the test? Is he then only a candidate to be sent somewhere else on the grounds that each church only has one special leader?

The end result is that the special leader keeps getting more proficient in this area with practice, but it is very difficult to raise up new special leaders apart from some parachurch structure. While other church staff positions develop many ministry skills, they by definition cannot offer experience in being the senior pastor. Instead, the gap just gets wider and the validity of the "SP" position becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy as all must conclude that nobody else in the church can really minister as effectively publicly as the special leader.

I would rather define JM's observations here as demonstrating that all of the elders should have equal opportunity for public ministry with their actual practice being dictated by their unique giftedness. This sounds like what JM is saying as well. But in its outworking we must get away from giving the preeminence to one special leader. There should be a whole spectrum of different amounts of participation -- a spectrum that is fluid as the identity and giftedness and maturity of the elders change rather than a set game plan that features a starting quarterback and occasional series of downs for the designated backups.

I am not suggesting that all of the elders should take turns at the public preaching. But I am affirming that we need to go out of our way to make sure that the assembly does not view the elders in any type of official hierarchy (e.g.: Senior Pastor, Assist. Pastor, Youth Pastor, etc.). This does not mean that an individual elder cannot major in one area of responsibility (e.g. counseling, youth work, etc.) but he cannot be one-dimensional and he still must function in limited ways in the other realms. Otherwise, if you delegate responsibilities too strictly you end up with everyone still being shepherded by a single pastor (who is responsible for that Sunday School class, or that geographical area, or that age group, or that special need category) and you lose the benefits of plurality of shepherding.

2) JM points to the twelve disciples as "a good example of how diversity functions in a unified system". Once again this is true, but it is not true that we can pick what analogies we want from this example and use them as the doctrinal footings for how plurality of elders should function within the context of a single local church. This hermeneutical approach is completely subjective and selective in what part of the ministry of the apostles to present as support for conclusions that have already been reached on some other basis (whether tradition or commonsense or experience with people or ...?). JM starts out right away rather apologetically explaining that we need to leave Judas out of this picture since he wasn't even saved!

Am I correct to conclude that each church should always have exactly four elders based on the structure of the different lists of the apostles as described by JM? Or am I correct to conclude that each church should always have at least 3 "special pastors" (Peter, Philip, and James and don't forget Paul)? Am I correct to conclude that when we list the elders of a given church, we should always start with the special leader and then list the others in any old order? Am I correct to conclude that because James serves as a spokesman for the church council in Acts (12:17; 15:13) we should recognize a hierarchical bishop over all of the churches? We stand on pretty shaky theological turf when

we go through such gymnastics for the major exegesis to establish such an important distinction. JM has just finished excellent explicit teaching about the nature and responsibilities of the plurality. Implicit material such as what he presents in this chapter can never supercede explicitly stated truth.

It is definitely arguing from silence (and stretching my credulity) to try to make a case that the other apostles (other than Peter, Philip and James) were not prominent public preachers and evangelists as well. Certainly when they were sent out in pairs (Mark 6:7) there would have to have been a minimum of 6 "special leaders" or in reality, the better emphasis in the gospels and in Acts is that they were all "special leaders" -- that's why they are the apostles. The fact that from a historical standpoint (and even from an immediate standpoint) some were more prominent is not the grounds for delegating the primary teaching responsibility in the local church to a special leader. To suggest from silence that support for the "SP" can be drawn from the observation that "there is no record that John ever preached a single sermon" reduces one of the famous "sons of thunder" (Mark 3:17) to a frustrated spectator. Anyone who has experienced the burning passion for preaching the burden of the Lord would realize that such a theologian as John whom God used to write the most profound books of the NT could never have maintained such silence.

To imagine that the early church spread so quickly on account of the leadership of the few apostles whom Christ chose and trained is amazing. But to go beyond these facts to suggest that in actuality the public preaching was concentrated around only Peter, Philip and James (and of course, Paul) would be something more than amazing.

