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The Missional-Ecclesial Leadership Vision of the Early Church

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The comprehensive picture of God's salvific work shaped the life of the early church. While the specific language of 'already and not yet' was not used, the apostolic leaders' self-understanding that they were living 'in the last days' provided them with a missional impetus that they saw as the heart of the church's life. This was particularly the case with Paul, whose theological training and dramatic Damascus road experience profoundly shaped his missional life and teachings, and in turn the churches he founded and the individuals he mentored.

I Missional-Ecclesial Leadership in the Early Church

In reflecting on early church leadership there is a frequent tendency among Christian writers to seek justification for contemporary church governance and administrative practice through eisegetical reading of texts that describe the developing life of the early church. In so doing the fundamental missional-ecclesial vision of the apostolic writers is often lost. A classic example is the way in which Acts 6 is used to justify various forms of church governance (all of congregational, Presbyterian, or Episcopal patterns are possible), and such practices as committees and food distribution for the poor. There are legion examples of books (and often the paragraph headings in Bible translations) that refer to this passage as 'the choosing of the seven deacons', a designation not applied until Irenaeus in the late second century.[1] The term 'deacon' does not appear once in the passage and those chosen are neither here nor elsewhere referred to as 'deacons', but as the Seven (see for exam-

1 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1885/1987), 315-567.

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ple Acts 21:9). A more careful reading of this text in its literary context reveals the deeper issues which shaped the early church's vision of congregational leadership systems.

The book of Acts opens with a period of evangelism and growth (chs. 1-3), followed by the first external challenge to the church with the arrest of Peter and John (4:1-22). The church's response of courageous faith (4:23-30) is met with a fresh outpouring of the Holy Spirit (4:31), and a dynamic community life experience (4:32-37). Acts 5:1-10 describes the first internal challenge to the church, the result of which is the power of God expressed in multiple ways, and growth in reputation and numbers (5:11-16). This led to the second external challenge to the church, the arrest of the apostles and their subsequent release (5:17-40), which resulted in rejoicing and the further spread of the gospel (5:41-42).

The conflict over the distribution of food (6:1) led to the appointment of the spirit-filled Seven (6:2-6), and the spread of the word of God (6:7). One of the Seven, Stephen, began performing miracles and preaching with authority (6:8-10), leading to the third external challenge – Stephen's arrest and martyrdom (6:11–7:60). Central to this passage is Stephen's 'sermon' (7:1-53), the longest recorded in Acts, and less an actual 'sermon' than a theological defence before a religious court that paved the way for the acceptance of Gentiles into the church.[2]

The end result of Stephen's martyrdom is the scattering of the believers (8:1-2), and an introduction to Saul of Tarsus (8:1, 3), who is to become the great apostle to the Gentiles. Among those scattered is another of the Seven, Philip, who uses the opportunity to preach the gospel in Samaria (8:4-13), leading to large numbers of Samaritans being accepted into the church (8:14-25). Philip is then led south where he encounters, teaches, and baptises the first Gentile convert – the Ethiopian official (8:26-39), after which we see Philip preaching in all the towns along the coast (8:40).

When taken in its context it becomes clear that Luke's concern in Acts 6:1-6 was *not* to prescribe a model for church governance and decision-making procedures. In point of fact we have no precise details of how the Seven were actually chosen – whether by election, consensus, or appointment. However, there is a detailed description of the positive qualities sought in new leaders. Nor was Luke's concern the administrative shape for distributing food to the poor. Rather, we read nothing further about food distribution in Acts, and we next see Stephen not in the ministry of social services but in the ministry of preaching and miracle-working. Shortly thereafter Philip has left his appointed ministry completely and is evangelising Samaria and beyond, and is later referred to not as a deacon but as an evangelist (21:8). If the point of the passage is to give a biblical mandate for committees and/or food distribution, at least two of the Seven failed pretty miserably in the task!

