

Elder-Leadership
Stonegate Fellowship

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A Common Question

“Who’s the Senior Pastor?” It’s a good question and one that naturally arises within the minds of people for whom a senior-leader model of church leadership is what they are used to. Especially in traditionally Southern Baptist or Catholic denominations, the senior-leader model carries with it a degree of confidence, stability, and assurance about the church’s future.

This is understandable. At a practical level, all of us like to know who the leader is. Who do we look to for guidance, direction, and leadership during critical times? Who do we hold responsible for critical decisions and mistakes? Who do we talk to when we need pastoral counseling or prayer? Again, a senior leader seems to answer each of these questions quite nicely. This raises a question: is this the model of leadership we utilize at Stonegate Fellowship?

The short answer is: *No*. We do not utilize this model of church leadership at Stonegate Fellowship and we want you to know *why* that is the case. It is the purpose of this paper to articulate Stonegate’s theology of church leadership. We hope this paper helps you understand why we have chosen not to implement a senior-leader model in our church. Most of all, we hope this paper engenders within you a deeper confidence of God’s leadership as He leads the people of Stonegate Fellowship through the model of church leadership we believe He has established for us.

To do this, we’re going to explore four topics: First, we will explore a brief theology of servant leadership. Second, we’ll examine the role of Senior Pastor in the New Testament. Third, we’ll explain the place of Elders in the New Testament. Finally, we’ll explore some practical considerations you may find helpful.

Servant Leadership

Just before Jesus ascended to heaven, He gave His followers a charge that would eventually change the world. Matthew tells us:

Jesus came near and said to them, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go, therefore, and make disciples of all nations, baptizing them in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit, teaching them to observe everything I have commanded you. And remember, I am with you always, to the end of the age.” — Matthew 28:18–20 CSB

It’s vital to recognize what Jesus told His followers *before* He gave them the charge to make disciples. Jesus declared, “*All authority* has been given to *me* in heaven and on earth.” In order to understand church leadership, we must begin here. Why? Because we must begin by acknowledging that *every* church leader—no matter who they are—operates within the *delegated authority* given to them by Jesus. Any leadership in the local church that does not operate under the leadership and authority of Jesus is both unwise and unbiblical.

Historically, many people have been wounded when leaders in their local church forgot this truth and misused their authority to manipulate, harm, and even abuse people. At Stonegate Fellowship, we want to do everything we can to prevent and resist such an abuse of power. As a result, we use the phrase *servant-leadership* to describe *all* of our leaders—staff and non-staff. We do this to reinforce the biblical imperative to use our positions of authority and influence to *serve* the people in our care—just as Jesus modeled for us (Philippians 2:3–11).

When we come to the question of church leadership, this philosophy is deeply imbedded in our culture and has become a lens by which we evaluate who to place in positions of authority. From the entry-level volunteer position to the elder-level, we strive to maintain a philosophy of servant-leadership as the lifeblood of our leadership culture.

The Senior Pastor of the Church

With this understanding in mind, it's important to recognize that *any* pastor-leader in the church is himself a *servant*-leader who is called upon by Jesus to lay down his life on behalf of others. Moreover, a pastor-leader must be someone who operates within the delegated authority given to him from Jesus.

Practically, this means the church *never* belongs to a single man or group of men. Rather, the church belongs to *Jesus*—*He* is the Savior, *He* is the Lord, and *He* is the Chief Shepherd. As a result of this conviction, we've designed our leadership structure so as to centralize the primary authority and attention on Jesus. The following biblical observations have informed this conviction for us:

1. *Jesus is the Head of the Church.* The apostle Paul made this clear multiple times when he declared:

He exercised this power in Christ by raising him from the dead and seating him at his right hand in the heavens— far above every ruler and authority, power and dominion, and every title given, not only in this age but also in the one to come. And he subjected everything under his feet and appointed him **as head over everything for the church**, which is his body, the fullness of the one who fills all things in every way. — Ephesians 1:20–23 CSB