3) The relationship between Paul and Barnabas deserves special attention. Rather than supporting the case for "SP", it overwhelmingly illustrates some of the fundamental points of the "NP" position. JM admits that "Barnabas was probably the leading teacher in the church before Paul came in." In fact Barnabas is mentioned first in the sending of the first missionary team in Acts 11:29-30. But there must have been equal opportunity based on unique giftedness or Paul never would have been able to advance to shoulder the majority of the teaching load. Since they were both sent out by the church at Antioch, there were other gifted teachers ministering there as well who continued to carry on the public ministry after the missionary team departed. The model at Antioch reveals a very fluid situation where there definitely was not a recognized special leader. Barnabas didn't just do "some teaching and preaching"; he must have done a lot of teaching and preaching. Later on down the road when he splits off from Paul and takes John Mark with him (Acts 15:39), Barnabas does not resume the activity of preaching which he had supposedly curtailed under Paul; instead, he continues to use his giftedness at all times to the maximum advantage.

4) The relationship between Paul and Timothy should be examined in depth as well. Paul was the one always encouraging the public preaching of Timothy.

II. ADDITIONAL SUPPORT FOR "NSP" VIEW

1) 1 Timothy 5:17.

This verse is often used by Presbyterians to support a distinction between "teaching" and "ruling" elders under the "SP" umbrella: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at

preaching and teaching." This verse does distinguish between elders on the basis of quality of leadership ("rule well") and sacrificial labor in public ministry (particularly preaching and teaching). However, this distinction is an outworking of the equal opportunity afforded to all of the elders.

The passage clearly assumes that more than one elder in a local church may be worthy of this "double honor". That could only be the case if men are allowed to minister on the basis of their giftedness and effectiveness rather than on the basis of official position. Therefore the verse provides one of the best examples of the "NSP" structure. It is helpful to turn the argument of the "SP" position around and ask: "On the basis of this distinction between teaching and ruling elders, does that mean that the teaching elder is not to function in a ruling capacity?" The answer is obvious: All of the elders must teach and all must rule.

Traditional Presbyterian ecclesiology, by defining the office of "the pastor" or "minister" as one of and yet different from the rest of the elders, provides a stark contrast to this "nonofficial" tone of 1Tim. 5:7. The family is the primary training ground for both elders and deacons. The rise of Bible Institutes and Seminaries has resulted in the substitution of formal and academic requirements for the public teaching of God's Word. These qualifications have created an unbiblical division within the eldership, the distinction between teaching and ruling elders.

While present-day practice of plurality of elders has progressed way beyond some of the traditional limitations, the "Reformation" with its exalted view of "the pastor" has not taken us far enough in this area of God's truth. We still are confused regarding how to mesh our perceived need for one "senior pastor" with our growing understanding of the Biblical truth of "plurality of pastors." The very fact that we have journeyed some distance from the traditional understanding of church government should make us receptive to evaluating the possibility of further changes.

2) Pastor-Teacher (Ephes. 4:11).

There are some that would base their support of the "SP" position on the idea of a main gifted "Pastor-Teacher" in the assembly -- using Ephesians 4:11 in conjunction with 1 Timothy 5:17. But once again, upon closer observation, this verse will offer more weight to the "NSP" concept. There is still some debate among Greek scholars over whether the Granville Sharp Rule ("two nouns connected by 'kai', the first with the article and the second without it, are by the article identified as one and the same individual or class") applies to the construction in verse 11 that includes the repetition of 'de'. Others like JM note that 'kai' here can be explanatory (translated "that is" or "in particular") so that the "pastors" are further explained as functioning as "teachers".

I would not rule out the possibility that this list could be referring to different men since gifted teachers who are not recognized as elders should have opportunity to teach the assembly as well. But there does seem more in favor of linking the two functions here as referring to the same individuals = pastor-teachers. Still there is no emphasis on any special office but rather on the ministry of gifted men. The fact that teaching is closely associated with shepherding has already been demonstrated from many other passages. We know that a plural group of such men must be functioning in the assembly so this verse does not add anything different to the discussion other than further

emphasizing their teaching role. It is significant that JM both in his booklet on Elders and in his later commentary on Ephesians does not try to use this verse to support the recognition of a "special leader" but instead applies it to all of the elders.

3) Call to the Ministry.

Our confusion is reflected in the common doctrine of a pastor's "call to the ministry". The Scriptures indicate that there needs to be both a personal dynamic (the direct leading of the Holy Spirit in the life of the individual) as well as a church dynamic. One's character and ministry next needs to be proven first in the family and then in the local church in order for that church to confirm the personal dynamic and commend the individual to the proposed ministry. There are far too many "volunteers" in paid ministry capacities who have responded to an emotional plea for total commitment, but have not truly been properly "sent" into the harvest fields by the Lord of the Harvest because they have not been proven in home and church. We need to do more praying for laborers and less emotional pleading. Since there is no special "calling" to the pastorate that is unique for the "pastor-teacher", all of the elders should be ordained in the local context on the same basis. There is not one special "Reverend" who has been examined and ordained by other senior pastors from other churches.

