Blog Series on Biblical Eldership (Fall/Winter 2018)
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Introductory Comments (from P.J. Davis) *- What follows in this document is a series of blog posts written by Joseph "Joe" Hellerman. Joe serves the body of Christ in two primary roles: 1) As a staff pastor-elder at Oceanside Christian Fellowship (OCF), an Evangelical Free Church of America congregation in Southern California; 2) As a Professor of New Testament Language and Literature at Talbot School of Theology (Biola University). In this series of posts, Joe describes his (and OCF's) understanding of pastoral leadership in the church undertaken by a team of co-equal pastor-elders. I <u>highly</u> commend Joe's words to your consideration. Where I've felt it necessary or helpful, I've added my own editorial comments. These appear in brackets, with blue font (go Air Force!), so as to clearly distinguish Joe's words from my own. Additionally, I made a few grammatical and formatting edits when transferring Joe's blog posts to this consolidated document. You can find this blog series online at OCF's website:* https://www.ocfchurch.com/pastors-blog/

At the end of the day, Jesus' church will be led (humanly speaking) by someone and in some fashion. The question is, "How, and by whom?" It is my conviction, and the conviction of this document, that God's word has much to tell us on both counts.

IS PLURALITY LEADERSHIP BIBLICAL?
(Blog Post #1)

Our last post explained why we preach through the Bible the way we do at OCF. In this and the next several posts we will consider another OCF "non-negotiable," namely, our team approach to pastoral ministry.

OCF has no senior pastor leading our church for two reasons:

1. BIBLICAL: We believe that shared ministry is God's ideal for his church.

2. PRAGMATIC: We believe that having a plurality of pastors is healthier for both the leaders and the members of OCF.

The first three posts will outline the biblical data. PART ONE (today) looks at specific New Testament passages that portray early church structure. PART TWO will consider Jesus' contribution to the team approach. PART THREE will tackle the issue as part of the broader emphasis in the Bible on community and relationships in God's church. In the weeks to follow we will consider the pragmatic benefits of having a team of pastor-elders lead a local church.

<u>**PART ONE — New Testament Passages on Leadership**</u>

The most common take on church leadership structure assumes that the Bible does not prescribe a single model. Those who take this position instead find a variety of structures in Scripture. They conclude that leadership today can (and should) be tailored to the cultural settings in which we find ourselves.

This may very well be the case. It is true that what we read about leadership structure in the New Testament is descriptive (how they did it back then), rather than prescriptive (how it should always be done). There is no verse in the Bible that reads, "You shall have a plurality of pastors leading your church."

There is, however, a whole lot of description. And this description is quite consistent. We encounter next-to-none of the variety of approaches to leadership that the popular view claims to find in the Bible. Instead, a distinct picture emerges, one which portrays a plurality of elders leading each early Christian congregation. I have assembled the data below, providing some context for each of the biblical texts.

[I find it helpful to think in terms of "prescriptive description." In other words, there are some things about which Scripture speaks "prescriptively" <u>because</u> of the way it speaks about them "descriptively." Biblical eldership is one such issue. There is no verse in the Bible which reads: "Thou shalt appoint elders in each and every local church everywhere around the world at all times." But, the way the New Testament describes the church and its life, not to mention Paul's prescriptive statements regarding elders, leads us right down the road of shared pastoral ("shepherding") leadership undertaken by a team of pastor-elders. In this sense, the New Testament is "descriptively prescriptive."]

Plurality Leadership in The Gentile Congregations:

*Paul and Barnabas appointed **elders** for them in each church and, with prayer and fasting, committed them to the Lord, in whom they had put their trust* (Acts 14:23). [Paul and Barnabas appoint leaders in the Galatian churches on their way back from the first missionary journey. Notice the emphasis upon elders (plural) in each church (singular).]

*From Miletus, Paul sent to Ephesus for the **elders** of the churc*h (Acts 20:17). [Refers to the leaders of the church at Ephesus, where Paul ministered for several years.]

*Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus, To all the saints in Christ Jesus at Philippi, together with the **overseers** and **deacons*** (Philippians 1:1). [Paul's churches in Europe reflect the same model of plurality leadership. Note that "elder," "overseer," and "pastor" refer to the same office in the New Testament.]

*The reason I left you in Crete was that you might straighten out what was left unfinished and appoint **elders** in every town, as I directed you* (Titus 1:5). [Again, notice the contrast between the plural ("elders") and the singular ("every town").] *1 To the **elders** among you, I appeal as a fellow elder, a witness of Christ's sufferings and one who also will share in the glory*

to be revealed: 2 Be shepherds of God's flock that is under your care, serving as **overseers** *—
not because you must, but because you are willing, as God wants you to be; not greedy for money,
but eager to serve; 3 not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the
flock. 4 And when the* **Chief Shepherd** *appears, you will receive the crown of glory that will
never fade away* (1 Peter 5:1-4). [Peter simply assumes that all the churches that will receive
his letter in "Pontus, Galatia, Cappadocia, Asia and Bithynia" (v. 1) are each led by a group of
elders. By the way, "Chief Shepherd" actually means "Head Pastor" in the original Greek.
Looks like OCF has a Senior Pastor, after all. His name is Jesus.]

Plurality Leadership In The Jewish Congregations:

Obey your **leaders** *and submit to their authority. They keep watch over you as men who must
give an account. Obey them so that their work will be a joy, not a burden, for that would be of
no advantage to you* (Hebrews 13:17) [Unknown author, writing to Jewish Christians,
assumes plurality leadership.]

Is any one of you sick? He should call the **elders** *of the church to pray over him and anoint him
with oil in the name of the Lord* (James 5:14). [James, addressing the Jewish Christian
communities in the eastern diaspora (1:1), can assume the presence of elders in every
congregation in which his letter will be read.]

That is a whole lot of churches, each led by a plurality of elders. The model proves to be the
norm among Jewish and Gentile congregations, located in Asia and in Europe. No variety. No
cultural adaptation. No senior leader in sight anywhere.

