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Kelly Carter

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# Coping with the AMBIGUITIES of Leadership

By Kelly Carter

In 1982, when I was newly into ministry, a brother from the church asked me in typical biblical-precedent-seeking fashion how I “biblically defined my role.” He wanted more than a title; he wanted me to describe my relationship to the remainder of the church, including its leadership. Perhaps he was wanting me to justify my role. Not knowing exactly what to say, I stammered out the suggestion that I was an “evangelist,” specializing in the evangelization of teenagers. He was quite dissatisfied with this answer (as was I), but since he seemed to have no better suggestions, the conversation died.

Numerous times since then I have personally carried on with this conversation, but seldom have I sought input from anywhere except my own experiences. A forum such as this offers me opportunity to raise questions which have nagged at me for awhile. This is not just because I keep seeking cohesion and completeness in what I believe, but because I face questions such as these several times a week while carrying out full-time ministry in the church. My guess is you will be able to identify.

For instance, I wrestle with the variety of ways in which my role is perceived. Because I stand in front of the congregation each Sunday and share a message purported to have God’s authority behind it, as well as the Spirit’s presence; because I am looked at by others in our church as having biblical knowledge and at least some

spiritual wisdom; because I have a formal theological education; because I counsel, do visitation, perform weddings and funerals; because I play a significant role in shaping the church’s direction and theology; because I intentionally mentor new Christians; and because I carry out numerous other functions usually reserved for pastors and priests, a high percentage of our church treats me as if the position I fill possesses an inherent authority, which places me in a of leadership role. Newer members frequently call me “Pastor,” and even “Father” has been applied from time to time.

At the same time, I have experienced over the years what seems to be an intentional effort on the part of many members to deny me certain prerogatives. They do not want the preacher to think of himself, or for anyone else to think of him, as a significant leader in the church. Such individuals clearly do not want the preachers of their churches to have, for example, decision making responsibilities, and they allow him little input, particularly when it comes to doctrinal matters. In fact I find it interesting that for some individuals the person least qualified to give advice on biblical interpretation, or the one whose opinion is most suspect, is the preacher. These individuals seem quite paranoid regarding the “power of the pulpit,” and so they attempt to limit whatever influence the preacher may have on the church’s decisions.



Then there is, of course, the relationship between preacher and elders. I have been treated at times as if I were part of the eldership (as part of a team of leaders) and sometimes as if I was their nemesis. Sometimes I have felt as though I were leading (or pushing!) our shepherds, while they willingly listened to advice, exegetical suggestions or doctrinal interpretations. Then, suddenly, a comment or a decision intentionally made without my input lets me know that I am not “running the church” (as if this, after all, is my goal).

Aside from experiencing what I have described in the preceding paragraphs, it is nonetheless true that as a preacher I play a significant role in church leadership. This is simply a fact, notwithstanding those who wish to deny the validity of whatever leading I might do. However, this places me in a difficult position. We all know how informal this kind of leadership and authority is and must be. The Restoration Movement’s reaction to clericalized church leadership was from the beginning condemning and negative. Our interpretation of church order stigmatized the clericalized role of the preacher/teacher as “pop-ish” in character. To be a leading or teaching pastor was part and parcel with creeds, hierarchies, denominational structures and titles of reverence. All of this ran counter to the egalitarian ethos of the New Republic and against the independence and self-sufficiency of the North American frontier. Democracy from the beginning shaped our thinking in the area of church polity, so little room was left for elitist church structures. If genuine Christian unity was to be achieved, it would result from the common mind and common individual creating a new church society, just as America represented a new era of republican democracy.

We reached our conclusions on congregational polity by viewing the New Testament as a kind of authorizing blueprint pattern (early Presbyterians did the same, but reached Calvin’s conclusions). What we found was pastoral leadership. However, pastor was redefined vis à vis typical Protestantism and Catholicism so as not to include (and to actually do away with) positions officially ordained to the work of preaching/teaching/evangelizing. The farmers, shopkeepers, teachers, blacksmiths, loggers and miners in early restoration churches were of no mindset to appreciate the special status of the clergy as bestowed by an institutional council, and they easily pointed to the lack of biblical precedent for the kinds of denominational pol-

ity and ordination which first lived in Catholicism and took shape in Protestantism.