It is easy to agree in theory with much of what has been said in this paper while still practicing some of the distinctives of a "SP" structure (maybe without even recognizing such to be the case). A good test to apply to your church to highlight the difference between an "SP" or an "NSP" orientation is to ask the following questions:

"If the main pastor-teacher in your church were to leave tonight, would sufficient leadership and teaching remain for the church to continue without having to establish a "Pulpit Committee" to start the proceedings of calling a new pastor from the outside?"

"Have you only lost one of your core group of gifted teachers and leaders or have you lost your one indispensable leader on whom you depend for quality instruction, overall direction, and leadership?"

"Do the people perceive that there is a #1 pastor, a #2 pastor, etc.?"

Instead of "Candidating for a Pastorate", why not merely allow the other elders to function. It sounds much more like looking for a position in a prominent law firm or interviewing for some other secular career. That is because we have elevated this "special leader" to a career status that differs from the functional status of the rest of the elders. How can we hope to evaluate someone in such an artificial, limited context where far too much weight is given to his preaching ability and doctrinal answers. Why should pastors be leaving one church situation to jump to another without the counsel and direction of the elders of the sending (or in most cases "abandoned") church?

4) Headship and Authority of Christ.

The "NSP" structure best pictures Christ as the Head over His Church and Christ as the Great Shepherd. The elders as a united group represent the corporate authority of Christ over a local body of believers and serve as

undershepherds. However, Christ and the Word of God still remain the direct personal authority for the believer.

This is a difficult balance to maintain, but I think some of Norbert Ward's insights in his article "Who Has the Authority in the Church" (Baptist Reformation Review, Summer 1976; vol.5:2) merit consideration:

"The Romish (Catholic) idea is that Christ is absent from His church, and common ideas of 'shepherding' have little difference from the Romish concept. The Biblical concept is that Christ is present in His church in the authority of His Word by the power of the Holy Spirit. Elders are shepherds over the flock in the presence of Christ, not in his absence.... This does not strip officers in the church of authority. It puts teeth in the authority, for they bear not their own authority but the very authority of Jesus Christ, when they preach the Word and are examples to the flock.... 'Office' and 'Authority' within the church must be thought of in the same way that we think of an officer of the law. A law officer represents the state. The law is the authority, not the law officer. The law officer has no authority, except to tell us what is written in the law books of the state, and to carry us before a judge if he believes we have violated what is written. Justice is served as we are judged by what is written! ... The basic principles to which I refer are: 1. The authority is in Christ; 2. The statement of His will is in the written Word. The ruling of an elder is then his service to the church in teaching and application of the authoritative Word."

Any earthly "head" or "senior shepherd" detracts from the focus of the assembly in simple dependence on Christ. The goal is not to meet the needs of people by causing them to depend on a dynamic human leader. The goal is to point to Christ as the All-Sufficient Savior and Shepherd of His people. We don't want people to identify a church as "John MacArthur's church" and Pastor MacArthur does not want that either. However, just like the Israelites sought Saul to be their earthly ruler instead of the invisible God of their theocracy, believers in the church have a natural tendency to look to a man. The reality is that the picture communicated by the "SP" structure, despite public teaching to the contrary, obscures the picture of the Headship of Christ.

In our culture people view the man who has the major teaching responsibility on Sunday morning as the chief leader of the local church, despite what other ministries the other elders may be performing. Titles such as "Assistant Shepherd (Pastor)" only contribute to this image. In order to elevate all of the elders to their rightful position as undershepherds, we must make sure they are not ranked under a "chief-shepherd" here on earth, but rather directly under the proper Chief-Shepherd -- Christ.

5) Titles.

The very terminology used to try to label this "special leader" represents the difficulties involved with the "SP" position. All of the Biblical terms for leadership have been used up as applying to all of the elders. So a name must be invented that does not sound too pretentious, while still allowing for clear differentiation from the others. These names have been used throughout this paper: "chief spokesman", "the pastor", "senior pastor", "recognized leader", etc. Surely one can sense the struggle to name this position -- a struggle that should cause us to re-examine the need for such a position. Just changing the title from "Assistant Pastor" to "Associate Pastor" without changing the reality of functioning will not be sufficient.

