

THE LEADERSHIP OF THE NEW TESTAMENT CHURCH

Throughout the story of the Bible, God's people have been given leaders (e.g. Moses, Joshua, Samuel, Elijah, etc.). Today, God has continued to provide His people (the church) with leaders who can help them accomplish their mission. Like the different leadership roles in the Old Testament (e.g. judge, prophet, priest, king), God has given different leadership roles within His church. God's people must understand His plan for leadership in the church today.

EPHESIANS 4:11-16

God has given His church all the leadership needed through the roles identified in this passage. These work to equip the saints (Christians) to accomplish the works of service in God's kingdom, with each member contributing to the overall function of the body of Christ (Romans 12:3-8; 1 Corinthians 12:12-27). Then, these build up (strengthen) the church so that all the members become more mature and united in the faith, not tossed about by false teaching nor remaining as spiritual babies (2 Peter 3:14-18; Hebrews 5:12-14). There are five distinct roles identified in this text: Apostles, prophets, evangelists, pastors (shepherds), and teachers (note that some consider the shepherds and teachers to refer to the same role, as shepherds who teach). Apostles were direct eyewitnesses of the resurrected Christ and handpicked by Jesus (Acts 1:21-22). Prophets spoke messages through direct revelation from God (1 Corinthians 14:29-32). Both roles were critical during the infancy of the church and have provided the foundation of God's word for the church today (Ephesians 2:19-22; 3:3-6). However, the faith has now been fully revealed in the pages of the New Testament and these roles are no longer needed (Jude 1:3; 1 Corinthians 13:8-13).

2 TIMOTHY 4:1-5

Consider the role of an evangelist. The term "evangelist" simply refers to one who spreads good news (i.e. the gospel). The books of 1 and 2 Timothy (also Titus) are helpful in learning the role of an evangelist (also the work Timothy accomplished in Acts). As this text indicates, his work is one of preaching God's word, regardless of how others accept or reject it. Elsewhere, we see Timothy working to help spread the gospel in areas it had not been taught and helping establish churches (e.g. in Corinth, Acts 18:1-11). Then, we also see Timothy helping churches be strengthened in the faith (e.g. 1 Thessalonians 3:1-5). In helping churches grow, there were times Timothy needed to help churches overcome problems that had developed (e.g. false teaching in Ephesus, 1 Timothy 1:3). Furthermore, we see a man named Titus accomplishing the same role when he was working with the churches throughout the island of Crete to complete what was lacking in those churches concerning elders (Titus 1:5).

ACTS 20:17-31

Consider the role of a shepherd (pastor). The apostle Paul met with "elders" from the church in Ephesus (v. 17). These "elders" did the work of overseeing and shepherding in the local church (v. 28). So, rather than "elders" ("presbyters"), "pastors" ("shepherds"), and "overseers" ("bishops") being separate roles, the New Testament uses these terms interchangeably to refer to the same office/role in the church (1 Peter 5:1-4). These are experienced Christians (inherent in the term "elders") who watch over the congregation to make sure that what is done pleases God (inherent in the term "overseers"). Then, as "shepherds" (or, "pastors"), they lead, feed, watch out for, and protect the flock (church). Like in Ephesus, each local church was expected to have multiple elders appointed once there were men qualified to fill the role (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5; 1 Timothy 3:1-7; Titus 1:5-9).

HEBREWS 5:11-14

Consider the role of a teacher. This passage demonstrates that God wants Christians to grow and mature to the point of becoming teachers. Although a new Christian should not quickly become a teacher (James 3:1), time spent with the Lord ought to result in the ability to then teach these truths to others, who can teach others also (2 Timothy 2:2). There are certainly different ways, though, for people to be teachers. In one sense, one who is older in the faith can simply teach one who is younger in the faith (Titus 2:1-8). Then, some will fill the role of public teaching in the assemblies of the church (Acts 13:1). Note that public teaching in church assemblies is limited by God to men only (1 Corinthians 14:34-35; 1 Timothy 2:11-14).

PHILIPPIANS 1:1

This passage helps to see a picture of a local church that is organized according to God's pattern. In this church, there were saints (all the Christians), as well as those in the roles of overseers (elders, shepherds) and deacons. Concerning the deacons, the New Testament demonstrates this to be a role of special servants who meet the qualifications God has given for them (1 Timothy 3:8-13). A possible model for the kind of work deacons can do may be seen in the seven chosen to serve the church in Jerusalem in Acts 6:1-7. Through their service in these areas, those who fill the leadership roles can better focus on their God-given tasks.

CONCLUSION

God has given all the roles needed to help lead His church. Through these roles, the gospel can continue to spread, churches can be established and strengthened, and Christians can be equipped for service in God's kingdom. Therefore, churches must always seek the leadership that fits with this pattern rather than perverting it, as has often happened (e.g. one pastor over a church, a lead pastor, associate pastors, women pastors, women preachers, a pope, unmarried bishops, reverends, etc.).

DISCIPLESHIP QUESTIONS

What roles has God given to lead His church?

What is the overall mission of those in these leadership roles?

What were the roles of apostles and prophets?

Are there apostles and prophets today?

What is the role of an evangelist?

What is the role of a shepherd?

What is the role of a teacher?

What is the role of a deacon?