The context of this story drives us to see Luke's purpose in including it. There were several reasons, including the desire to provide an introduction to

2 Perry W.H. Shaw, *The Acts of the Apostles* (Amman: Program for Theological Education by Extension, 2000), 97-106.

the Seven as men filled with the Holy Spirit, to demonstrate how Spirit-driven and creative decision-making leads to the spread of the gospel, and finally, to emphasise that all are welcome in the people of God. The concerns embedded in the text are not administrative but rather the following: the missional-ecclesial vision of the spread of the word of God; the power of the Holy Spirit at work in the church and the need to depend on his guidance in decision-making; the comprehensive nature of the church racially and linguistically, and the love and acceptance that should characterize our churches; and the holiness and integrity of character expected in Christian leaders.

The only thing that a careful literary-contextual approach to Acts 6 says with respect to governance and church administration is that the preferred approach is one which best promotes the spread of the gospel. That this was the 'prescribed' approach of the early church is evident in the changing shape of leadership recorded in the book of Acts and the letters. Carter comments on the early church, 'At every stage persons are arranged to do ministry in the most effective way … Changing mission means … new positions and persons, sometimes through new roles for those already at work.'[3]

II Changing Leadership Patterns in Service of the Missional-Ecclesial Vision

In the opening of Acts we see authority vested in the Eleven, who in turn oversee the casting of lots for Matthias to replace Judas and complete the Twelve. Through Acts 1-5 the Twelve apparently assumed sole responsibility for leadership, including oversight of the early church's finances (4:37; 5:2). As the church grew, the responsibilities became unwieldy and the Twelve oversaw the appointment of the Seven (6:1-6) who would take the administrative responsibility from their shoulders so that the Twelve could devote themselves to 'prayer and the ministry of the word' (6:2,4). With Stephen's martyrdom (Acts 7) and Philip's growing evangelistic ministry (Acts 8), one can only speculate as to what happened to the caring ministry to which they had been appointed, but while absolutely nothing is recorded it seems probable that the apostles continued to appoint others to these sorts of ministries.

Through Acts 8-11 the Twelve, and in particular Peter and John, continue to play a senior leadership role: the new movement in Samaria is only confirmed and established with the arrival of Peter and John (8:14-25); Barnabas saw apostolic approval as crucial to Saul's acceptance (9:27); Peter is the agency for the acceptance of Cornelius and his Gentile household into the church (10:1-11:18). Luke's record sees the Spirit's work at the heart of the church's centrifugal missional movement to Samaritans and Gentiles (8:15-19; 10:44-48; 11:15-18),[4] crossing boundaries and becoming contextualised in new cultural settings,

3 William J. Carter, *Team Spirituality: A Guide for Staff and Church* (Nashville: Abingdon, 1997), 19.

4 cf. Bengt Sundkler, 'Jesus et les Paiens', in *Contributions à l'étude de la Pensée Missionnaire dans le Nouveau Testament*, ed. Bengt Sundkler (Copenhagen: Munksgaard 1937), 1-38.

frequently in spite of the church's reluctance (11:1-3).[5]

It is with the growth of the multi-ethnic Antioch church that we first see new official roles being described. Agabus was clearly only one among many who were recognised as 'prophets' (*prophētēs*) (11:27-28), and apparently the leadership of the Antiochian church comprised a group of 'prophets and teachers' (13:1). Judas and Silas, 'leaders among the brothers' (15:22) are also designated 'prophets' (15:32). While some have questioned whether these were official designated roles in the church,[6] the nominal grammatical structure would suggest that they were.

