

**Biblically Based Leadership: A Survey of the Scriptural Sources for the  
Exercise of Authority and Leadership in the Church**

Approved by the Elders of Immanuel Bible Church  
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## **Biblically-Based Leadership: A Survey of the Scriptural Sources for the Exercise of Authority and Leadership in the Church**

**Purpose:** The following document presents an overview of the relevant biblical material that applies to and should guide our discussion concerning the exercise of authority and assignment of responsibility at Immanuel Bible Church (“Immanuel”).

**Background:** The Immanuel General Council of Elders (the “General Council”) seeks to assign authority and responsibility among leaders at Immanuel according to biblical principles. The objective is to enable the exercise of leadership and authority as outlined in Scripture and to ensure:

- Agreement among the members of Immanuel and the General Council concerning the appropriate (and accurate) definition of church leadership roles and responsibilities.
- Appropriate revision of the Immanuel Constitution, pastoral Job descriptions, policies and any other related documents as necessary to conform with any modifications made by the General Council to the roles and responsibilities of the leaders of Immanuel.
- Wise and considered selection of godly men and women for positions of spiritual leadership who both understand and concur with the leadership roles defined by the General Council.

**Short Conclusion:** The Scripture consistently supports limiting the authority and responsibility given to one man or position to that which is essential to perform the functions of leadership. In keeping with this pattern, churches should be structured to distribute authority among several centers and delegate functional authority to the lowest levels consonant with accomplishing the purposes of the organization. Structure alone cannot ensure biblical polity in a church, however. It is absolutely essential that those appointed to positions of responsibility be of the highest character with servant hearts, a spirit of humility, a willingness to serve sacrificially, a shepherd’s love for the flock, an abhorrence of lording it over others, and a determination to refresh and strengthen those under their direction and care.

**Discussion:** Immanuel has been and remains committed to a biblical model of church governance. While the Bible is not a handbook addressing the details of church organization and polity, it does provide basic definitions of the roles and functions of the two offices given to the churches, elders and deacons, and in addition offers insights and principles that can be applied by churches seeking to organize their operations in conformity with biblical principles. In all the churches elders are to govern and teach, while deacons serve under the elders to meet the needs of the people, especially concerning practical matters that impact the everyday lives of those in the body. Immanuel has agreed to these definitions in practice, and they are reflected in the Immanuel Constitution and Bylaws.

The primary question presently before the General Council is whether one man— presently the Senior Pastor—should possess (1) supervisory authority, including line authority, over the pastoral staff; (2) serve as the primary teaching pastor; and (3) be regarded by the General Council and the church body as

the senior or principal leader and spokesman for the church. Many evangelical churches have answered this question in the affirmative, embracing a model of leadership in which virtually all church authority is vested in the Senior Pastor position. The alternative to this concentration of leadership in one man is a less centralized approach which vests authority over the pastoral staff and leadership of the church body in multiple individuals, generally via some combination of an elder board and a senior pastor or pastors. With that overarching issue in mind, this paper will address the following questions with a view to assisting the General Council in reaching a consensus on the best approach moving forward:

- **QUESTION 1:** Does the New Testament provide biblical perspectives either in favor of or opposed to the centralization of authority in one person in the churches?
- **QUESTION 2:** What additional principles impacting church organization and leadership are developed in the New Testament?
- **QUESTION 3:** What is the proper use of authority and assignment of responsibilities in the church(es) from a biblical perspective?

**Question 1: Does the New Testament provide biblical perspectives either in favor of or opposed to the centralization of authority in one person?**

The New Testament is the primary guide for the life and governance of all churches. That said, the Old Testament does provide examples of God’s response to the centralization of authority in one person or in a highly centralized organizational structure that inform our consideration of proper church government. Attachment 1 provides some insights designed to demonstrate that the limitation on highly centralized forms of church government prescribed by God in the New Testament is supported in principle by His rejection of man-centered rule in the Old Testament specifically as found in the history of Israel and in relation to Gentile world empires. The objective in considering the perspective of the Old Testament is not to prescribe specific organizational forms for the churches but to show the consistency of God’s mind throughout the biblical record concerning the exercise of human authority.