A possible exception is Jesus' half-brother James, in the Jerusalem church. And it is standard
fair for those who favor the senior pastor model to appeal to Acts 15. What unfolds in this
passage, however, is a collaborative approach to decision-making that differs markedly from
what generally transpires in today's large, senior-pastor-led churches.

The use of Acts 15, moreover, to support one-man leadership brings up the broader
hermeneutical issue of the relationship between biblical interpretation and theological
synthesis. Frankly, I get a bit nervous as a New Testament scholar, when interpreters defend
a position by drawing upon a single biblical text that can be read in more than one way. I
think we are on safer ground leaning on the larger group of clear passages outlined above.
So, as our blog title asks, *Is Plurality Leadership Biblical?*

As we have seen, the New Testament consistently describes the apostles establishing
churches led by a team of elders. I would be a bit hesitant to cite the above passages as
categorical, prescriptive evidence for the plurality model. However, I think there is enough
solid description for us to take the biblical data very seriously as we develop our theology of
church structure—especially since team leadership was so utterly countercultural in the
broader world of the New Testament. *[See my comments above on "prescriptive description."]*

Anticipating PART TWO:

As a historian, I have been trained to look for cause-and-effect. In the case of plurality leadership, we would want to ask, "Why did early Christian leaders adopt this model?"

The question is a particularly thorny one, since every other social institution in the ancient world—from empire to family—was markedly patriarchal, with a single male leader at the top. What led the apostles to adopt such a counter-cultural alternative for church leadership? We really don't know for sure. But we may be able to tease some hints out of the Gospels, where we see Jesus preparing his disciples for their future role as church planters. Next week we will continue our survey of the biblical data by considering Jesus' contribution to early church leadership orientation and structure.

PLURALITY LEADERSHIP IN THE TEACHINGS OF JESUS?
(Blog Post #2)

I ended the previous post with a question: *What led the apostles to adopt plurality leadership as the preferred option for church structure?*

The model is radically counter-cultural, given the universal preference for one-man leadership across the empire. So, where did it come from? Did Jesus instruct his disciples to organize the early Christian congregations like this?

We really don't know for sure. But we can tease some hints out of the Gospels, where we see Jesus preparing his disciples for their future role as church planters.

Jesus had a whole lot to say about the *character* of leadership (leaders as servants). But there are some intriguing hints that he may have given instructions concerning the *number* of leaders he anticipated in a local congregation, as well.

Leadership *character* and *number* are not unrelated. We'll see in future posts that the team approach (*number*) provides precisely the kind of community and accountability that encourages servant leadership (*character*). But we are getting ahead of ourselves. Let's return to our topic for the day. *Can we find any evidence that Jesus may have instructed his disciples to establish churches with a plurality of pastors?*

We'll begin by considering Jesus' take on fatherhood.

<u>Jesus & Fatherhood</u>

Sole male authority was the norm everywhere in the ancient world. The concept was rooted primarily in the culture's patriarchal family structures. Every natural family had an earthly daddy who exercised absolute authority over everyone in the extended household.

The role of the father was so culturally defining for people in the ancient world that paternal imagery proved serviceable far beyond the boundaries of the natural family. The Roman Senate gave to the emperor Augustus the title "Father of the Fatherland" (*Pater Patriae*). Religious groups, like the worshippers of the god Mithras, appointed a *pater,* a single "father" figure, to oversee the community. A father-figure of some sort headed up nearly every social institution in the New Testament world.

This background makes Jesus' command in Matthew 23:9 radically counter-cultural: *"Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven"* (Matthew 23:9).

Jesus has two fathers in view in this command: a natural father (*"on earth"*) and a divine Father (*"in heaven"*). The distinction is instructive, because as we read the Gospels we discover:

(1) Jesus emphasized the fatherhood of God more than anyone had before in Israel's history.

(2) Jesus had some rather scandalous and disruptive things to say about natural fatherhood.

The evidence for (1) God as Father in the teaching of Jesus hardly needs mentioning, since it is on page-after-page of the Gospels. We are less familiar with the fact that (2) Jesus undermined paternal authority in a way that would have made a profound impression on his disciples and others who heard his teaching. Here are just three of Jesus' striking statements related to natural fatherhood:

[If I have a critique of Hellerman, having read one of his books, it's that sometimes he seems to overstate things a bit. For instance, I would not say that Jesus "undermined" paternal authority, though I understand the point Joe makes here. Rather, I would say that Jesus radically "redefined" paternal authority, perhaps giving it a renewed God-honoring center, while stripping away the crust of cultural idolatry etc. Either way, I think Hellerman's point stands with respect to biblical eldership.]

Mark 1:19–20 — *He saw James the son of Zebedee and John his brother, who were in their boat mending the nets. And immediately he called them, and they left **their father** Zebedee in the boat with the hired servants and followed him.*

Matthew 8:21-22 — *Another of the disciples said to him, "Lord, let me first go and bury **my father**." And Jesus said to him, "Follow me, and leave the dead to bury their own dead."*

Luke 14:26 — *"If anyone comes to me and does not hate **his own father** and mother and wife and children and brothers and sisters, yes, and even his own life, he cannot be my disciple."*

Jesus (1) emphasized the Fatherhood of God in his teaching and actions. But he (2) intentionally destabilized natural fatherhood *[see my comment above…I would not use the word "destabilized"]*, both in passages like those cited above, and in his insistence that natural descent from Abraham (the ultimate Jewish "father") counted for little in God's relational economy (see John 8:34–59). Our key text (again) summarizes Jesus' viewpoint on divine and human fatherhood:

Matthew 23:9 — *"Call no man your father on earth, for you have one Father, who is in heaven."*

Jesus & Leadership

Does Jesus' take on fatherhood/Fatherhood have anything to do with leadership structure in the family of God? There is a piece of evidence that suggests that it does:

Mark 10:28-30 — *28 Peter began to say to him, "See, we have left everything and followed you." 29 Jesus said, "Truly, I say to you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or **father** or children or lands, for my sake and for the gospel, 30 who will not receive a hundredfold now in this time, houses and brothers and sisters and mothers and children and lands, with persecutions, and in the age to come eternal life."*

Peter and Jesus here discuss the sacrifices made by some of Jesus' disciples who had to leave their natural families (who likely disowned them) in order to become part of Jesus' new family of faith (v. 29). Jesus assures Peter that these natural family relationships will be replaced by relationships in the church family ("in this time" [v 30]). A comparison of the two lists is quite revealing:

Five Relationships Sacrificed:

*"brothers or sisters or mother or **father** or children"* (v. 29)

Four Relationships Gained:

"brothers and sisters and mothers and children" (v 30).