Certainly in the Revelation (11:18; 16:6; 18:24) prophets are singled out as those who have been targeted for persecution, suggesting an official leadership role in the late first century church. Likewise the *Didache* (10:7; 11:7-12; 13:1-7) speaks of prophets as individuals worthy of high respect and financial support, although by this time they may have had a predominantly itinerant influence rather than being leaders in specific local churches.[7]

In Acts 14:14 we see the designation 'apostle' (*apostolos*) extended to Barnabas. That this became a standard designation for certain leaders beyond the Twelve is confirmed through the following: Paul's standard use of the term as a self-appellation; the reference to the apostles Andronicus and Junia (Rom. 16:7), Apollos (1 Cor. 4:6, cf. 4:9), and Silvanus (Silas) and Timothy in (1 Thess. 1:1; cf. 2:6-7); and the instructions given on apostles in the *Didache* (11:3-6). In 1 Corinthians 12:28 Paul speaks of God's appointment of first apostles, second prophets, third teachers. Irrespective of whether this is a chronological or hierarchical priority or both, or a prioritisation based on benefit to the faith community,[8] or simply a listing device, the repeated mention in Ephesians 4:11 suggests that these are stable, permanent roles that were widespread in the early church.[9]

A discussion of the precise nature of each leadership role is subject to debate and has been discussed in some depth elsewhere.[10] My point here is to indicate the fluid nature of governance

5 cf. Craig Van Gelder, *The Ministry of the Missional Church: A Community Led by the Spirit* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2007), 40.

6 Richard B. Gaffin Jr., 'A Cessationist View', in *Are Miraculous Gifts for Today? Four Views*, ed. Wayne Grudem (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 23-64; John F. MacArthur Jr., *Charismatic Chaos* (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1993); Samuel E. Waldron, *To Be Continued? Are the Miraculous Gifts for Today?* (Ashland: Calvary, 2007); R. Fowler White, 'Richard Gaffin and Wayne Grudem: A Comparison of Cessationist and Noncessationist Argumentation', *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* Vol. 35, no. 2, June 1992, 173-81.

7 Ronald Kydd, *Charismatic Gifts in the Early Church*, (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1984), 6-11.

8 Robert Banks, *Paul's Idea of Community: The Early House Churches in their Cultural Setting*, rev. ed. (Peabody: Hendrickson, 1994), 96.

9 Jerome Crowe, *From Jerusalem to Antioch: The Gospel Across Culture* (Collegeville: Liturgical, 1997), 141.

10 For example Kenneth Berding, *What are Spiritual Gifts? Rethinking the Conventional View* (Grand Rapids: Kregel, 2006); Henry Blackaby and Mel Blackaby, *What's so Spiritual about your Gifts?* (Colorado Springs: Multnomah, 2004); Max Turner, *The Holy Spirit and Spiritual Gifts: Then and Now* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 1996).

and structure in the early church, and the continual restructuring that took place for the accomplishment of the missional mandate.

It is not until Acts 11:30 that we first hear of 'elders' (*presbuteros*), some 15 years or more after the Pentecostal founding of the church. But James has also come to prominence, and the apostles and elders look to James' leadership in the Jerusalem Council (Acts 15:13). Schnabel suggests that the development of leadership by elders in Jerusalem had resulted from the departure of the Twelve from Jerusalem at the time of the Agrippan persecution of 41/42 AD mentioned in Acts 12.[11] It is probable that 'eldership' was first developed in the very Jewish environment of the Jerusalem Church, based on the model of the Sanhedrin.[12]

Whatever the reasons for the establishment of leadership by elders, from this point forward elders play a dominant leadership role in the church. Paul sees the appointment of elders as an essential element of his missional activity, and both appoints (Acts 14:23) and reports to (Acts 20:17; 21:18-19) elders as he travels. Even then it would seem that the term 'elder' was loose and fluid, and Acts 15:23 ('the elder brethren' – *hoi presbuteroi adelphoi* – is the best attested reading of the Greek text) suggests that in Jerusalem at least the term may have simply referred to senior believers who, like James, had been followers of Christ since the resurrection or even earlier,[13] a usage also found in Papias[14] and Irenaeus.[15]