6) Priesthood of All Believers.

The Reformation recovered the doctrine of the priesthood of all believers in a personal context:

- a) individual's right and responsibility to interpret the Word of God
- b) no need for a priest as an intermediary for confession of sin or for offering of praise
- c) receiving the blessings of God on a direct basis instead of thru the priest or the church

But the corporate expression of that priesthood in the main meeting of the assembly was not understood or implemented.

There are two major realms where that corporate functioning of the priesthood of believers should be encouraged in the assembly meeting:

a) Offering Praise

Our singing provides for a limited corporate expression here, but where is the opportunity for the individual to offer specific praise to his God? Should this be restricted to a Thanksgiving service or a smaller meeting context. In this section I will quote extensively from an article by Jon Zens in Baptist Reformation Review (Vol. 10, #2):

"the Old Covenant priests had certain functions to constantly perform. Peter focuses on this point: New Covenant priests function by offering up 'spiritual sacrifices' (v.5). A non-functioning priesthood is an absurdity! What is included in 'spiritual sacrifices' can be seen clearly in such passages as Rom. 12:1, Heb. 13:15-16 and Rev. 5:8."

b) Mutual Ministering one to another

The emphasis in the NT is that the edification of the body requires the mutual ministering of all the parts rather than mainly heavy doctrinal input from one source. Granted, not all of the gifts lend themselves to public expression. It is the responsibility of the leaders to make sure that these less visible gifts receive proper recognition and appreciation. The publicly-oriented gifts cry out for expression. Those with the gift of teaching who are not elders should have opportunity to teach. Those with the gift of exhortation have much to share publicly.

While each person should not contribute and while orderliness rather than confusion must reign and while the goal of edification must be maintained, there still should be some opportunity for ministering one to another. The Corinthian church experienced all of these problems and still Paul counseled them on guidelines governing such expression rather than simply telling them to forget about the "open" part of the meeting.

John Zens offers another interesting argument from Heb. 10:25:

"Heb. 10:25, of course, is cited as a basis for people to 'come to church.' It is probably the strongest passage on such a responsibility in the N.T. But what, according to 10:24-25, is to occur in our assembling? Where in 10:25 can you find the idea that we are to come to hear the ministry of one man? We probably assemble together, but do our services allow for the exhorting of one another? If we are going to employ 10:25 to press the duty of assembling together, must we not also use it as a guide for what transpires in our

services? In light of our practice, it appears that we use about half of the verse rightly ('assemble'), but think little about the other half ('exhort' one another)."

Zens goes on to quote from Colin Richards: "Thus, while the N.T. connects mutual ministry and our gatherings as a church, we have in our practice separated them without exegetical basis. Why? Because we have structured our 'corporate public worship' around the 'pastor,' and thereby relegated any mutual ministry to occasional meetings, perhaps 'once a month'."

Zens concludes: "It seems to me that we have made normative that for which there is no Scriptural warrant (emphasis on one man's ministry), and we have omitted that for which there is ample Scriptural support (emphasis on one another)."

Zens quotes John MacArthur, Jr. as supporting such mutual ministry:

"God has given each member certain spiritual gifts for the work of the ministry....The local church essentially is a training place to equip Christians to carry out their own ministries. Unfortunately, for many Christians the church is a place to go to watch professionals perform and to pay the professionals to carry out the church program. In many quarters Christianity has deteriorated into professional 'pulpitism,' financed by the lay spectators. The church hires a staff of ministers to do all the Christian service. This scheme is not only a violation of God's plan, but an absolute detriment to the growth of the members of the body. Every member needs to find a significant place of service. To limit the work of the ministry to a small, select class of full-time clergymen hinders the spiritual growth of God's people, stunts the development of body, and hinders the evangelistic outreach of the church into the community." (The Church: The Body of Christ, pp.122-123).

7) Arguments from silence.

Such arguments should not be conclusive. However, it seems that given all of the evidence already detailed above, the burden of proof should be on the "SP" side to point to some NT local church situation where one man is singled out as the senior pastor. Surely in all of the personal references in Paul's epistles he would have a special word for one of these pastors. If he were writing today to churches of the "SP" mold, it is inconceivable that such references would be consistently omitted. We are not talking about a couple of isolated churches as the scope of this omission. We are talking about multitudes of churches that are referred to in the NT.