**The New Testament Record**

The New Testament does not prescribe a detailed form of church organization. It does, however, speak of elders who rule and teach and deacons who serve. References in support of this assertion are numerous, and begin as early as Acts 11:30, and Acts 14:23, when Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in the new churches they have started. In Acts 13:1, the church at Antioch was led by a multicultural group of prophets and teachers that included Saul (later Paul) and Barnabas. In Acts 20:17, Paul calls the elders from the church at Ephesus to give them his farewell instruction. In I Tim 5:17, Paul refers to elders as directing the affairs of the church and preaching and teaching. In Titus 1:5, Paul directs Titus to appoint elders to govern the churches he had started in Crete. In Jas 5:14, James directs the elders in the churches to pray for the sick anointing them with oil. In I Pet 5:1, 5, Peter admonishes the elders in

his audience to shepherd the flock and not lord it over them. Significantly, in all of these references a plurality of elders is in view with authority shared among several men in each church.

Moreover, the New Testament defines no position of church authority other than elder. The office of apostle ended when the apostles of the first century died. Strictly speaking, all authority exercised in churches should be by an elder or by someone appointed by the elders acting under their supervision. Relatedly, the title “pastor” (Greek, *poimen*) is almost non-existent in the New Testament. The term appears in Eph 4:9-13 as the last in a list of four offices given to the church to build it up to maturity (the other three offices are either gone, as is the case with the office of apostle, or have no direct authority over the churches as in the case of prophets and evangelists). In Eph 4:11 the office of pastor is paired with that of teacher, which is also a distinguishing qualification of the elder position (I Tim 3:2). In essence, the pastoral office is that of teaching elder, and the position has authority because of its association with the elder office. The office of teaching elder/pastor teacher also becomes one of authority by virtue of the Word taught. The Word has power and authority in itself. The one teaching it becomes one in authority not on his own account, but on account of the power and authority of the Word he is presenting.

The modern title of senior pastor does not appear in the New Testament nor does its standing in many churches as the senior point of authority in the church receive any support from the New Testament. In some ways it appears to be the evangelical protestant version of the parish priest in the Catholic Church or the rector in the Anglican Communion. Unfortunately neither of these denominations follows the New Testament model of authority distributed among a plurality of elders in a local church, which raises questions about the biblical ground for the aforementioned offices and their evangelical protestant counterparts.

It should be noted that in the New Testament, the plurality of authority shared by all elders in common does not imply equality of leadership within the elder body. Indeed, the New Testament speaks of a diversity of gifts and of differences in the measure of grace/faith given to exercise them (Rom 12:3-8). Some elders have more capacity with a particular gift than others who may have the same gift. The elders in a local church recognize those differences and allocate leadership authority and responsibility accordingly. Those elders having a particular gift for leadership (Rom 12:8) would normally be given leadership roles and responsibility. Some will thus have greater authority over others by position and ability. The opposite of overbearing authority is chaos, which has no place in the churches (I Cor 14:40). The issue of importance faced by every church is not whether there must be those who have authority over others; it is what does the New Testament say about their character, and what does wisdom say about their location in the structure of the organization. No church organization, no matter how carefully designed to limit concentrations of power, can ultimately restrain a man without character whose pride and hunger for power cause him to dominate others. On the other hand, a poorly-designed structure led by men who are humble and committed to serve others will reflect consideration for the freedom of others and avoid arbitrary uses of authority. With that said, an organization structured in light of biblical principles encourages the proper and effective use of authority and appropriate delegation of responsibility. In all things there is moderation and balance

## **Conclusion to Question 1**

Based on this survey of material from the New Testament, the conclusive answer to Question 1 is that the Scripture supports limiting the concentration of power in one man or position to that which is essential to fulfill leadership responsibilities. Placing authority in the hands of one man whether it is in the context of civil government or the church tends toward the abuse of power driven by pride, selfish ambition, and the desire to control and use others for personal advantage. A corollary principle is that organizations should be structured to distribute authority among several centers and delegate functional authority necessary to fulfill responsibilities to the lowest levels consonant with accomplishing the purposes of the organization.

## **Question 2: What additional principles impacting church organization and leadership are developed in the New Testament?**

The character of those in leadership is obviously a critical element in establishing and maintaining a biblically-based church organization and polity. The New Testament clearly defines the requisite character of church leaders. A leader is to be a servant, a man of humility who does not lord it over others, a shepherd who cares for the sheep, one who sacrifices for those under him, and one who refreshes those he leads.