Eldership continues to be a prevailing pattern of church governance throughout the New Testament (Acts 20:17; 21:17-18; 1 Tim. 5:17-19; Tit. 1:5-6; Jas. 5:13-15; 1 Pet. 5:1-5; 2 Jn. 1; 3 Jn. 1; Rev. 4:4,10; 5:6,8,14; 11:16; 19:4), although the terminology is rather fluid between 'elder' and 'overseer' (*episkopos*; sometimes translated 'bishop'), particularly seen in the interchange of the terms in Acts 20:17,28 and Titus 1:5-9. The use of the term 'overseer' is widespread (Acts 20:28; Phil. 1:1; 1 Tim. 3:2; Tit. 1:7), and may have been used to refer more specifically to those leaders in whose homes churches would meet, and who supported the faith community in various ways as 'patrons'.[16]

The first we see of the leadership role of 'deacon' (*diakonos*) is in Philippians 1:1 and in reference to Phoebe (Rom. 16:1). Despite the widespread translation of the term in Romans 16:1 as 'servant' or 'deaconess', neither can be justified linguistically, as the use of the masculine form (*diakonon*) in reference to a woman points strongly to a formal position held in the church.

11 Eckhard J. Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary: Realities, Strategies and Methods* (Downers Grove: IVP. 2008), 48.

12 Hans Von Campenhausen, *Ecclesiastical Authority and Spiritual Power in the Church of the First Three Centuries*, trans. by J.A. Baker (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1969).

13 Roger Beckwith, *Elders in Every City: The Origin and Role of the Ordained Ministry* (Carlisle: Paternoster, 2003), 45.

14 Papias, *Fragments of Papias, in The Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 1, eds. Alexander Roberts and James Donaldson (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1885/1987), 153-155.

15 Irenaeus, *Against Heresies*.

16 Udo Schnelle, *Apostle Paul: His Life and Theology*, trans. by M. Eugene Boring (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2005), 573.

Deacons are also mentioned as local church leaders in 1 Timothy 3:8-10. It is noteworthy that Ignatius refers to deacons as not simply 'ministers of food and drink' but servants of 'the mysteries of Jesus Christ' (Trallians 2:3), pointing to their holistic ministry of word and deed in the service of the church's mission.[17]

It is probable that the early church gave multiple titles to leaders, for example elder (or deacon) and apostle, prophet, evangelist, and/or shepherd-teacher. This is suggested by Paul's tendency to introduce his letters with greetings to the elders, overseers, and/or deacons, but (with the exception of the pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus) the application of more 'charismatic' titles in the body of the text. The use of multiple titles is also indicated by a comparison between the most 'charismatic' of letters, 1 Corinthians, in which the emphasis is on the leadership of apostles and prophets, and 1 Clement 42:4 (addressed to the Corinthian church) in which Clement recaps their early leadership in the words, '[the apostles] appointed their first converts … to be bishops [*episkopous*] and deacons.'

Despite the fact that deacons and elders clearly played a significant part in the life of the early church, we are nowhere informed as to the precise nature of their leadership roles, although clearly pastoral (Acts 20:28; Jas. 5:14; 1 Pet. 5:1-2) and teaching (1 Tim. 3:2; 5:17; Tit. 1:9) ministries, and oversight of missional advancement (Acts 21:18-19), were key responsibilities. Of far greater concern to the New Testament writers than leadership roles was the quality of life expected from these leaders (1 Tim. 3; Tit. 1:5-9; 1 Pet. 5:1-4), as an essential necessity in the spread of the gospel (Acts 14:23; 20:28-32; Tit. 1:5). Paul clearly saw true righteousness in leaders as having foundational missional implications: the good reputation (*marturia*) of leaders (1 Tim. 3:7) is directly related to the witness (*marturia*) of the church.[18] Fee observes,