Don't miss what's missing. Sometimes what the Bible does *not* say is as important as what it does say. Among the **Four Relationships Gained**, "father" is conspicuously absent.

Did Jesus just forget to include "father"? A simple oversight? Hardly! Jesus left "father" off the second list because he anticipated that there would be no human father in the church family. That role is reserved for God alone.

Summary

The blog title asks, *Plurality Leadership In The Teachings Of Jesus?*

I included the question mark, because most of us assume that Jesus had virtually nothing to say about church structure. The passages cited above suggest otherwise.

Jesus gave his disciples a lot of instruction that did not make it into our four Gospels. Luke tells us, for example, that after the resurrection Jesus spent forty days with his disciples, *"speaking about the kingdom of God"* (Acts 1:3). It is only reasonable to assume that Jesus instructed his disciples about church leadership and organization.

In the Gospels, we encounter some residual hints of such teaching. In the Epistles, we see Jesus' instruction bearing its intended fruit, in the form of team-led churches throughout the Roman Empire.

As a historian trained to look for cause-and-effect, I am convinced that what we see in Acts and the Epistles finds its origin in the ministry of Jesus. Jesus intended for God—not a human senior pastor figure—to function as the sole father of the early Christian congregations. Jesus' disciples "got it," and they organized their churches accordingly.

By way of conclusion, let's expand our horizons and place what we have learned about God and fatherhood alongside two other key images of the church in the New Testament. The agreement is rather striking:

The Church as The Flock Of God — Jesus alone is called "Chief Shepherd" (1 Peter 5:4), which translates a Greek word (archi-poimen) that can equally be rendered "lead pastor" ("shepherd" = "pastor" in the Bible).

The Church as The Body Of Christ — Jesus alone is the head of the body (Ephesians 1:22; Colossians 1:18).

The Church as The Family Of God — God alone is the Father of the church (Matthew 23:9)

The idea that one person—lead-pastor or senior-pastor—should teach, shepherd, and make decisions for a whole local church community flies in the face of every Bible passage we have examined here and in the previous post. And we have yet to touch upon what is perhaps the most important reason that plurality leadership is biblical. We will do so next week, as we conclude our survey of the biblical evidence for shared pastoral leadership at Oceanside Christian Fellowship.

IS PLURALITY LEADERSHIP BIBLICAL?
(Blog Post #3)

This is our third and final post examining the biblical evidence for plurality leadership in the local church. The first post surveyed the numerous descriptions of team-led churches in the New Testament. In the second installment, we traced the model to the teachings of Jesus in the Gospels. Today we turn away from specific passages about leadership, in order to consider how plurality leadership fits with the broader scriptural contours of Christian life and ministry. As it turns out, the very essence of our faith in the God of the Bible virtually demands a team approach to pastoral ministry.

What follows has been excerpted (and slightly edited) from Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Kregel, 2007).

<u>The Heart of The Faith</u>

Ministry is no easier for me today than it was nearly forty years ago, when I accepted my first paid position in a church. It is, however, a lot less complicated. It would likely have become simpler much earlier in my pilgrimage as a pastor, if I had just listened to Jesus. Jesus boiled the whole Old Testament down to two basic commandments:

Love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your mind. This is the greatest and most important command. The second is like it: Love your neighbor as yourself. All the Law and the Prophets depend on these two commands (Matt. 22:37–40)

There it is. A simple, twofold job description for the ministry of a local church pastor. I am to encourage my flock to love God. And I am to encourage my flock to love others. Simple on paper. But what does this actually look like in practice?

Let's take the first commandment. How will I know when the people of Oceanside Christian Fellowship are loving the Lord with all their heart, soul, and mind?

Their time alone with God?

The way they spend their money?

The movies they choose to watch?

The kinds of beverages they consume?

Love for God certainly manifests itself in the relative vitality of our devotional lives. And I would not want to minimize the importance of sound financial habits or moral purity, as evidence of a living faith. Yet the Bible does not identify a Christian's devotional life as the primary indication of love for God. Nor do personal morality or financial generosity make the cut.

Instead, Scripture turns repeatedly to the quality of our relationships—particularly with our fellow Christians—as the foremost evidence of genuine love for God. Jesus put it like this: *"By this all people will know that you are My disciples, if you have love for one another"* (John 13:35).

The New Testament unequivocally maintains that healthy human relationships are to be the natural and indispensable response to God's great work on our behalf in salvation history. Here are just a few of the familiar "one anothers" from the Bible:

Love one another (John 13:34)
Show family affection to one another (Romans 12:10)
Be in agreement with one another (Romans 12:16)
Let us no longer criticize one another (Romans 14:13)
Accept one another (Romans 15:7)
Instruct one another (Romans 15:14)
Serve one another (Galatians 5:13)
Be kind and compassionate to one another (Ephesians 4:32)
Forgiving one another (Ephesians 4:32)
Submitting to one another (Ephesians 5:21)
Encourage one another and build each other up (1 Thessalonians 5:11)
Be hospitable to one another (1 Peter 4:9)

Since our love for God is evidenced primarily in our love for others, there is a sense in which the first great commandment ("Love the Lord your God") cashes out, in practical terms, primarily in the way we relate to our fellow human beings ("Love your neighbor as yourself"). Paul apparently saw this quite clearly: *The entire law is summed up in a single command: "Love your neighbor as yourself."* (Galatians 5:14). The apostle elaborates in Romans 13:8–10: *[T]he one who loves another has fulfilled the law. The commandments: Do not commit adultery; do not murder; do not steal; do not covet; and whatever other commandment—all are summed up by this: Love your neighbor as yourself. Love does no wrong to a neighbor. Love, therefore, is the fulfillment of the law.*

It is the second of Jesus' two great commandments (Matthew 22:37–40), then, that becomes the mark of the Christian, the primary tangible evidence of the reality of our relationship with God.

