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**Dysfunctional Elders Make a Dysfunctional Church**

**November 14, 2019 – Phil A. Newton**

A recent visitor seemed surprised by our church’s practice of elder plurality. He attended weekly gatherings, membership classes taught by elders, and witnessed different men preaching, teaching, and shepherding.

When cancer treatment forced a four-month isolation from the senior pastor role I’ve held for 32 years, he watched the church continue to worship, proclaim the Word, serve, and do missions with me nowhere in sight. He realized the elders function quite well without me directing traffic.

Equality among elders sounded nice, he’d been told, but it doesn’t really exist.

And it certainly doesn’t exist where dysfunctional elders are characterized by disunity and inequality. But humble men serving in plurality—the New Testament model—strive to make plurality completely functional. Anything less betrays the Christlike example Scripture calls for in elders.

### God-Appointed Templates

Pastors expect the congregation to evidence unity as those who demonstrate “deep affection toward one another in brotherly love; [who are] outdoing one another in giving honor” ([Rom. 12:10](https://www.esv.org/verses/Rom.%2012%3A10/); my trans.). This happens when the church is “of the same mind, maintaining the same love, united in spirit, intent on one purpose . . . with humility of mind regard[ing] one another as more important than yourselves” ([Phil. 2:2–3](https://www.esv.org/verses/Phil.%202%3A2%E2%80%933/)).

While unity should be true in the larger body, it starts with the elders. Elders are not to lord over the church, but be examples to the flock ([1 Pet. 5:3](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Pet.%205%3A3/)). Since example implies a template for others to follow, elders should model the life that characterizes godly community. What pastors long to see among the body, in other words, must be evident among the elders.

Sin can slip in among elders, however, and causes them to struggle for unity: pride in position and abilities, longing for recognition and praise, exaggerated view of usefulness, the misuse of authority, and more. When elders give way to these sins they use biting words, demonstrate attitudes of superiority, abuse authority, and show disdain for others. The beauty of equality and unity disintegrates.

### What About the Lead Pastor?

Among the mixture of staff and non-staff elders, the lead pastor serves as first among equals. He doesn’t have more authority than the collective elders, but he’s in the most prominent position due to God’s calling and ministry gifts. He leads in worship, instructs the congregation, voices pastoral burdens, and represents his fellow elders to the corporate body.

Proclaiming God’s Word each Sunday positions him as the most visible elder in the church. He has no more authority, however, than the least gifted elder. Like the rest, he only has one vote. His authority as first among equals must never be coercive, self-promoting, authoritarian, aggressive, domineering, or controlling. His authority is derived from God’s Word.

First among equals is a heady matter wherein humility gets tested. Does he grab for power? Does he misuse the pulpit by crafting sermons that further his plans and desires? Does he denigrate fellow elders in conversations with church members? Does he bypass wisdom, counsel, accountability, and God-ordained plurality to seize power? Does he forget he’s called to set an example of humility?

Elder plurality in some churches just doesn’t work. But the problem is not with the biblical idea of plurality; the problem is sin among those Christ charges to be templates of humility for the church.

When elders struggle to get along or work together, the same dysfunction will seep into the whole church. Instead of a community beautifying the gospel in unity, this sullies the church’s witness before a watching world. A church may have admirable evangelism and may serve well, but disunity, bitterness, and animosity will eventually emerge through sinful talk ([Matt. 12:34](https://www.esv.org/verses/Matt.%2012%3A34/)).

### Course Correction

If a church has fallen into destructive patterns of disunity and inequality among the elders, the first step is to call for immediate repentance. But before calling others to repent, it’s important to consider the log in our own eye ([Matt. 7:1–5](https://www.esv.org/verses/Matt.%207%3A1%E2%80%935/)). Also, ask the following questions:

* Do I give a Christlike example for others to follow?
* Do I consciously build up and encourage my fellow elders?
* Do I value the input, opinions, and ideas of the other elders?
* Do I get defensive when someone holds a different opinion?
* Do I willingly submit to my fellow elders in decisions?
* Am I argumentative, antagonistic, or explosive in conversations with fellow elders?
* Do I recognize my propensity for pride or power-grabbing?

If some of these questions evoke painful responses, confess and repent of those particular sins. Humble yourself before your fellow elders. Ask forgiveness and seek reconciliation with those you’ve offended. Listen to their concerns with brokenness and willingness to learn.

You may need to apologize to the congregation for failing to love, support, and live in gospel equality with your fellow elders. When the church’s template for humility, equality, and unity unravels, elders fail the church they’re called to shepherd. Public repentance may be necessary to restore confidence and health in the body ([1 Tim. 5:19–21](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Tim.%205%3A19%E2%80%9321/)).

### Don’t Be a Parody

Until church members see humility, unity, and equality exercised among the elders, they likely won’t practice these redemptive qualities with each another. Instead, they’ll parody Christianity in worship and service instead of mirroring the life of Christ ([Gal. 4:19](https://www.esv.org/verses/Gal.%204%3A19/)).

[Hebrews 13:7](https://www.esv.org/verses/Hebrews%2013%3A7/) calls on Christians struggling with perseverance to imitate the faith of their spiritual leaders. Paul’s rationale for appointing plural elders in his missionary journeys included the faithful example of how to live with each other within Christ’s body ([Acts 14:23](https://www.esv.org/verses/Acts%2014%3A23/); [Titus 1:5](https://www.esv.org/verses/Titus%201%3A5/)). That’s why the most important elder qualification is godly character ([1 Tim. 3:1–7](https://www.esv.org/verses/1%20Tim.%203%3A1%E2%80%937/); [Titus 1:5–9](https://www.esv.org/verses/Titus%201%3A5%E2%80%939/)).

In the hustling whirl of elder ministry, let’s not neglect the most basic responsibility: setting an example for living, loving, serving, and caring for one another in the body.

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