> Apart from the authority of the apostles over the churches they had founded, there seems to be very little interest in the question of 'authority' at the local level. To be sure, the people are directed to respect, and submit to, those who laboured among them and served them in the Lord (1 Cor. 16:16; Heb. 13:17). But in their roles as those who care for the others. The concern for governance and roles within church structures emerges at a *later* time.[19]

III Organic and Contextual Patterns of Missional-Ecclesial Leadership

Fluidity of governance and administration in service of the church's missional-ecclesial vision is also emphasized in the consistent biblical use of organic rather than organisational language in describing the church: body (Rom. 12:4-6; 1 Cor. 12:12-26; Eph. 4:4,25; 5:29-30; Col. 2:19; 3:15); family (Mt. 12:49-50; Rom. 12:10; Gal. 6:10; Heb.

17 Beckwith, *Elders in Every City*, 65.

18 Schnabel, *Paul the Missionary*, 247.

19 Gordon D Fee, '*Laos* and Leadership Under the New Covenant', *Crux* Vol. 25, No. 4, December 1989, 3-13.

13:1; 1 Pet. 1:22; 3:8); bride (2 Cor. 11:2; Rev. 19:7); wife (Eph. 5:25-28); olive tree (Rom. 11:17-24); a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation (1 Pet. 2:9). In the New Testament the word 'member' is consistently used with a biological rather than organisational meaning. Likewise, Paul saw his relationship to the churches he had established in parental (as father in 1 Cor. 4:14-15; 2 Cor. 12:14; 1 Thess. 2:11, and as mother in Gal. 4:19; 1 Thess. 2:7) rather than organisational terms.[20]

The familial character of the early church's self-understanding is equally seen in that Luke uses some form of the Greek term *adelphos* ('brother/sister') fifty-seven times in the book of Acts when speaking of the community of faith. These images point to the church as: people more than programmes; dynamic and growing rather than static and stagnant; heterogeneous rather than homogeneous.

While certain positions (notably 'apostles', 'prophets', 'elders', 'overseers', and 'deacons') seemed to hold some level of precedence, the notion of a distinct 'clergy' class was foreign to the early church. The word *kleros*, from which the word 'clergy' derives, referred not to a separate group within the church, but to all who had received the inheritance of God's redemption (Acts 26:18; Col. 1:11-12).[21] Within the early Christian community each believer was called on to fulfil the ministry for which God had gifted him or her, so that corporately all might together grow to maturity (Eph. 4:11-12).

Spiritual gifts found their source in God himself, and consequently '… the authority to exercise a gift was the right of any person who had a call from God and could demonstrate it by the ability to use the gift properly. As a result, a large group of diverse people often shared the leadership.'[22] Gaillardetz asserts that the 'charism-versus-office' debate is a product of Protestant-Catholic polemics, and that a more 'fluid continuum' existed between office and gift in the early church.[23]

Comparative studies suggest that a significant cultural element came into the formation of structures within the early church. Meeks,[24] for example, observes clear parallels between the structure of local Christian communities in the first century and the concurrent models of the household (*oikia*), the voluntary associations that proliferated in the early Roman Empire, the synagogue,[25] and even the philosophical and rhetorical schools.

There can be no question but that patterns of congregational leadership

20 Robert Banks and Bernice M. Ledbetter, *Reviewing Leadership: A Christian Evaluation of Current Approaches* (Grand Rapids, Baker, 2004), 37.

21 cf. W. Charles Arn, 'Lay ministry: A closer look', in *Church Growth: State of the Art*, ed. C. Peter Wagner (Wheaton: Tyndale, 1986), 108.

22 David A. Steele, *Images of Leadership and Authority for the Church: Biblical Principles and Secular Models* (Lanham: University, 1986), 9.

23 Richard R. Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church: A People Called and Sent* (Maryknoll: Orbis, 2008), 30-31.