### **The Character of Humility**

Paul, who was an apostle, an office senior to that of an elder in a church, exercised his authority with firmness but with a strong emphasis on humility. Consider his dealing with the rebellious and disobedient Corinthian church (I Cor 2:1-5). This text is particularly important in its emphasis on the Spirit's power rather than wise and persuasive words as the primary means of influence. Paul comes to the Corinthian church "in weakness and fear and in much trembling" with the working of God shown in "demonstration of the Spirit and of power," (I Cor 2:3-4) in marked contrast to authoritarian leadership.

In I Pet. 5:1-3, Peter plainly addresses the problem of lording authority over the flock/assembly. He admonishes elders to lead by example. This is in agreement with our Lord's command and manner of life that service, sacrifice, and humility are to be the primary characteristics of all leaders rather than intellectual brilliance or high position. The Scriptural requirement is that leadership in the church be based on proven character demonstrated specifically in sacrificial care for those for whom the leader is responsible. A life that demonstrates humility and self-giving service is mandatory.

In Eph 4:1-3, Paul admonishes all of the Ephesians, including the elders, to be completely humble and gentle, be patient, bear with one another in love, and make every effort to maintain the unity of the Spirit through the bond of peace. In Col 3:12-13, he strikes a similar tone asking for his readers to be clothed with compassion, kindness, humility, gentleness, and patience bearing with one another and forgiving one another while putting on love. In II Tim 2:24-25 Paul asks Timothy to avoid quarrels, be kind to all, be able to teach, not be resentful, and to gently instruct opponents. In all of these texts it is clear that the exercise of authority is to be tempered in favor of the compelling influence of a gentle and

understanding touch with a forgiving heart. This does not weaken the authority of the elders or make them passive, it makes their exercise of authority more effective. The elders must actively challenge any tendency for the church and the congregation to move away from obedience to the scriptures and affirmation of good doctrine, and they must exercise church discipline including removing members of the congregation from fellowship with the body.

### **The Character of a Servant's Heart and a Refreshing Spirit**

During the Last Supper the disciples argue over who would be first. At one point in the meal the Lord takes off his outer garments and washes the feet of all the disciples. In so doing he assumes the role of a menial house servant. After the washing is complete, He puts on His garments and asks them, in Jn 13:3-15, "Do you know what I have done to you? You call me Teacher and Lord; and you are right, for so I am. If I then, the Lord and the Teacher, washed your feet, you also ought to wash one another's feet. For I gave you an example that you also should do as I did to you" Jesus thus establishes the principle of servant leadership by showing how the one having the greatest authority, as was clearly the case in what they had just seen, was to be willing to serve those under Him in the most humble way. He also demonstrates the leadership principle of refreshment of those led by washing off the dust and dirt of the road and allowing the disciples to enjoy the healing touch of water flowing over their tired legs and feet (*cf.* Mk 10:42-45).

### **The Character of Servant Leadership**

During the Last Supper, the Lord Jesus also speaks clearly to His disciples concerning the exercise of authority without lording it over people, (Lk 22:25-27):

And He said to them, "The kings of the Gentiles lord it over them; and those who have authority over them are called 'Benefactors.' But it is not this way with you, but the one who is the greatest among you must become like the youngest, and the leader like the servant. For who is greater, the one who reclines at the table or the one who serves? Is it not the one who reclines at the table? **But I am among you as the one who serves.**"

In Phil 2:2-8 Paul extends servant leadership to include sacrificial leadership. The text applies to all believers, but it certainly applies with intensity to those who lead.

"Do nothing from selfishness or empty conceit, but with humility of mind regard one another as more important than yourselves. Do not merely look after your own personal interests, but also the interests of others. Have this attitude in yourselves which was also in Christ Jesus, who although He existed in the form of God, did not regard equality with God a thing to be grasped, but emptied Himself, **taking the form of a bond-servant**, and being made in the likeness of men. Being found in appearance as a man, He humbled himself by becoming obedient to the point of death, even death on a cross."