Unfortunately, there has always existed a certain tension within Churches of Christ when the exegetical results of our patternism have been applied to practical

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church situations. For instance, what does the church do when one who is qualified to act as elder in a congregation and who is clearly leading with inherent authority, is in fact part of the full-time staff? Or, if the inherent power of the preacher’s influence is evident to all, should the church legitimize that power, possibly creating imbalance within the leadership? How should the church respond to eminently qualified young men, especially if their leadership abilities include knowledge, teaching skills and humility, perhaps to a greater degree than those “over them in the Lord” (it should be clear my reflections now are hypothetical and not autobiographical!)? Is it not the case that in some churches the person most qualified to participate in decision making is the last one consulted? As preachers we sometimes feel the pain of knowing that our decisions to serve the Lord in full-time ministry actually hinder our opportunities to contribute in some official way to church policy making. We end up expressing numerous opinions and advice, without the opportunity to actually be a decision maker. For many this is viewed, no doubt, as a blessing. “Let someone else shoulder the responsibility,” we might say. But, if God has called us to serve his church, does it not make sense that we should be willing and ready to share in both the highs and lows of church decision making?

For me, practical frustrations are augmented by the questions I have about the exegetical results reached by restorationists concerning the “pastor” passages and the role of evangelists. Isn’t “pastor-teacher” a better way of viewing the fourth role enumerated in Ephesians 4:11?



What does this say about those chosen to serve as shepherds? Who, accordingly, should fulfill this role? How was Paul thinking of the elders in 1 Timothy 5:17? Timothy (II Timothy 4:5) was to carry out the work of an evangelist (as per Ephesians 4:11?), but what kind of authority did he possess within the Ephesian church? How did he lead? How was he, and how were those who carried out his role in other places and generations, supposed to relate to shepherds? Is this a role which passed away with the apostles (this was Calvin's conclusion)? If we now classify our preachers as evangelists, as many of us do, do we only carry out the preaching/teaching role of the office or should the authority given to a Timothy somehow apply to our roles today? Also relevant here is the discussion of spiritual giftedness. At what point does giftedness take precedence over how many children one has or over age? If a preacher at a young age shows giftedness in leadership, wisdom, teaching and counseling, how can this God-giftedness be applied in the church?

**A**lthough I have not reached systematic or comprehensive and final conclusions on the leading roles of those serving as preachers/evangelists, I am presently looking for biblical and practical conclusions superior to those I often see worked out in contemporary Churches of Christ. As these are reached, it is important to reflect on some additional questions besides the practical and exegetical issues raised above. For instance, to be true to scripture, it is my opinion that we must begin to admit the genuine diversity which is present within the New Testament when it comes to church polity. It is difficult to reconcile consistently all the biblical passages pertaining to leadership roles within the church. The leadership structures in Ephesus and Jerusalem, for example, were not identical. If this is the case, church polity should perhaps be decided more on a congregation by congregation basis rather than our common practice of having all conform to an identical pattern.

Further, when do the changes in a society legitimately begin to call for models of ministry different from those we have typically chosen? Will there come a time, for instance, when specially trained elders will be needed to sort out for the church the intense and complicated intellectual challenges to faith which Christians face daily? Perhaps those whose training and experience are in the business world are not equipped to address the myriad of issues their congregations face. Who, then, will be expected to lead or who will in fact be leading? My point is that if our traditional manner of working out church polity stems from sociological and historical factors, as well as from biblical teaching, we must be willing to admit it. If we admit this, perhaps we can allow contemporary needs to influence and shape church polity within the circumscription of the entire scriptural witness to God's choosing of leaders among his people, rather than specific scriptural propositions.

Finally, given the fact that our preachers do lead in our churches (although in most churches, not exclusively or officially), it seems prudent to alter our perceptions of the preacher/evangelist role. To ignore the preacher's leadership role or to denigrate it, even while he does in some sense lead, can only hinder his effectiveness in leading and, therefore, can only hurt the church. Perhaps it is appropriate for churches to positively and constructively reconsider their framing of the preacher's role vis à vis scripture, our traditional leadership decisions and the specified roles of other leaders in Churches of Christ. This, when done with societal factors in mind, should positively affect the leadership our preachers offer to the churches they serve.

**Kelly Carter** is preaching minister for the Church of Christ in Victoria, British Columbia. This article was an oral presentation at the Northwest Expositor's Seminar, Portland, Oregon, August, 1995.