But speaking the truth in love, let us grow in every way into **him who is the head—Christ**. — Ephesians 4:15 CSB

He is also the head of the body, the church; he is the beginning, the firstborn from the dead, so that he might come to have first place in everything. — Colossians 1:18 CSB

In saying that Jesus is the head of the church, Paul is echoing what Peter declared when he called Jesus the “Chief Shepherd” of the church (1 Peter 5:4). In practical terms, we believe the apostles are declaring that Jesus is the One who ultimately pastors the church. Jesus does this through qualified leaders, but these leaders care for the people of God *under the authority and leadership of Jesus* by submitting to His Word and depending upon His Spirit.

2. *No Senior Pastors in the New Testament.* As we study the New Testament, we find it difficult to conclude that Jesus intended to have any other senior leader of the church apart from Himself. This doesn't mean that a biblical case for a senior-leader model couldn't be made. Indeed many have made a theologically robust case for a senior leader among a plurality of elders who acts as a “first among equals.”¹

However, we simply differ from this conclusion. One reason is because of passages like these:

When [Paul & Barnabas] had appointed **elders** for them in every church and prayed with fasting, they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed. — Acts 14:23

The reason I left you in Crete was to set right what was left undone and, as I directed you, to appoint **elders** in every town. — Titus 1:5

¹ See Danny Akin, “The Single-Elder Led Church: The Bible's Witness to a Congregational/Single Elder-Led Polity” in *Perspectives on Church Government: 5 Views*, ed. by Chad Owen Brand and R. Stanton Norman (Nashville: B&H, 2004), 25–74.

Perhaps one of the most helpful passages in this regard is 1 Peter 5:1–5. In this passage, Peter clearly addresses the plurality of elders within the local congregation and then directly identifies Jesus as the “Chief Shepherd.” Peter says:

I exhort the **elders** among you as a **fellow elder** and witness to the sufferings of Christ, as well as one who shares in the glory about to be revealed: Shepherd God’s flock among you, not overseeing out of compulsion but willingly, as God would have you; not out of greed for money but eagerly; not lording it over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock. And when the **chief Shepherd** appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory. In the same way, you who are younger, be subject to the **elders**. All of you clothe yourselves with humility toward one another, because, “God resists the proud but gives grace to the humble.” — 1 Peter 5:1–5 CSB

Notice again how the elders are identified in reference to Jesus. These men are specifically charged to lead God’s people with a posture of heart that looks forward to Jesus’ return. Just in case there is any doubt about who Peter has in mind when he identifies “the chief Shepherd,” one need only look to Jesus’ statements about Himself when He declared:

I am the **good shepherd**. The **good shepherd** lays down his life for the sheep...I am the **good shepherd**. I know my own, and my own know me, just as the Father knows me, and I know the Father. **I lay down my life for the sheep.** — John 10:11, 14–15 CSB

Taken together, both the immediate context of Peter’s words and the larger context of the New Testament make it clear that the New Testament writers understood Jesus to be the senior-leader of the church. He was and is the good shepherd, the chief shepherd, and the head over the church.

Again, this doesn’t mean that churches with a senior-leader model are necessarily unbiblical. There are many people who have profited from this model of leadership over the years and there are many Christian thinkers—especially in the Southern Baptist tradition—who advocate for this model.²

We simply find their arguments unpersuasive and believe the New Testament paints a different picture. We believe the picture emerging from the Scriptures is one in which Jesus is designated as the Senior Pastor under whom a group of qualified men lead as pastor-elders.

To the question of eldership we now turn.

² In addition to Akin’s essay listed above, consider the following online article that makes the case for a senior-pastor model of leadership: Greg Gilbert, “The Case for the Senior Pastor,” *9Marks Journal Online*, August 29, 2011 <https://www.9marks.org/article/journalcase-senior-pastor/>.