Suddenly my twofold job description as a pastor has become even simpler. I am called as a pastor to encourage and equip my people to engage in healthy, sacrificial, mutually edifying relationships with their fellow human beings, in response to what God has done for us in Christ, that is, to love one another. Pretty straightforward, at least in theory.

You Cannot Lead Where You Will Not Go

But here's the rub. 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. The seriousness of the problem cannot be overstated, yet I suspect that few church leaders give it much thought.

What we have in the corporate model of ministry is a pastor who relates intimately to no one in the church, but who nevertheless exhorts his people to engage relationally with each other. The glaring disconnect that inevitably results threatens to undermine the most basic virtue of the Christian life: our love for one another in the family of God. Maybe this is why so many pastors and boards remain content to take the corporate approach and evaluate the success of their ministries by (1) Sunday attendance and (2) financial viability. Neither criterion requires anyone in the church—leaders or followers—to engage in healthy, mutually edifying interpersonal relationships.

Community is at the very heart of the Christian faith. And community in our churches must begin at the top. Michael Frost and Alan Hirsch write unequivocally about the need for church leaders to model the kind of community that we so often extol in our Sunday messages:

> "[W]e need to recognize that an authentic community can only be founded on changed relations between people; and these changed relations can only follow the inner change and preparation of the people who lead, work, and sacrifice for the community. In other words, it must begin with leadership." (Frost and Hirsch, *The Shape of Things to Come,* 156).

This is hardly rocket science. A pastor who has no genuine brothers in his congregation will lack the prophetic platform necessary to challenge others in the church humbly to engage in the kind of surrogate sibling relationships that God intends for His people. This disconnect proves particularly problematic in a culture where people are cynical about their leaders, and where church-goers are highly attuned to any perceived disparity between a pastor's "Sunday talk" and his "weekly walk." Frost and Hirsch elaborate:

> We simply don't believe that people in our 'crap-detector' generation, savvy people who understand what it means to be constantly targeted by hundreds of thousands of clever sales messages, are going to follow other people who don't live out their messages. If leadership fails to embody the message, no one is going to follow. Leaders, you cannot lead where you will not go; you cannot teach what you do not know. (*The Shape of Things to Come,* 342)

Strong words, to be sure. Yet as we all know, the principle is inviolable: "you cannot lead where you will not go." And this will be particularly the case where risky, vulnerable interpersonal relationships are concerned.

Consider, in contrast, the credibility inherent in a community of leaders (a) who share their lives together as brothers in Christ, (b) who share the public ministry of their church, and (c) whose people see their pastor-elders sticking it out and making peer relationships work at

the top, in the real world of day-to-day pastoral ministry. Here brotherly love—that central Christian virtue—is modeled by church leadership. And a preaching pastor suddenly possesses all the credibility he needs to challenge his people to join him in enthusiastically embracing Jesus' primary charge to His followers: *"Love one another as I have loved you"* (John 15:12).

Conclusion

Is Plurality Leadership Biblical?

A brief summary of our three blog posts leads us to reply to this question with a resounding *YES!:*

1. The churches in the New Testament were each led by a team of pastors.

2. Jesus' teachings about divine Fatherhood and natural fatherhood most naturally support the plurality approach.

3. Team leadership best reflects (and models to the congregation) the relational heart of the Christian faith.

Next week we'll switch gears a bit to consider the practical benefits—for both leaders and members of OCF—of the plurality model of pastoral ministry.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF PLURALITY LEADERSHIP
(Blog Post #4)

Our first three posts surveyed the biblical data supporting plurality leadership:

1. The churches in the New Testament were each led by a team of pastors.

2. Jesus' teachings about divine Fatherhood and natural fatherhood most naturally support the plurality approach.

3. Team leadership best reflects (and models to the congregation) the relational heart of the Christian faith.

We turn now to consider some practical reasons for having a plurality of pastors at OCF. Even if the Bible supported a variety of approaches, I would still opt for a team of leaders over one lead pastor. Plurality leadership benefits both leaders and church members in some very important ways.

BENEFIT #1 - Team Ministry Undercuts "Celebrity-ism"

A colleague of mine was hired to consult with the elder board of a Southern California megachurch with a large ministry and a massive campus. These leaders wanted to make sure that Walt understand their church's "cultural DNA" at the outset. With great pride they informed him, "This whole ministry is designed to serve and support the gifts of one man."
American culture used to have heroes. A hero is a person whose life serves as an example for others. Abraham Lincoln was a hero. So was Martin Luther King, Jr.
Few of us have heroes anymore. We have traded heroes for celebrities. A celebrity is a bigger-than-life person whose followers generally have no lives of their own. They live out their lives vicariously through the lives of their favorite celebrities.

Celebrity-ism is patently foolish when your favorite celebrity is a Kardashian. But it is downright dangerous when he is a spiritual leader whom you put on a pedestal and imagine to be a sinless saint of some sort.

Israel cried out, "Give us a king!" (1 Samuel 8:6). Against his will, God gave his people what they wanted. A real superstar. Saul was the handsomest and tallest man around (9:2). That didn't work out very well, did it? It never does.

The antidote to celebrity-ism is shared ministry. The following story from my own pilgrimage as an OCF pastor pretty much says it all.