The situation at Antioch has already been addressed. It was the same apparently at Ephesus as no distinction can be found in the very personal farewell speech of Paul in Acts 20. It is the same at Philippi where Paul greets "the overseers and deacons". (It is interesting that there does not seem to be any pressure to adopt a "chief deacon" position in every church.)

The only place where we see a distinction pointed out is in a negative sense in the case of Diotrephes "who loves to be first among them". This type of self-assertive leader who takes the position of preeminence (which certainly does not categorize all senior pastors) is soundly rebuked in Scripture.

Some people point to Paul's admonitions to Timothy as the counsel of an apostle to a local pastor. But Timothy is ministering in that special foundational period of the early church and serves as a transitional bridge as an apostolic delegate. He and Titus are charged to "appoint elders" in every church (Titus 1:5) rather than to be elders in a local situation. Or to try to paint Paul as a model of a senior pastor ignores his very special calling and function as the apostle to the Gentiles. While we are certainly to imitate Paul as he imitated Christ, the scope of that model does not include his apostolic functioning. Instead we can learn much about attitudes of ministry, motives, methods, etc.

In pointing to Acts 15 where James appears to act as a spokesman for the churches, it must be pointed out that he functioned in this capacity as a representative spokesman and as a temporary one rather than occupying any official position as a bishop over the churches. He did not have any permanently recognized functional supremacy.

III. PRACTICAL PROBLEMS WITH THE "SP" METHOD OF FUNCTIONING

(with corresponding advantages of "NSP" method)

1) Problems related to Church Planting.

Most church planting situations in the United States and many on foreign missionary fields revolve around the strong leadership of one key leader. The initiative, the initial evangelism and discipling, the organization and direction of the work are accomplished by this church planter. Having begun in such a fashion, it is not surprising that regardless of whatever form of government the church may later adopt, this key-leader orientation will continue.

If churches were started by a team of church planting pastors (in addition to whatever core group of supporting believers might be involved), the structure of plurality would be modelled from the outset. The NT pattern shows at least two key leaders on every missionary team. Even the Apostle Paul felt uncomfortable when ministering on a solo basis.

2) Problems related to Discipling.

Should the Lord Jesus Christ be our model in how we disciple other people? In most respects, the automatic answer in the affirmative is correct. But in one very crucial respect we need to see a difference: while Christ as Perfect Man and All-Sufficient God models and teaches the truth without error, each of us can present only an imperfect and flawed representation of God's truth. Therefore, the picture of discipling in the context of the church emphasizes the importance of the ministry of the entire body to one another. This community approach does not preclude the need for individual focus where one person sets out with the objective of helping another believer to grow in certain areas. But the Navigator model (with all of its good materials and excellent results) can never offer the well-rounded totality of a church-focused approach to discipling.

The leaders of the church, the elders, bear the responsibility of guiding this discipling process and equipping the saints to do the work of the ministry. In a "SP" situation, one of two problems can occur:

a) Either the pastor neglects discipling completely because he doesn't have time or because he does not want to be charged with favoritism (since he can't work individually with everyone), or because he is not good at such a ministry; or

b) The pastor passes on to select men the only thing he has to offer -- which is a flawed picture of true Christianity with blind spots and weaknesses that become magnified with each new cycle of reproduction.

The beauty of the plurality is that the strengths of the different men can provide the positive reinforcement to compensate for one another's weaknesses. While I may learn more about patience from one elder, another may teach me faith and vision.

The elders have not arrived at a spiritual plateau where they no longer need exhortation and training. The plurality affords them the opportunity to learn from one another and sharpen one another as "iron sharpens iron" (Prov. 27:17). But who is adequate to minister to the senior pastor or what opportunity for such ministry is even available? The need for advice and encouragement from other godly men is not a sign of weakness but of wisdom. Usually the pastor seeks such encouragement from outside the context of the local church. Outside sources help to keep us from becoming ingrown or too concerned with our own soapboxes, but the regular ongoing support of mutual ministry within the local church is just as essential for all of the elders. I was even taught in seminary that a pastor should not be extremely close friends with people in the church because he bears somewhat of a professional relationship to them as a doctor does to his patients. The larger a church gets, the more this perspective seems to be expedient. Again, we may have recognized the error of such attitudes, but in the "SP" model there is still the tendency for the pastor to be the discipler who is equipping the other pastors.

As mentioned earlier, within the "SP" model it is difficult to train another elder to be the senior pastor.

3) Problems related to Uniqueness.