## **The Character of a Shepherd**

Shepherd leadership appears in a number of contexts in both the Old and New Testaments. Moses spent forty years in a desolate wilderness alone taking care of sheep as part of God's preparation for his leadership of the nation of Israel during the Exodus and the long years of wandering in the wilderness. David was a shepherd who learned to protect his nation by protecting his father's flock from the lion and the bear, (I Sam 17:36-37). Our Lord is described as the Chief Shepherd, (I Pet 5:4), the Good Shepherd, (Jn 10:11), and the Shepherd and Guardian of our souls, (I Pet 1:25). The Lord commanded Peter, the man chosen to lead the apostles in the early years, to shepherd My sheep, (Jn 21:6). Later Peter exhorted his fellow elders in I Pet 5:2-3 requiring spiritual leaders to shepherd their flocks and repeating his emphasis on leading by example:

Shepherd the flock of God among you, exercising oversight not under compulsion, but voluntarily, according to the will of God; and not for sordid gain, but with eagerness; nor yet as lording it over those given to your charge, but proving to be examples to the flock.

It is fair to say that the role of shepherd is the model for leadership in the churches; yet shepherds were not men of great stature in the community. The Egyptians despised them, Gen 46:34, David's brothers mocked his being one, (I Sam 17:28), and the shepherds hearing the first announcement of the Lord's birth were without doubt the most ordinary of men. To be a good shepherd meant a commitment to a lowly life of hard work, in all kinds of weather, taking care of vulnerable animals that were often dirty, prone to wander, and not especially intelligent. It is the model for leadership in the churches; humility, patience, understanding, gentleness balanced by firmness, and sacrificial concern for others. Authority and position are not the issue or the focus. The emphasis is on a loving concern for people, knowing them, understanding their needs, their weaknesses and their strengths, and leading them gently and with consideration for each sheep. The first century shepherd knew his sheep. They would not respond to a voice other than his and depended on him for their protection, provision, and survival. The shepherd spent much time with them and had to be willing to sacrifice himself in the face of danger to the flock in a picture of what actually happened to the Good Shepherd, Jesus Christ. This is our standard, a standard that transcends church organization in importance in the churches.

## **Conclusion to Question 2**

In answering Question 2 it is clear that biblically ordered leadership requires men of high character with servant hearts, a spirit of humility, a willingness to serve sacrificially, a shepherd's love for the flock, an abhorrence of lording over others, and an unyielding desire to refresh and strengthen those under their direction and care. Structure alone cannot ensure biblical order in a church. It is absolutely essential that only men with the character qualities above be appointed to positions having leadership responsibility.

**Question 3: What is the proper assignment of responsibility and use of authority in the church(es) from a biblical perspective?**

Careful consideration of Biblical perspectives identified above commends the following principles that govern the allocation and application of authority in the organization and operation of a local church:

- **The ruling body of elders should be senior in authority over all church matters acting in concert and consensus together.<sup>1</sup>**
- **Concentrations of authority should be minimized to the extent possible while allowing sufficient authority to effectively accomplish ministry in the congregation and community.**
- **Anyone being considered for a position as an elder or as one holding any office requiring the exercise of authority over others should be of proven character and must specifically demonstrate a servant's heart, sacrificial and humble spirit, and respect for others.**

## **Conclusion**

If the three principles defined in the response to question three above are faithfully and consistently applied, the organization of a particular church is open to the wisdom of its elders who then have the freedom to shape its structure within those principles to address needs and concerns specific to that church.

Two corollary principles should also be followed:

- **The office of pastor must always be understood as one of caring for and feeding the sheep. The function of ruling or exercising authority is always secondary and subservient to that purpose.**
- **An ongoing effort to balance the need for authority and direction with a commitment to organize in a manner designed to avoid arbitrary use of that authority must be a priority concern for the elders to avoid the tendency over time to gradually concentrate authority in the hands of a few men.**

### **Final Thoughts:**

#### **God, the Source of Our Authority**

All authority and leadership ultimately come from God. He has delegated a portion of His authority to man to govern the earth, (Gen 1:28, 2:15), under His direction. No authority can be properly exercised by men without the conscious awareness of our accountability to God and the understanding that all the authority we have is ours only because of God's desire to give it to us for a time. Arrogance and pride wither in such a context. Anyone who has even some ability to recognize the awesomeness of God and