I love to teach the Bible. But when I finish preaching on Sunday, I am spiritually exhausted and emotionally vulnerable. One morning after the service I was walking up an aisle to leave the auditorium. Someone ran up and told me how much they liked the message. They concluded, *"I just love it when **you** preach, Joe!"*

I began to feel pretty good about myself. Until I walked through the lobby toward the front door, where I heard someone say to Denny O'Keefe, *"When is Brandon preaching again? I really like it when **he** preaches."*

Ouch! After I got over myself, however, I thought, *"Exactly! This is precisely why we have a teaching rotation on Sunday mornings. At OCF no one becomes a celebrity."*

We all have our preferences and favorites, in every area of our lives. But where OCF's preaching is concerned, we hope that you will learn to come to church for the message—not for the messenger.

Hear the words of Dietrich Bonhoeffer on Christian leadership. Bonhoeffer shares timeless truths that are painfully fitting for an evangelical culture that continues to be enamored with large, visibly successful ministries and big-name church leaders:

> "Every cult of personality that emphasizes the distinguished qualities, virtues, and talents of another person, even though these be of an altogether spiritual nature, is worldly and has no place in the Christian community; indeed, it poisons the Christian community. The desire we so often hear expressed today for 'episcopal figures,' 'priestly men,' 'authoritative personalities' springs frequently enough from *a spiritually sick need for the admiration of men*, for the establishment of visible human authority, because the genuine authority of service appears to be so unimpressive." (*Life Together*, 108, my italics).

Note the italicized phrase: *"a spiritually sick need for the admiration of men."* Powerful stuff. But so very true.

You won't find spiritual celebrities at Oceanside Christian Fellowship. But you will find plenty of heroes. OCF's heroes are the spiritually mature Christians in our midst, whose lives serve as an example to the rest of us: the O'Keefes, the Yetters, the Schramms, the Hutchisons, Margy Emmons, and many more!

Astute readers will notice that I failed to mention our #1 spiritual hero, whose life will always be a perfect example to the rest of us at OCF. Interestingly enough, he would have been labeled a failure as a megachurch pastor. His congregation dwindled from thousands to just eleven guys during the course of his ministry. But we will always be proud to call him our Senior Pastor at Oceanside Christian Fellowship.

His name is Jesus. He is our hero. And someday he will even become a celebrity of sorts: *"Every knee will bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father"* (Philippians 2:10-11).

Next week we'll consider a second benefit of the team approach, namely, the accountability it provides for those in pastoral leadership.

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF PLURALITY LEADERSHIP #2
(Blog Post #5)

More than a decade ago Oceanside Christian Fellowship terminated "Bill," one of our paid pastors. Bill's poor use of time and his lack of productivity had generated not a little frustration among others at the church, who were carrying more than their weight in their respective areas of ministry.

A move to a new facility, which called for sacrifice and a servant's attitude on everyone's part, sharply accentuated the latent resentment that had been building among the staff. We knew that something was seriously wrong when another staff person—one of our most productive and effective ministers—began to explore the secular job market outside the church.

I was part-time at the church and had little first-hand exposure to the dysfunction in the office, though I do recall being quite annoyed when Bill showed up late, week after week, to our Wednesday elder meetings.

The elders had made an attempt to address the issue along the way but, frankly, we did not take the initiative we should have earlier, so that the situation had deteriorated unnecessarily by the time we set up a meeting with Bill and the rest of the pastor-elders.

For several hours we went back and forth with Bill. There was next to no ownership on his part. Here were six of Bill's fellow elders raising serious concerns about his work as a pastor and church employee. He responded by rationalizing his behavior and telling us that we had it wrong on every count.
Bill pretty much determined his own future at OCF when he maintained, *"I take a long time to make a decision, but when I do decide, I am almost always right."*

A series of follow-up meetings led to Bill's termination. The atmosphere around the office changed dramatically for the better.

I had said some very pointed things to Bill in the course of that initial meeting. All of my statements were objectively true. In the heat of the discussion, however, I did not share my convictions in a loving way.

After Bill left the room, as we sat around planning our next steps, several of my fellow pastor-elders told me, in no uncertain terms, that I had been hurtful in my comments. They insisted that I owed Bill an apology. The rebuke was hard to hear. It caught me completely off guard. Our natural tendency in a situation like this is to retreat into a defensive posture. I was tempted to rebuff the critique and to go back over the things I had said in the meeting, one by one, demonstrating that each point I made was true. After all, it didn't seem like the two remaining elders had a problem with how I handled myself.

What kept me from defending my behavior, however, was the relationship I had with the men who challenged me about the tone of my comments that day.

As OCF's pastor-elders, we meet every week, early on Wednesday morning, to pray for one another, for our families, and for the people in our church. We have been doing so for years. I know these men well enough to trust them with my life. They know me, too. They appreciate my strengths. And they are quite aware of my weaknesses. I recognized that these guys would only rebuke me with my best interests—and the best interests of the church—in view. So we set up a meeting, and I humbly apologized to Bill for the hurtful manner in which I had framed my words. I assured Bill that I stood by the content of what I had said. But I told him that I deeply regretted the way in which I communicated it to him. I asked Bill for his forgiveness, and he graciously responded in turn.

That Would Never Happen in My Church

A year or so later, one of my Korean students at Talbot School of Theology, Jonathan, came to interview me during office hours. Jonathan had received an assignment in another course that required him to interact with several pastors about their approach to ministry.

One question on the survey asked, "What does a leader need in order to be successful?" I replied that a pastor needs (among other things) three kinds of relationships to succeed long-term in local church ministry: (1) mentors to guide him, (2) peers to serve alongside him, and (3) younger disciples to raise up as future leaders.

Jonathan and I proceeded to discuss each of these relationships. He was particularly intrigued by category #2, since Korean pastors generally lack peer relationships in their congregations. To illustrate the importance of a community of leaders, I told Jonathan the story about the hard experience I went through during the painful process of Bill's termination (above).

Jonathan's response was revealing. When I finished sharing how I had been rebuked by my fellow-elders, and how I, in turn, apologized to Bill, Jonathan immediately asserted, *"That would never happen in a Korean church."*

It is not hard to see why. Pastors in traditional Asian congregations do not have the kind of peer relationships that characterize OCF's board of pastor-elders. The pronounced social hierarchy and relational expectations of an honor culture guarantee that no one would ever rebuke the behavior of a preaching pastor in the presence of other men in the church.