Since the senior pastor is in a special category all by himself, his family comes under unnatural scrutiny in a fishbowl environment. The expectations directed towards his wife and children are different from those directed towards the family members of the other elders. This creates additional pressure with the added burden of no one who can identify with the senior pastor's situation (again, causing the pastor and his family to seek support from other senior pastors in other contexts).

Since there can only be one senior pastor, very often when he retires he graciously moves out of the picture or attends another church to allow the new pastor to establish his own leadership without having to compete for the people's affection. Once again, this practice is expedient and maybe necessary because of the uniqueness of the senior pastor, but hardly biblical. It even offends our common sense. If the church is an extension of our family, what does this say about our caring for our own elderly family members? It just proves that we have created a monster that does not fit into any biblical category so we then compound the problem by creating our own unique set of guidelines for behavior.

Serious problems can result when pastors respond improperly to their perceived uniqueness. They can justify behavior that they would counsel others against because somehow they have become bigger than life. They can place themselves above any constructive criticism or efforts on the part of fellow believers to counsel them because they are God's anointed and any non-supportive statements are vicious attacks and persecution. They can ensure that others whose spiritual gifts might threaten their preeminence not be given equal opportunity to minister. The problems related to uniqueness are legion.

4) Problems related to Size.

The smaller the church, the less the distinction between "NSP" and "SP" will appear. When relationships are very personal, when the ministry of everyone is vital and apparent to all, when the senior pastor is very directly involved with all of the people, the fellowship in terms of true partnership is more genuine. As the church gets larger, the official position of the senior pastor and all of its distinctives and characteristics become more pronounced. Very real changes take place not just perceived changes.

The senior pastor becomes more of an administrator who channels and supervises the ministries of the other staff members along with concentrating on the study and public teaching of the Word. He no longer has time to do direct pastoring in the lives of the flock. He barely has time to do minimal discipling of staff members. The same shift in emphasis away from direct pastoring and to administration of programs takes place with the other elders and staff members to the extent that their area of responsibility grows. Any type of "open" ministry time in the large assembly becomes impossible. Since it is impossible in the large "successful" churches, its validity in even the smaller churches is undermined.

This issue of whether there is a point at which a church is too large is another topic altogether -- and I do not want to lose focus. To restrict our thinking to the topic at hand, the "NSP" position focuses less on the preaching of one man as the magnet to attract and hold a large following. Instead, more emphasis is placed on developing quality elders who have a vision for handling church growth (whether thru sister churches in the surrounding area that would be community-oriented rather than large, centralized, metropolitan congregations, or whether thru other internal organizational changes that would preserve the actual practicing of the model of plurality).

IV. PRACTICAL PROBLEMS WITH THE "NSP" VIEW

with suggestions for solving these problems

1) Unity of Doctrine.

Statement of the Problem: "If you do not have a senior pastor to study complicated issues and determine which position the church should adopt (based on the stamp of approval of the plurality as well) you will be paralyzed with doctrinal differences. For a flock to have a consistent, well-balanced diet there must be one man who is supremely qualified who will head up the church's program of indoctrination."

Analysis: When this line of argumentation is followed out consistently you end up with the type of "bishop" over the elders that one can see in the

historical writings of Ignatius. We would never call the senior pastor a bishop because he has only one vote just like all the other elders. But too often we let one man minister as though he were a bishop. It is true that the "SP" structure might facilitate a church taking dogmatic stands on a larger number of doctrinal issues. But that might not be an advantage.

Several factors must be remembered:

a) We have already seen the explicit NT teaching that all the elders bear the responsibility for sound doctrine and for reproving error.

b) Independent, autonomous local churches face a critical need for the functioning of the plurality in determining doctrine. Other denominations (such as PCA, Southern Baptist, etc.) have church councils that establish unified doctrinal confessions. But delegating too much responsibility to the senior pastor in an independent church leaves the flock unprotected against error.

c) We do not want to be equally dogmatic on every issue since some issues are more important than others as well as clearer than others. The interaction of the elders will better portray this broad spectrum of dogmatism.

d) As undershepherds faithfully seek the mind and will of Christ in specific doctrinal areas, we should expect that a unified position will result in most cases. The process might be longer and more difficult, but the results will reflect the personal convictions of all from their own study and will have greater impact as they are communicated to the flock.

e) Our goal is not to teach the dumb sheep to blindly accept whatever is taught from the pulpit, but to challenge them to develop personal convictions from their own study and to judge the message that is publicly proclaimed. If we are not practicing this type of discrimination at the leadership level, it will not be practiced by the believers in general. The involvement of the plurality helps to keep our focus on the authority of the Word of God rather than on the authority and wisdom of the senior pastor.