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<sup>1</sup> This does not preclude involvement by the congregation in decisions impacting the church as in the case with Immanuel where the congregation elects elders, approves constitutional changes, approves the purchase of property, approves hiring pastors, approves the budget, and may as required disband the church.

the contrasting limitations inherent in being human is compelled to use authority carefully and respectfully. In a healthy sense it should cause one to fear being given the responsibility of leading other people, especially when that leadership in the context of the Christian community may impact the spiritual lives and eternal destinies of those who follow us. In the church we must recognize Christ as our head not in some abstract way that has little impact, but in a continual awareness hour by hour that He is the strength for every moment, every decision and every purpose. This is both practical and transcendent unifying the eternal with the everyday activities of time.

### **Our Freedom in Christ**

In looking at the use of authority in Scripture one begins to see an overarching reality that God is all about giving us freedom. Before the fall Adam was totally free to be himself absent the single restriction concerning the fruit of one tree. He was not troubled by constant moral choices since he had no knowledge of good and evil. Sin as we know it did not dog his path. He was free. Sin always creates bondage including the bondage of being under its power and the power of men who are themselves in bondage to it. Christ came to set us free, (Jn 8:32-36; Rom 8:2; Gal 4:1-8,21-27, 5:1) not only from sin and the bondage of the Law but free to walk before God in the power of the Spirit unencumbered by guilt and loosed from the petty rules made by men. This is not a freedom to be unruly and rebellious or focused on ourselves, but it is a freedom in the churches not to be dominated by those who seek to rule over us for their own purposes. We need to recognize and treasure the freedom we have in Christ and carefully consider the authority we establish in the churches allowing only what is necessary for the edification of the body and its members, and the maintenance of good order.

Unfortunately the history of the church has demonstrated man's tendency to use spiritual power for personal benefit and restriction on God given freedom. It shows up in III Jn. 9-10 where Diotrephes is described as one who "loves to be first" and one who placed his brothers under restrictions so controlling that he disallowed fellowship with other believers who came to visit the church. It showed up through the long centuries of church history when what had been churches that were fellowships of believers, often in homes, became an enormous hierarchy of man made authorities centered in Rome and Constantinople. This tyranny became so corrupt and full of false teaching on the most essential matters of salvation that the Reformers had to challenge its rule directly to even begin some measure of return to the gospel of salvation by faith. To this day powerful church hierarchies dominate the Roman and Orthodox communions and in some measure the Protestant denominations. We need to treasure the freedom we have in Christ, not as a license for our own way, but as a marvelous privilege bought and paid for by our Lord. Do not give away this privilege for the allure of powerful, strong, able men who we think are the key to moving forward. Our strength is in the Lord enabled by the Spirit. Whatever is the work of mere men, no matter how impressive, will not stand the test of time or the judgment of God.

## **Attachment 1, The Old Testament Record of God's Response to the Centralization of Human Authority as Shown in the History of Israel and the Governance of Gentile World Empires**

### **The Old Testament and Concentrated Authority**

Unlike the modern focus on systems, procedures, structure, and process, much of the Bible is narrative, where applications are inferred and implied more than explicitly stated. Two Old Testament narratives in particular provide instruction concerning concentrated authority. The first is the history of Israel as a nation; the second is the biblical account of the history of the Gentile Empires.

### **The Experience of Israel in the Old Testament**

The biblical account of the national history of Israel begins with the extended family of the patriarchs Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob, and the migration of that family of some seventy souls to Egypt in the time of Joseph. By the end of their stay in Egypt, the Israelites' number had grown to some two million subjects governed by the Egyptian Pharaoh through their taskmasters and the elders of Israel who represented them before the Egyptian throne. The book of Exodus reveals that God called Moses for the unprecedented task of leading this vast mass of people out of Egypt to the Promised Land. In the beginning Moses led alone, with only the assistance of his brother, Aaron, and sister, Miriam. Once the Israelites' sojourn settled into a time of wandering in the desert, however, God instructed Moses to select seventy elders to serve as his assistants (Num 11:16-17) in concert with several levels of supervisors governing thousands, hundreds, fifties, and tens to manage the everyday affairs of the people (Ex 18:24-26, Deut 1:9-18). Each of the twelve Israelite tribes also had its leaders and elders. While Moses was clearly the senior leader, he was by no means alone in the leadership structure. His role as final judge was somewhat similar to the judges of a later time, but his towering stature among the people as the voice of God before them was unique to the exodus, and the nation's desert sojourn was obviously an impermanent arrangement rather than an enduring model.