Nor would a Korean pastor entertain the prospect of "losing face" by apologizing to another person in the congregation for the way that he had handled himself in a meeting. The social context of ministry in traditional Asian culture simply does not allow for such a scenario.

The result, of course, is that a pastor in a Korean church like Jonathan's has much more latitude, behavior-wise, than any Christian ever ought to have. Here, I suggest, the cultural values and social codes of a traditional honor culture have decidedly compromised the relational contours of the Gospel.

Things are hardly different, however, in many of our corporate style Anglo churches in America. In my experience it is a rare event for a senior pastor to get called on the carpet for anything short of blatant sexual immorality or, perhaps, an equally serious moral compromise, such as embezzlement of church funds.

Hurtful treatment of associate staff? Subtle manipulation of the truth in the service of slick and effective ministry? Sadly, in numbers of congregations that's just the price of doing business. As long as the pews are full of people, and the offering basket is full of money, the pastor is doing just fine, thank you.

<u>The Social Context of Ministry</u>

These stories underscore the importance of leadership structures and organization in our churches. The socio-cultural context of ministry has tremendous ramifications for the ways in which leaders leverage their power and authority in the local church.

It is a simple fact that some ways of doing church encourage the healthy exercise of ministerial authority. Others do not. *[This is a very helpful statement. It highlights the fact that while we don't have to be dogmatic in all aspects of our approach to "being the church," we also don't have to assume that all roads are equal in terms of their biblical faithfulness. Some churches are, and will be, healthier than others because of decisions they make about what it means to be the church. To be "dogmatic" would be to say that any church which does not agree with us on X, Y, or Z (pick your issue) is no true church. We ought to reserve such a stance only for Tier 1 "Gospel" concerns (reference the idea of "theological triage"). These are issues of doctrine that relate directly to the Gospel; areas where, if someone gets it "wrong," they will face the wrath of God in Hell. But, beyond dogma, we stand on "principled, biblical conviction." We hold these convictions because we think they matter, and sometimes matter greatly, in the life of Jesus' people gathered as his church. It is my belief, and seems to be Hellerman's as well, that biblical eldership is one such area of conviction.]*

Many instances of authority abuse in our churches can be traced directly to systemic cultural values—and resulting social contexts—which obstruct, rather than facilitate, healthy, other-centered leadership. This is true whether that abuse is enabled by a group's traditional honor values, or by an American business culture that treats a senior pastor like the CEO of a large corporation.

All of the above strongly commends the team approach to local church ministry, with its ability to provide some healthy checks-and-balances for the exercise of authority among our pastoral leaders.

The temptation for God's people to adopt secular leadership values and practices is hardly new. In one of his most memorable teachings, Jesus pointedly contrasted (a) the way authority was exercised in the surrounding culture with (b) the servant approach to leadership that he expected of his followers:

"You know that those who are considered rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them. But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant" (Mark 10:42–43).

We live in a much different world than Jesus and the early Christians. But the threat of cultural accommodation remains the same. What kind of structure today will be most conducive to Jesus' vision for servant leadership among his followers?

A secular business model, with a single CEO-type leader at the top?

A traditional honor culture's unassailable social hierarchy?

Or the New Testament's plurality approach, with a team of pastors sharing authority with one another?

The answer, I think, is obvious.

Being rebuked by my fellow-pastors for my behavior at that meeting years ago was not a pleasant experience. But it was a necessary one.

Your OCF pastor-elders will tell you that we treasure the accountability that the plurality approach naturally provides, as we share the ministry together. I certainly do. It is one of the greatest benefits that team leadership gives us at Oceanside Christian Fellowship.

NOTE: Much of the above was adapted from Joseph H. Hellerman, *Embracing Shared Ministry: Power and Status in the Early Church and Why It Matters Today* (Kregel, 2007).

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF PLURALITY LEADERSHIP #3
(Blog Post #6)

This is our sixth blog post discussing the topic of plurality leadership in the local church. The first three entries surveyed the *biblical data* that favors the model. What follows is our third installment addressing the *practical benefits* of having a team of pastors at OCF.

People get attached to their spiritual leaders, especially when that leader is the head pastor of their church. Indeed, whole congregations often take on the personality of a senior leader who instructs and inspires them, Sunday after Sunday, through the teaching of God's Word. What happens when that leader leaves?

Change is a fact of life. But change becomes problematic when a local church is led by one individual who does all the preaching and who functions as the key leader of the congregation.

Plurality leadership significantly lessens the negative effects of pastoral transition on a local church community. This is one of its great advantages. We have experienced this first-hand at OCF on a number of occasions.

OCF has lost at least six of our pastor-elders during my twenty-two years on the team. Reasons have varied: retirement, termination, divorce, relocation. Some transitions were more difficult than others (Michael Martin's move to Baltimore comes to mind). Most challenging was the loss of our founding pastor, some eighteen years ago.

Duke was a highly gifted speaker who had guided OCF from a small Bible study group to a church of nearly 150. When he stepped down, one long-time member exclaimed,
"Duke can't leave! OCF is the church of Duke, just like the Lutheran Church is the church of Luther!"

Duke's departure clearly placed OCF in a very tough position. Few churches of 150 survive the loss of their founding pastor.

Fortunately, Duke had a vision for plurality leadership. In fact, Duke and I (and our families) had dreams of pastoring a church together back in the early 1980s, when we were both doing youth ministry at Community Baptist Church (now Journey of Faith).

Our dream came true in February of 1996, when I came on staff as a co-pastor at OCF. By the time Duke left in 2000, we had gathered together a team that included (in addition to myself) Dan Olson, Denny O'Keefe, Ed Arriola, Brandon Cash, and Stan Yetter.

The loss of our founder was still a tough one—primarily because of the relationships we share as fellow-pastors. But OCF's plurality approach provided us with a "deep bench," so we managed the transition quite well. We shifted around ministry responsibilities and continued to grow to become the church of 600+ that we are today.