2) High View of Preaching.

Statement of the problem: "Only the 'SP' structure has a high enough view of preaching. Historically, this emphasis on quality preaching as the focal point of the worship service has been the benchmark of a successful church from the time of the Reformation right on thru the Puritans to the 'megachurches' of our present time. Whoever in the church is most qualified should do the vast bulk of the preaching. The senior pastor is chosen largely on this basis and should be allowed to function as such."

Analysis: God has different standards for measuring the effectiveness of preaching than merely the strength of the analytical outline, the beauty of the rhetoric, and the polish of the speaker. The key dynamic is the interaction of the Holy Spirit both in empowering the messenger and in helping the listeners to understand and integrate truth into their lives. Paul described his own preaching as often lacking in terms of outward appearance, but energized by the Spirit of God and fruitful in the lives of others. People today are much more attracted to impressive entertainment than to spiritual power.

My contention is that the power and effectiveness of preaching are directly linked to our personal relationship with the preacher and our opportunity to see the truth modelled in his own life. The "SP" emphasis fails miserably in these key areas -- directly proportional to the size of the church. That is why the Great Shepherd has not directed His church to simply pick the most impressive cassette tape ("the Star of the Week" approach) and mass distribute it for our Sunday edification. Such an approach would certainly economize on the duplication of effort of so many pastors laboring so hard on individual messages. But this is not the method God has chosen to use. Messages need time to soak. Pastors need time to live out the truth. The plurality offers a more balanced and more personal doctrinal diet. Under the "SP" perspective, the limitation of only one "teaching" elder per church is another self-fulfilling prophecy since other equally qualified men would be frustrated in a subordinate role and are thereby directed towards serving in that same capacity but in another church. We tend to multiply churches faster than we multiply leaders. If we could only back up and multiply leaders first, we would find that we could then multiply churches that are both stronger and more numerous.

That is not to say that I want to sacrifice a high view of preaching. I am not advocating that everyone should take their turn. I decry mediocrity in the teaching of God's Word. But the importance of mutual ministering in some type of open meeting and the emphasis on praise and worship (mentioned above) all need to find exposure along with the preaching by gifted men in the assembly.

3) Forward Motion.

Statement of the problem: "There must be one leader who will take the initiative and provide direction and vision for the church as a whole. There must be one leader to whom the other staff members are accountable. How can you get anything accomplished when individuals are only accountable to a committee?"

Analysis: Elders cannot be passive. The plurality will be a disaster if the men are overly committed to secular employment so that no leadership is available for the people and pastoring is just a hobby to give the leaders spiritual fulfillment. Aggressive pastoring is necessary to meet the needs of the people. The goal would be to multiply that aggressive pastoring rather than to centralize it. Goals must be established. There must be measurements of progress and management-by-objective. It is true that big business has its CEO, its Chairman of the Board and that is where the buck stops. But in the church we have the Lord Jesus Christ and the indwelling Holy Spirit. The same Lord who established the plurality is sufficient to keep it moving in the right direction.

4) Finances.

While this is a practical area that must be addressed, it does not bear on the validity of "SP" vs. "NSP" so I am going to refrain from tackling the issue in this paper. Basically JM's presentation provides a good foundation and other questions would have to be discussed regarding specific implementation.

5) Does It Work?

Unfortunately, this question has become the bottom line for most people. I say "unfortunately" because my presupposition is that if God has appointed "NSP"

as the means to the accomplishment of His goals then it has to work -- at least from God's perspective, which is the only one that counts. An increasing number of Biblical scholars are admitting that the NT church structure did not have any "special leader". But at the same time they are shying away from the cost involved in implementing such a structure by labelling it as "too idealistic", "not really workable", etc.

I readily admit that this section dealing with "Practical Problems With the 'NSP' View" has not adequately introduced all of the problems--much less solved them. For example, just in my own limited experience with churches wrestling with some of these issues, I have witnessed a number of problems that are probably fairly typical:

Abuses have included both extremes of totalitarian shepherding as well as leadership that is too passive and lacks direction and solid teaching.

Rivalry between elders and improper exercise of church discipline have too frequently been the result of functioning without a senior pastor. The reasons for such failures need to be examined and safeguards need to be proposed.