Eldership in the Local Church

As mentioned above, the consistent pattern that emerges from reading the New Testament is one that strongly affirms the place of eldership in the local church. Specifically, *plural* eldership in which the primary authority of leadership is not vested in one man, but rather in a plurality of qualified men who collaboratively seek to honor Jesus by caring for His people. In addition to the verses already listed, consider the following:

Now from Miletus, he sent to Ephesus and summoned the **elders** of the church. — Acts 20:17 CSB

And he himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, some **pastors** and teachers, equipping the saints for the work of ministry, to build up the body of Christ. — Ephesians 4:11–12 CSB

Paul and Timothy, servants of Christ Jesus: To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are in Philippi, including the **overseers** and deacons. — Philippians 1:1 CSB

Now we ask you, brothers and sisters, to give recognition to **those** who labor among you and lead you in the Lord and admonish you, and to regard **them** very highly in love because of **their** work. Be at peace among yourselves. — 1 Thessalonians 5:12–13 CSB

The **elders** who are good **leaders** are to be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says: Do not muzzle an ox while it is treading out the grain, and “The worker is worthy of his wages.” — 1 Timothy 5:17–18 CSB

Obey your **leaders** and submit to them, since they keep watch over your souls as those who will give an account, so that they can do this with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you. — Hebrews 13:17 CSB

Is anyone among you sick? He should call for the **elders** of the church, and they are to pray over him, anointing him with oil in the name of the Lord.— James 5:14 CSB

These passages speak for themselves. In every instance where church leadership is mentioned, the New Testament writers make it clear that leadership should not concentrate authority to one man. Rather, as one scholar observes, “The argument for a plurality of elders, pastors, overseers, leaders is [easy] to make based upon the biblical evidence...every time the word elder (*presbuteros*) appears in the context of church leaders, it is always in the plural.”³

The biblical witness indicates that where a leaders has authority in the local church, it is a *shared authority* among a group of qualified men who are under-shepherds of the “Chief Shepherd”—Jesus.

You may have noticed that the New Testament does use a variety of terms by which to speak about these leaders. It’s interesting that even advocates of a senior-leader model of church leadership acknowledge that the various terms used in the New Testament to describe the elders/overseers/pastors of the church are all used *interchangeably* to denote the *same* office of leadership.⁴

What’s more, we have good reason to believe the biblical writers didn’t invent this understanding of leadership, but received it directly from Jesus Himself. Consider the following passages:

³ Daniel Akin, “The Single-Elder-Led Church,” 64.

⁴ Daniel Akin, “The Single-Elder-Led Church,” 40–54.

“But you are not to be called ‘Rabbi,’ because you have one Teacher, and you are all brothers and sisters. Do not call anyone on earth your father, because you have one Father, who is in heaven. You are not to be called instructors either, because you have one Instructor, the Messiah. The greatest among you will be your servant. Whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and whoever humbles himself will be exalted. — Matthew 23:8–12⁵

New Testament scholar, Joseph Hellerman, comments:

Jesus intended for God to be the only ‘solo leader’ in the community. At the human level, he intended the plurality approach to serve as the inspired blueprint for church leadership. Paul and others grasped Jesus’ intentions, and they established team-led churches accordingly.⁶

In perhaps the most extensive treatment of the question of eldership in the Bible, Alexander Strauch observes from this passage:

In complete obedience to Christ’s teaching on humility and brotherhood, the first Christians and their leaders resisted special titles, sacred clothes, chief seats, and lordly terminology to describe their community leaders. They also chose an appropriate leadership structure for their local congregations—leadership by a council of elders.⁷

In order to ensure these elders would in fact lead according to the intentions and Spirit of Jesus, Paul gave clear instructions about the qualifications of an elder. In 1 Timothy 3:1–7 and Titus 1:5–9, we find that an elder must be a man who possesses the following qualities in faithful (not perfect) measure:

Blameless	Righteous
Marital stability	Not a new convert
Family stability	Holy
Not arrogant	Self-controlled
Not hot-tempered	Able to teach
Not excessive drinker	Gentle
Not a bully	Good reputation
Not greedy	Hospitable
Loving	Not quarrelsome

At Stonegate Fellowship, these biblical qualifications are the very standards by which someone is evaluated for the office of elder. Such a list of qualifications reveals a sobering charge to our elders. Caring for the people of Stonegate Fellowship involves nothing less than caring for the very people for whom Jesus gave His life. As such, the bar for an elder’s character cannot be set to high.