24 Wayne A. Meeks, *The First Urban Christians: The Social World of the Apostle Paul* (New Haven: Yale, 1983), 75-84.

25 cf. David J. Hesselgrave, *Planting Churches Cross-Culturally: A Guide for Home and Foreign Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1980), 351, Steele, Images of Leadership and Authority, 27.

in the early church reflected predominant models observable in the local culture. However, the end goal differed: in contrast to a world that was shaped by Caesar the early church leaders recognised their primary calling to form an alternate community built on an identity rooted in Jesus Christ.[26] With this self-understanding, the focus on character rather than role in early Christian leadership should not surprise.

Even within the relatively brief period represented by the New Testament documents, change and development in church structure is observable. Lingenfelter[27] notes that in the early days, while the community was small and localised around Jerusalem, and group-identity was a central concern, a 'collectivist' approach to leadership was adopted by the early Christians. As the church grew, incorporated first Samaritan, then Gentile believers, and expanded far beyond the Levant region, a more complex organisation evolved. However, structures remained fluid until the close of the first century.

While the first hints of more formalised categories appear in the pastoral letters to Timothy and Titus and in the *Didache*, it is only in the writings of Ignatius (Ephesians 6; Magnesians 6; Trallians 3; Philadelphians 1; Smyrnaeans 8) in the early second century that more hierarchical and rigid ecclesial leadership structures begin to appear. If anything, a study of New Testament terminology teaches us that congregational leadership forms must be understandable to the cultural context, and yet flexible enough to cope with changing needs both outside and inside the church, with the ultimate purpose that the community of faith will best live out its missional-ecclesial identity.

IV Summary

A careful reflection on leadership patterns in the early church suggests the following general principles:

- The missional-ecclesial vision of the early church shaped its governance. Organisational change occurred whenever the shape of governance was hindering the spread of the gospel and the formation of a community that reflected the incarnate character of God.
- The variety and flexibility of New Testament leadership terms seem to make any definitive statements on church governance or Christian leadership practice singularly unwise. Where any form of structured ministry is considered it is seen as a call to service of the faith community rather than as an opportunity to exercise power.[28]
- It appears that general processes of institutionalisation[29] were at work even in the early church. However, its commitment to missional-eccle-

26 Alan Roxburgh and Fred Romanuk, *The Missional Leader: Equipping your Church to Reach a Changing World* (San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, 2006), 118.

27 Sherwood G. Lingenfelter, *Transforming Culture: A Challenge for Christian Mission* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 1992), 194-201.

28 Gaillardetz, *Ecclesiology for a Global Church*, 32

29 Paul G. Hiebert, Daniel R. Shaw, and Tite Tiénou, *Understanding Folk Religion: A Christian Response to Popular Beliefs and Practices* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2000), 333-346.

sial vision with its balance between 'prophets' [apostles and prophets] and 'priests' [elders and deacons] slowed the process of institutionalisation at least until the early years of the second century.

- The Holy Spirit is the source of wisdom for both the choice of leaders and their on-going ministry. It is the Holy Spirit who provides both the gifting and authority necessary to fulfil particular leadership functions. Consequently, one of the chief responsibilities of existing leaders is to acknowledge and empower those whom the Holy Spirit has already appointed. Church governance in the early church is fundamentally a 'pneumatic' order.[30]
- While certain individuals within the community of faith are called to take positions of supervisory leadership, there is nonetheless a wide variety of leadership roles and these roles will be filled by many different members of the Body of Christ. Multiple leadership is based on Holy Spirit giftedness.
- Personal integrity, quality of life, being filled with the Holy Spirit, and a recognition that leaders are no more (or no less) than stewards entrusted with an authority which ultimately is not their own, are more important leadership issues than are position and task. Christian leadership finds its power base in spiritual rather than other forms of power.
- Church membership is by nature relational, emphasising mutual care and responsiveness to needs. The purpose of leadership is corporate growth in Christ, a growth that will not occur individually in an isolated setting.

30 Emil Brunner, *The Misunderstanding of the Church* (Philadelphia: Westminster, 1968).