But to me the significance of this study is that the debatable areas center around the implementation of the "NSP" position, while the Biblical principles regarding the validity of the position itself seem clear. It should not surprise us that the process of rediscovering an important model of God's truth would present serious practical difficulties since we lack the historical perspective of viewing the model in action. These reformation issues are the very battlegrounds where Satan tries to wage the strongest resistance. As an analogy, a generation from now the Biblical role of women might lack sufficient models and be increasingly difficult and costly to recover if evangelicals continue to waffle. God forbid that we shrink back and leave such battles for our children to fight.

CONCLUSION

God has always been concerned that the leaders of His people follow His appointed means in order to accomplish His ends. For God the end never justifies the means. However, the sad OT commentary is that Israel's leaders fell far short in this crucial benchmark of shepherding. From all we can learn of early church history, it seems that almost immediately the Biblical pattern of leadership was lost. This is not the only area of truth. So accuracy here apart from faith and obedience in other areas should not be regarded with pride as a shibboleth. But in closing, I would like to offer a short exposition of 1 Samuel 13:11-12 that has helped me to value God's means as well as His ends.

Background:

Samuel's instructions had been clear. There was no debate over the meaning of the Word of God (cf. 10:8). Saul was to WAIT and not to act apart from the guidance of God's prophetic spokesman. The purpose of the planned events at Gilgal was apparently the confirmation of the kingdom in the hands of Saul and an affirmation of commitment to the king. Saul was coming off an impressive conquest of the Ammonites (11:1-15). He had just been shown up to some extent by Jonathan (13:3). Certainly Saul needed to solidify support for his leadership. The Lord was apparently testing Saul here. Is Saul fit to lead God's people?

Big Idea: 3 RATIONALIZATIONS FOR CHOOSING EXPEDIENCY RATHER THAN SIMPLE, CHILDLIKE FAITH AND OBEDIENCE

A. UNITY IS MORE IMPORTANT THAN TRUTH -- A PROBLEM WITH THE PEOPLE OF GOD

"the people were scattering from me"

Saul might have reasoned: "The ship is falling apart. No one will be left. Therefore, I can sacrifice truth to do what I think will best preserve and promote unity." Unity is a good goal, but it can never be made an end in itself to justify not obeying God's instructions in other areas.

As a Christian virtue, love is greater than faith and hope, but it is not greater than doctrine and truth. In fact, true Christian love cannot thrive apart from an atmosphere of Christian truth. God is only glorified by unity in the truth just as Christ and the Father are one.

Saul would have been much better off if all of the people had fled while he alone stood firm for the truth. Instead he gave in to the pressure and tried to rally the troops by an act of disobedience. It is interesting to note that he did not achieve the result he intended; for at the end he only had 600 men left anyway. But even if 4000 had stood with him, this would not have justified his sin.

B. GOD'S INSTRUCTIONS NO LONGER APPLY BECAUSE OF CIRCUMSTANCES (EITHER PERSONAL OR CULTURAL) -- A PROBLEM WITH THE WORD OF GOD

"you did not come within the appointed days"

According to Saul's timetable, God was too late to be of any help. Are God's instructions trustworthy, serious, demanding of obedience regardless of my circumstances? We do not have to understand the reasons behind God's commands to obey them.

C. THE CONSEQUENCES OF OBEDIENCE WILL BE TOO SEVERE -- A PROBLEM WITH THE ENEMIES OF GOD

"the Philistines were assembling at Michmash"

Defeat was imminent from a natural perspective. Therefore, Saul judged that he could not afford to wait any longer. Saul should be given some credit. He waited 7 days while others were fleeing and hiding. However, this stand was not sufficient for God's approval.

If there is any doubt that God hates expediency, note the severity of the judgment. It surprises us that God should make such an issue over one little point. It seems like nitpicking, but it actually was the most important test of Saul's life. Not only did he fail at this point in time, but he also failed to learn the lesson of complete obedience (cf. 1Samuel 15). Expediency cost Saul the kingdom. The consequences of disobedience far outweigh those of obedience.

BENEDICTION:

"May the God of Peace, who through the blood of the eternal covenant brought back from the dead our Lord Jesus, that great Shepherd of the sheep, equip you with everything good for doing His will, and may he work in us what is pleasing to him, through Jesus Christ, to whom be glory forever and ever. Amen." Hebrews 13:20-21