⁵ It may be helpful to observe that when Jesus says, “You are not to be called instructors,” He has in mind the formal school of instruction that was often used as a badge of honor and superiority in the Jewish educational system. Jesus’ command does not forbid the disciples from instructing others, but it does forbid them from doing so in a manner that is self-serving and status-focused.

⁶ Joseph Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family: Recapturing Jesus’ Vision for Authentic Christian Community* (Nashville: B&H Academic, 2009), 190.

⁷ Alexander Strauch, *Biblical Eldership: An Urgent Call to Restore Biblical Church Leadership* (Littleton, C.O.: Lewis & Ross Publishing, 1995), 111.

To ensure this list of qualifications is met, the evaluation and equipping period for Stonegate elder-candidates spans at least 18 months. During this time, candidates are involved in distinct phases of evaluation and training. Toward the end of this process, candidates are formally presented before the congregation during one of our Sunday gatherings in order to invite any relevant information the elder body should be aware of concerning a specific candidate (i.e. issues of character).

Why such a rigorous process? Because the care and oversight of God's people is too important to require anything less. Paul's words to the Ephesian elders serve as both a sobering charge and a humbling reminder of the task given to our elders:

Be on guard for yourselves and for all the flock of which the Holy Spirit has appointed you as overseers, to shepherd the church of God, which he purchased with his own blood. I know that after my departure savage wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock. Men will rise up even from your own number and distort the truth to lure the disciples into following them. Therefore be on the alert, remembering that night and day for three years I never stopped warning each one of you with tears.

— Acts 20:28–31 CSB

At Stonegate Fellowship, our elders take to heart the same charge given to the Ephesian elders by the apostle Paul:

- Guard Yourself
- Guard the Flock,
- Shepherd the Flock,
- Remember: This Flock belongs to Jesus, not you.

While no man is perfect, the elders of Stonegate Fellowship seek to live a life of dependence upon the Spirit, saturated in the Scriptures, and humbled by the grace of God in order to obey these biblical instructions. Even though we—as elders—will never be perfect at this, we believe the care and nurture of God's people requires nothing less than obedience to these passages. In this way, we seek to honor the servant-leadership modeled for us by our great King and Chief Shepherd who gave His life for each of us.⁸

⁸ The elder team and Stonegate Fellowship are also deeply grateful and indebted to Patrick Payton for his pioneering commitment to start this model of leadership from the beginning of this church. As the founding pastor/elder he remained committed through various challenges to see this type of shared leadership model installed into our leadership culture. It was always his conviction that such a leadership model best promoted the protection and care of God's people at Stonegate Fellowship. It was also his belief that such a leadership model would continue to promote the health and nurture of Stonegate Fellowship well beyond his time as the senior-leader. The imbedding of the leadership model outlined in this paper is one way—among many—we are trying to honor his effort and legacy.

Some Practical Considerations

Aside from the biblical imperatives we see in Scripture regarding eldership, we also believe there are some enormous practical benefits to this model of leadership that we want to share with you.

1. *A Safeguard Against Abuse.* Having a plurality of elders is an excellent safeguard against the potential abuses that could occur when the pastoral authority is vested into one person. This is not to say there is no possibility of abuse, but it's much less likely that false teaching, pride, selfish ambition, manipulation, and other evils can spread when there is a healthy system of checks and balances provided by a team of qualified leaders who are seeking to honor Jesus and care for His people.