Once in the land of Canaan, governance was relatively loose. The elders of the twelve tribes would come together only in times of crisis, and rule was administered by judges appointed by God in response to a particular challenge or situation. Notably, the judges' rule did not develop into a royal family or dynasty. There was no enduring central authority, and the people lived largely in the context of the local community or village and their tribe. This very open system, which lasted more than three centuries, was God's ordination for the nation of Israel, as clearly shown by His angry reaction to the people's desire for a king (I Sam 8:4-9). While Israel wanted a strong leader to fight their battles and unify their nation, God viewed this desire as rejection of dependency on Him and His governance through the judges He raised up as He saw fit. He also saw it as bringing about a great loss of precious freedom as so clearly demonstrated in the prophet Samuel's address to the nation (I Sam 8:10-18).

It is important to note that the Bible emphasizes that when people look to a single leader for direction and protection, they errantly turn their focus toward the leader, not God. This has been a human

tendency throughout history. Indeed, Church history down to the present moment is full of this often-repeated pattern—to the great detriment of ministry. The powerful modern nation-state has grown in our own country and throughout the West as people have increasingly rejected God in favor of human power, trusting the state to protect them and preserve their prosperity. With all its flaws, the open system of governance under the judges was a better reflection of God’s desire than the centralized power of the Israelite kings that so often led the nation away from God into idolatry.

Relatedly, it should also be noted that the role of judge in Israel was not that of a king. A judge’s purpose was to judge the people using the standards of the Law, as in the case of Samuel and others, and to provide military leadership when the nation was being attacked. Since external attack was typically the consequence of the Israelites’ sin, military mobilization was often accompanied by a spiritual revival, effectively rendering the judge a spiritual leader as well as a military one. Nonetheless, no judge had control of the whole country with the authority of royalty. Nor did the priests govern the nation; rather, their responsibilities were limited to leading the community in worship and providing instruction in the Law. God did provide for leaders and leadership, but He did not concentrate authority in one position ruling over all on a permanent basis, as was the case later with the kings of Israel and Judah.

### **The History and Future of the Gentile Empires**

The second narrative informing us of God’s attitude toward centralized authority comes through the long history of the Gentile nations from the days of Nimrod to the present moment and on to the ultimate end of Gentile power in the destruction of man’s ungodly, Satanically-energized rule described in the Book of Revelation. From the beginning of Gentile culture at Babel we see God’s rejection and disdain for the brutal dictatorships of men. God’s dramatic confusing of tongues at Babel was specifically designed to limit the concentration of human power and disperse the human family over the face of the earth (Gen 11:1-8). Every time we have to learn another language we are reminded that God purposely made it difficult for people to cooperate together because of their fallen desire to find security and power in their unity and size (which is exactly the pattern we see in the world today in the explosion of giant cities, in the enormous concentrations of power in corporate, governmental, and international organizations, and in the power and influence of the internet). We are returning to Babel in our modern age, and this tendency inevitably has had an impact on how we conceive of the proper organization of and operation of our churches.

After Babel came Nimrod, a man of great power and a man hostile to God. God allowed him to establish the cities of the Tigris Euphrates Plain that, along with Egypt, became the cradle of Gentile and pagan civilization (Gen 10:8-12). Later, God gave Nebuchadnezzar a dream interpreted and documented by Daniel that laid out the progression of Gentile world empire through the course of history (Dan 2:26-46). All of these empires were and will be bestial concentrations of power (Dan 7:1-12) ruled by absolute monarchs and dictators. God sentenced all of them to destruction and the entire system will be

destroyed by the coming of Christ who will reduce them to dust blown away by the wind (*cf.* Rev 18-19). God has rejected these empires and condemns them to crushing defeat at His hand. Again, we have a major marker of the heart of God standing against the centralization of man's power and the glorification of human strength and confidence in the flesh.