

## Elders in the Cell Church

I wrote this in the form of questions and responses because this is a dialogue that I have been having with myself and others. This dialogue is not about qualifications of elders as defined in Timothy and Titus. It is about how oversight works relationally.

Question: How do elders function in the cell church?

Response: In a cell church an elder would be a cell leader who oversees other cell leaders so that the multiplicity of his offspring make his role as an elder self-evident.

Question: What do you mean by self-evident?

Response: Take for example God sending Moses back to Egypt to deliver Israel. God told Moses to gather the elders without telling Moses who they were. Moses had not been there for forty years. But when he returned to Egypt, Moses knew who the elders were by the multiplicity of their offspring. I believe the same is true in the church. Elders are recognized by the multiplicity of their spiritual offspring. They are life givers.

Question: Are you saying that in a cell church, elders are assigned oversight over other cell leaders?

Response: No. In the cell church no one is assigned to anyone. Cells are about disciple making and discipleship is voluntary. This means that anyone can make disciples who make disciples so that his disciples become cell leaders. If someone is an overseer, it will become evident through the multiplicity of his disciples who are making disciples.

Question: I noticed you used the word overseer rather than elder?

Response: I prefer the word overseer to elder because it focuses upon a relational function. The overseer oversees those looking to him. If he stops overseeing others, it is obvious that he has ceased to function. Whereas, the word elder focuses on being older and an elder never grows younger. Once someone is called an elder, he may continue in the office even if he has stopped functioning.

Question: Do you believe eldership is a lifelong office.

Response: I do not believe eldership is an office. I used the word office because that is how it is viewed by many, and I am aware that some translations refer to the office of elder in 1 Timothy 3. But it is not in the Greek text. The NIV makes this clearer by translating it, "If anyone sets his heart on being an overseer." An overseer is someone you become and not an office you enter.

Question: If eldership is not an office how then do elders function as a board?

Response: I think that is one of the problems we face today. The elders have become a board of directors. I am not talking about words. I am talking about reality. The reality is that in some churches elders make collective decisions like a board and oversee the pastor as though he was the CEO and they were the board of directors.

Question: What is wrong with the elders serving as a board of directors?

Response: The problem with a board of directors is that they oversee the fruit of others rather than their own fruit. This stunts the growth of elders and churches.

Question: How does it stunt elders?

Response: How this happens in church is that we take a man who is a life giver, recognize him as an elder and put him in multiple meetings until he has no time left to make disciples. So, he ends up overseeing the fruit of others. This stunts his growth as a disciple maker and his growth as a leader.

Question: How does it stunt his growth as a leader?

Response: You lead people; whereas you administrate things. An elders' meeting is a thing. Meetings, programs, music and sermons are things. And we have become proficient at administrating things. But if you strip away from an elder the meetings, the programs and whatever else he administrates, what is left are the people that look to him for leadership. An elder's leadership is measured by the people that look to him. This is made clear in the cell church.

Question: How does the cell church make this clear?

Response: Because cells are voluntary, which means people are not assigned, the only people who look to a cell leader for discipleship are those who want to. This reveals the measure of a person's leadership. You may be a worship leader in a congregation of hundreds or an elder on a board directing a large church, but if only three people join your cell that is your measure of leadership.

Question: How then did we end up with elders as a board of directors?

Response: I think there are historical and cultural reasons? Historically, the model of elders as a board of directors became popular after the 1911 Men and Religion Forward Movement. This movement was about getting men back to church by patterning church leadership according to business leadership. After 1911 the model of church leadership became pastors serving as CEOs and the elders became the board of directors. Culturally, this appeals to us as Americans because we believe in one man, one vote. So the idea of elders equally voting on decisions fits us culturally.

Question: If the elders are not a board then to whom is the pastor accountable?

Response: The pastor is accountable to everyone. Accountability goes up, down and sideways. I am accountable to those under my authority to give an explanation to anyone who asks anything. I am accountable to those alongside me to get their input, listen and develop unity. And I am accountable to my pastor, who is over me.

Question: You have a pastor over you?

Response: Yes. I believe that every pastor needs someone outside the local church to whom he is accountable. In my case it is another pastor. And those who work with me know who he is and if we reach a serious impasse on doctrine, morals or direction of the church, they can call on him.

Question: So then you don't have elders meetings?

Response: God told Moses to gather the elders but I don't think that meant they started meeting every Monday night. I believe life produces administration, and administration that doesn't produce life becomes a bureaucracy that you serve. Churches have a tendency to develop bureaucracies of meetings and not enough life giving relationships. I don't see Jesus holding a lot of meetings. He did life together with his disciples. Imagine elders doing life together with the people they are close to and I think you'll have a better picture of a New Testament elder. Then if the situation warrants, elders gather in meeting along with others. In the conference in Jerusalem, there were apostles, elders and people.

Question: How then do elders exercise rule?

Response: Rule is a spiritual function and not a corporate decision. The rule of elders is spiritual and it is exercised across the bridge of relationship. The stronger the bridge of relationship the greater will be the measure of rule. This is why the elder has to first know how to rule his family. The family models how an elder exercises rule.

Question: How did you arrive at this view of elders?

Response: After thirty-five years of ministry I have come to see that biblically speaking everything in the body of Christ is organic. The corporate model makes for nice flow charts but doesn't help the flow of life. I think the church in America is in critical condition and most of our problems are internal. We need to make the adjustment away from a corporate model to a living model that can adapt to our times to reach our nation with the gospel.

Question: What do you mean by moving away from a corporate model?

Response: We are talking about elders in particular but this is just one area where the corporate model has crept into the church. We also follow the corporate model when we target our outreach according to market analysis and define our vision through brainstorming sessions. None of this is biblical. Biblically speaking, elders were life givers, not a board of directors; outreach was Spirit led, not market driver; and vision was given, not decided upon. If we don't get back to the biblical model we are in trouble.

Question: You think this is that important?

Response: I think it is more than important. Think of church organization as a vehicle to get to a vision. The vision is your destination but if the vehicle is not road worthy, you are not getting there. I think there are a lot of churches that have a vision but who will never get there because they are traveling in a vehicle that is not road worthy.

Question: What should a church do that doesn't have elders?

Response: The same thing it does with elders. The pastor and others in ministry within the church should minister as a team. There should be input and accountability on the finances through a finance committee. The pastor should have someone outside the church that he is accountable to and that those who work with him know. And everyone should work together in team. If and when the Holy Spirit makes an elder, he will be part of the team.

Question: So then you are not just talking about a different view of elders but a whole different way of doing church?

Response: Yes. That's right. The cell vision not only gives opportunity for elders to rise, it gives opportunity for everyone to rise to their level of leadership. Both genders and all generations can lead cells and oversee their own fruit. This takes the cap off the church and empowers everyone to get on with the mission: Go, therefore and make disciples.

I hope these thoughts help explain the role of elders in the cell based church.

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