"Jesus is the same yesterday today and forever" (Hebrews 13:8). But (as I am reminded every time I look in the mirror) Jesus' undershepherds do not remain the same. And we do not remain forever.

Someday Joe might leave OCF to go on tour with the Rolling Stones. At any moment Brandon could submit his resignation to play second base for the Los Angeles Dodgers. Hutch and Denny might leave us to play together on the PGA tour.
Seriously, leaders come and go. Change is a fact of life. However, as we have experienced first-hand over the years at OCF, plurality leadership significantly lessens the negative effects of such a loss on congregational life and ministry.

Perhaps, just maybe, Jesus knew this, when he set up he plurality model some two thousand years ago. *Ya think???*

PRACTICAL BENEFITS OF PLURALITY LEADERSHIP #4
(Blog Post #7)

So far in our series, we have focused primarily upon ways in which a team of pastors benefits a church as whole. In today's post I will reflect on a key advantage enjoyed by pastors who minister as a team.

Pastoral depression and burnout have become hot topics of conversation. The increasing demands of the job, along with the relational isolation that often characterizes a pastor's life, have generated some highly troubling trends. The following statistics come from H.B. London and Neil B. Wiseman. *Pastors at Greater Risk* (Regal, 2003):

- 40 percent of pastors and 47 percent of spouses are suffering from burnout, frantic schedules, and/or unrealistic expectations.
- 80 percent believe that pastoral ministry affects their families negatively.
- 33 percent say that being in ministry is an outright hazard to their family.
- 52 percent of pastors say they and their spouses believe that being in pastoral ministry is hazardous to their family's well-being and health.
- 66 percent of pastors and their families feel under pressure to model an ideal family.
- 45 percent of pastors say that they've experienced depression or burnout to the extent that they needed to take a leave of absence from ministry.
- 90 percent feel unqualified or poorly prepared for ministry.
- 40 percent of pastors have considered leaving their pastorates in the past three months.
- Hundreds of pastors leave their ministries each month due to burnout, conflict, or moral failure.

We live in a broken world that is full of broken people. Pastors are broken people, too—all of us. There will always be instances of moral failure, debilitating depression, and burnout among God's leaders. Recent events at <u>Willow Creek Church</u> made the headlines only because of the size and influence of Willow Creek's ministry.

What is troubling is that these experiences have become almost the norm—rather than the exception—for people in pastoral ministry. This should not be the case.

Consider the Apostle Paul. Paul certainly faced serious challenges and crises in his missionary adventures. He was beaten, imprisoned, and nearly killed. He writes of "the daily pressure on me of my anxiety for all the churches" (2 Corinthians 11:28). He exclaims, "We were so utterly burdened beyond our strength that we despaired of life itself" (1:8)!

Ministry was not easy for Paul. Yet somehow Paul avoided the kind of personal emotional and spiritual crises reflected in the statistics listed above. Twice in 2 Corinthians Paul assures his readers that, despite all the physical and emotional hardship, "We do not lose heart" (4:1, 16).

Burnout was nowhere on the apostle's radar screen. Nor was depression. Later, as Paul's life drew to a close, he confidently claimed, "I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith" (2 Timothy 4:7).

What made Paul's experience different than that of so many pastors in our churches today? We must be careful here. There is generally no silver bullet to address clinical depression, which is often a puzzling combination of spiritual, emotional, and physiological factors.

Clinical depression, however, is not the issue faced by the great majority of the pastors reflected in the above statistics. Rather, it's the daily pressures of church ministry that's causing the problems.

So, again, what made the difference for Paul? The answer, I suggest, is team ministry.

We learned in our very first post (July 24) that Paul appointed a plurality of elders to oversee the churches he established (e.g., Acts 14:23). There were no senior/lead pastors in these congregations.

Paul modeled this very approach with his own team of missionaries. It began in Antioch, where he shared teaching responsibilities with Barnabas, Simeon, Lucius, and Manaen (Acts 13:1). We see it continue throughout Paul's three journeys, as described in Acts 13-21.

I laid out the evidence for Paul's relational style of ministry in some detail elsewhere (chapters 27 & 28 of *Biblical Leadership: Theology for the Everyday Leader* [Kregel, 2017]). We don't have space here to revisit the data, so I'll share another scholar's observations by way of summary:

> "Paul explicitly calls no less than sixteen persons 'fellow workers,' and his usage, along with circumstantial evidence, suggests that he would have so identified another twenty to twenty-five women and men. Acts and the Pastorals have picked up this evidence and added another fifteen names. Paul's association with so many fellow workers has no parallel in early Christian missionary activity" (W. H. Ollrog, "Sunergos," *Exegetical Dictionary of New Testament Theology,* 3.304b).

Key Question: *Were the relationships Paul enjoyed with his co-workers a key to the apostle's robust optimism about his work for Christ and his staying power in ministry?*
Given the common sense connection between healthy relationships, on the one hand, and human flourishing, on the other, it could hardly have been otherwise.

It is now axiomatic among those who study human longevity that persons engaged in healthy relationships generally live longer. It only makes sense to assume that we will serve longer when we do so in community with others, as well.

The most troubling pastoral statistics, in this regard, may very well be the ones I left off the list at the beginning of this post:

- Although 55 percent of pastors say they belong to a small accountability group, 70 percent claim they don't have any close friends.
- 56 percent of pastors' wives say that they have no close friends.
- 25 percent don't know where to turn when they have a family or personal conflict or issue. 20.5 percent say they would go to no one.

No close friends. Nowhere to turn. Our lone-ranger approach to Christian leadership contrasts sharply with Paul's practice of ministering in community with others. And it is costing us dearly in terms of pastoral isolation, discouragement, and burnout.

I find myself deeply saddened when I think about the individual lives and families represented in these figures, in part because I find myself nowhere among the statistics.

Do I get discouraged at times? Seasons of exhaustion? Certainly. That's par for the course in the pastorate. But my family has flourished in vocational church ministry. Serious burnout has never been an issue. And I still cannot imagine doing anything else with my life.