In this way a plurality-based leadership structure allows for moral and spiritual *accountability* in order to preserve moral and spiritual *authority*. This not only honors the name of Jesus, but it protects the leaders from the sins of their own heart and guards the people of God from unhealthy leadership.

2. *A Safeguard Against "Celebrity-ism".* We live in an age of almost cult-like adoration for certain celebrities. This is nothing new—people have always developed unhealthy infatuations with people they strongly admire (see Acts 14:8–20). But this has no place among the people of God. We worship Jesus and Jesus alone.

When we elevate a human person to the status of celebrity, we've ceased viewing that person as a fellow brother and sister who sins and struggles just like us. Moreover, we can grow attached to this one person and find our security in their presence and teaching. This is unhealthy, because it replaces our focus on Jesus and places it on the senior leader. As Hellerman puts it well:

Plurality leadership provides God's people with a visible reminder that Christ is the head of the church—a truth perhaps more important in our society than ever before in the history of the church... You can spot the Christians who view their pastors as celebrities. For one thing, they ditch church when the senior pastor is out of town. After all, they don't go to their local Christian community to hear from the head of the church, Jesus. They go to church to listen to their celebrity pastor.⁹

When this happens, the life-changing message of Jesus Christ quickly becomes eclipsed by the personality and charisma of the leader.¹⁰ Because of this, we believe a leadership structure with a plurality of elders will elevate Jesus and prevent the creation of a celebrity culture in which a single leader/teacher is elevated to an unhealthy status.

3. *A Balanced Spiritual Diet.* Another benefit to plural eldership is the diversity of teaching emphasis that come from the ministry of multiple individuals.

At Stonegate we have both teaching-elders and non-elder teaching ministers who teach from the stage. These individuals are different in so many ways—personality, gifting, upbringing, temperament, life struggles, etc. Practically, this means the church is able to receive wisdom, encouragement, and application from multiple voices who have a range of experiences with both life and Scripture.

⁹ Hellerman, *When the Church Was a Family*, 192.

¹⁰ This is not to say we shouldn't strive for excellence in our leadership. Rather this excellence must be a *part* of the church's community life, but not the *essence* of it.

4. *Teamwork makes the Dreamwork*. As cliché as this phrase is, there's no denying the practical benefit of Godly men coming together to seek the face of Jesus on behalf of His people. Instead of the full mantle of the church's vision, direction, and teaching being placed on the shoulders of one man, our elders and teaching team genuinely work together to collaborate and share the mantle of leadership.

This is important not only for the planning and vision of the church, but also because it models the relational context in which the people of God flourish. Said differently, church leaders never stop being members of the body who need honest, accountable, loving relationships with other believers. A team-based approach to ministry enables the church to function in its family-like dynamic that God intended. Hellerman is once again helpful on this point:

The beauty of plurality leadership is that it models relational integrity and teamwork at the top level of church life...In our day of dysfunctional families and increasing relationship chaos, the local church needs more than a solitary preacher who talks eloquently about getting along with others but who answers to no one in his everyday ministry. A church needs a team of pastors who model people skills in their relationships with one another. Plurality leadership provides the context for just such modeling.¹¹

Seen in this light, a team-based approach to church leadership guards against unhealthy consequences of isolation. Further, it promotes unity and collaboration among the leadership as they collectively partner together to shepherd Jesus' people. Finally, it guards the leaders from the burnout that often comes from trying to lead the church in their own strength. At the same time a team-based approach models the healthy interconnectedness of relationships that should characterize all of God's people (Romans 12:3–8; 1 Corinthians 12:12–21).

Conclusion

We hope this paper has given you a clear picture for why our leadership structure at Stonegate Fellowship is set up as a plurality of elders. We further hope this paper has enriched your understanding of how church leadership is laid out in the Scriptures. In the end, we believe these instructions reveal God's heart for His people and it is our desire to lead in a manner that is consistent with what He has revealed.

¹¹ Hellerman, *When the Church was a Family*, 196.