As I've shared in a couple recent sermons, the Hellerman family has gone through some very difficult times in the past several years. I won't revisit the sad details here. I will simply observe that it is has been my relationship with my fellow-pastors—especially my two best friends, Denny O'Keefe and John Hutchison—that has kept me focused, obedient, and faithful to my calling as a husband and a pastor, during the darkest period I've experienced in forty-plus years of church ministry.

I take no credit for any of this. By God's grace, Joann and I have never served alone. We began church work as part of a relationally healthy team of youth workers back in the late 1970s. A friend recruited me to co-pastor a church plant with him in 1996. I continue today at Oceanside Christian Fellowship serving among a team of eight pastors who share all facets of ministry and who, more importantly, share our lives together.

PLURALITY LEADERSHIP: FINAL INSTALLMENT
(Blog Post #8)

This concludes our series on plurality leadership. Next week we will begin a number of posts dealing with various other issues in our lives as followers of Jesus.

People who are used to a lead-pastor model often wonder just how plurality leadership cashes out, when it comes to making hard decisions and leading the church. What follows is a behind-the-scenes look at our meetings, our relationships with one another, and the decision-making process. I have slightly edited several pages from the last chapter of *Embracing Shared Ministry*.

Except for the fact that five of us draw a paycheck every couple weeks, OCF knows no distinction between its seminary-trained pastors and those on our board whom other churches might refer to as elders or (in churches without elders) deacons. Indeed, in order to discourage the kind of minister-versus-layperson mentality traditionally associated with the terms 'pastor' and 'elder,' all eight of us are designated as 'pastor-elders', and we encourage our church to view us that way.

Our weekly meetings are the key to the success of the whole enterprise. OCF's pastor-elders gather together for an hour-and-a-half each Wednesday morning. We have no business agenda. We simply share our lives and pray for one another, and we go through the prayer requests that your folks submit each week.

OCF currently has eight pastor-elders. Our tenure ranges from five years on the team to more than thirty. I have been part of the team for twenty-two years. You can imagine the kind of community we have developed by faithfully meeting and praying for one another, for so long, on a weekly basis.

Over the years we have shared in countless joys and sorrows, big and small. We welcomed a number of new children and several grandchildren into the world. We have fervently prayed for shaky marriages in our extended families. And we grieved together when one of our brothers lost his wife to a long battle with cancer.

We generally reserve decisions and actions related to church programs and ministry for another context, meetings that we hold one Saturday each month. It is here, at these Saturday gatherings, that the community we cultivate on Wednesdays pays big dividends to our church family as a whole.

Power plays? Authority abuse? Not a chance. Denny, John, Brandon, Chris, Mark, Dan, Carlos, and I know each other too well—and we love each other too much—to let anyone get away with politicking or posturing. It is really quite amazing what happens when decision-making arises organically from a relational soil of mutual trust, respect, and admiration.

We struggle through the same kind of overwhelming challenges that confront other church leaders. Disgruntled and divisive church members, immorality, financial crises, a major

building program, hiring and firing staff—we've seen it all. And like any team comprised of opinionated leaders, we have had our share of strong disagreements along the way.

The community we cultivate on Wednesdays, however, allows us to tackle church crises on Saturdays—and push through divergent viewpoints to consensus—in ways that we never could, if we were a typical church board, devoid of caring relationships, meeting monthly solely to do church business or, perhaps, to rubber-stamp the limited vision of a sole pastor figure. Among OCF's pastor-elders, community is the bedrock of consensus:

CONSENSUS
[Monthly Planning Meetings]

⬆ ⬆ ⬆

COMMUNITY
[Weekly Prayer Meetings]

Does This Really Work?

People who are new to OCF, and to our team leadership model, repeatedly ask, *How does this actually work out in practice, when a difficult and potentially divisive decision must be made?*

There are no absolutes where the decision-making process is concerned, and different groups of individuals will inevitably interact with one another in different ways. At OCF, our pathway to consensus typically runs as follows:

1. We each weigh in with our convictions or opinions about the issue at hand.
2. We listen carefully to each person's viewpoint and to the rationale for his perspective.
3. We seek to be highly sensitive to the general direction the discussion is going, trusting that the Holy Spirit is superintending the process.
4. A pastor-elder whose viewpoint becomes increasingly out-of-step with the trajectory of the discussion willingly defers to the growing consensus of the group.
5. Once a decision has been made, we unanimously own it.

And, of course, we pray our way through the process. Not once, during my twenty-two year tenure on the board, have we ever had to vote formally on an issue.

God's Perfect Will?

Here is a final observation that will perhaps strike a number of you as counterintuitive: the way we make decisions as a community of leaders is at least as important to God as the ultimate decisions we make. Indeed, I have become convinced over the years that God is generally more concerned with the process than with the outcome of our Saturday leadership meetings.

I often find it difficult to discern God's will when we are making decisions in our meetings. Perhaps you have the same experience in your own ministry. While some decisions are clear-cut, it seems that in most situations there are probably a number of viable alternatives, several of which would be pleasing to God. In still other situations, I suspect that God has no preference at all.

Persons who believe otherwise, and who seek vigilantly to ascertain God's perfect will for every key decision, run the risk of completely missing a biblical reality that is indispensable to healthy team leadership. In contrast to the lack of clarity often associated with the *outcome* of the decision itself, God's will for the relational integrity of the *process*—humility, mutual respect, brotherly love—is crystal clear throughout the Scriptures.

It is, of course, quite Western to be preoccupied with outcome at the expense of process. But I don't believe it is biblical.

Indeed, it has been my experience that the Bible seldom speaks directly to the decisions that face us in church ministry. Scripture always speaks directly, however, to the manner in which we are to go about making those decisions together.

The upshot of all this for decision-making by consensus is that I am less and less inclined to confuse my personal convictions with the will of God on an issue, and I am increasingly willing to defer to group consensus when I represent the sole minority opinion at one of our Saturday planning meetings. My brothers on the board take the same approach. For we are quite confident that if OCF's pastor-elders engage the process with integrity, God will be pleased with the outcome.