

LEADERSHIP IN THE CHURCH DURING ITS FIRST CENTURY

**Just as important as it is today,
church leadership was a vital issue in the
early Christian Church.**

Formal leadership roles in the early church can be broadly categorized into three types, two of which disappeared in the subapostolic period. Because the dynamics that influenced this development are still in effect, what happened in the first century of the history of Christianity can be instructive for the church in our own time.

Though the threefold categorization of ministry types is useful, it must be conceded at the outset that the distinctions are not always

sharp, that the same person could represent more than one type of ministry and thus come under more than one category. It should also be noted that development was not uniform and proceeded at different

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rates in different localities.

The three types, listed in order of appearance, can be characterized as (1) charismatic, (2) familial, and (3) appointive. The term *charismatic* does not represent the modern connotation, but in the original sense based on Romans 12 and 1 Corinthians 12. The main distinction among the three types focuses on the mode of reception and basis of authority. Charismatic leaders received a direct divine call. Familial leaders were blood relatives of Jesus. Appointive leaders were elected in some fashion by the church.

Charismatic Ministry

The first type of ministry can be called charismatic because it was marked by the bestowal of a spiritual gift and is listed among the *charismata* (Rom. 12:3-8; 1 Cor. 12:4-11, 28; Eph. 4:11-13; 1 Peter 4:10, 11). For the purposes of this article, the most important feature of this type of ministry is that a person was called to it directly by Christ or His Spirit. It was

not an office to which one was elected or humanly appointed. It was a function to which a person was divinely called. The church could extend its recognition of that calling, but the reception of the calling did not depend upon such recognition and normally preceded it.

In the beginning, Jesus chose, called, and appointed 12 men to be with Him, and to be sent out to preach and have authority to cast out demons (Mark 3:14, 15). The parallel in Matthew 10:1 calls the Twelve “disciples.”¹ Luke 6:13 adds that Jesus named them *apostles*. The term *disciples* reflects Mark’s remark that they were to be with Him, while *apostles* was an appropriate title for those who were to be sent out. Luke is apparently using the term technically as a title, for Jesus is said to have named them thus. Both Matthew and Luke, immediately after their report of the calling of the Twelve, describe their being sent out on a missionary journey. Mark reports this mission in his sixth chapter and there

uses the title *apostle* in verse 30.

Apostles represent the one who sends them and come with the authority of the sender to the extent that they faithfully fulfill the mission that is committed to them. In John 13:16 Jesus says: “Most assuredly, I say to you, a servant is not greater than his master; nor is he who is sent greater than he who sent him.” The Twelve were sent out by Jesus as His representatives with the assurance, “He who receives you receives Me, and he who receives Me receives Him who sent Me” (Matt. 10:40).

The 12 chosen by Jesus were the apostles *par excellence*. The number 12 was significant, corresponding to the 12 patriarchs and 12 tribes of Israel (Matt. 19:28; Rev. 21:12-14). They were clearly not Jesus’ only disciples, but they occupied a special place in the scheme of things.

So important was the number 12 in the thinking of the infant church that they felt it necessary to fill the vacancy left among the 12 apostles by the defection of Judas Iscariot (Acts 1:15-26). “The Twelve” was so firmly established as a synonym for the original group of apostles that Paul referred to them thus even when they had become only 11 (1 Cor. 15:5)! Furthermore, it was important that the office not be seen as bestowed by human choice or appointment, so the vacancy was filled by casting lots after prayer (Acts 1:23-26). The words of the prayer are significant: “Show

which of these two You have chosen” (vs. 24). But Peter, who chaired the meeting at which this occurred, did lay down special qualifications that must be met even to be considered as a candidate: an apostle must have been an eyewitness to the resurrection of Jesus (vss. 21, 22; cf. 2:32). This meant only being an eyewitness to the risen Lord, able to give personal testimony to seeing Jesus alive after He died, since none of the Twelve had actually seen the resurrection event itself occur.

The lot fell on Matthias, about whom we read nothing more in the New Testament. But that is true of most of the Twelve.

It is understandable, then, that the earliest Christians in Palestine, all Jews for whom the Twelve were especially significant, were unwilling to concede that anyone other than the Twelve could be a legitimate apostle. But this limitation was shattered by the divine calling of Paul to the apostolate in a development that was vehemently resisted by many. Paul needed constantly to defend his apostleship. In 1 Corinthians 9:1, 2 he did so by insisting on his qualifications: he was an eyewitness to the risen Lord (a claim supported in 15:8 and by Acts 9:3-5; 22:6-11) and had done the work of an apostle. In Galatians 1:11-19 he argued that by revelation he received his commission directly from the Lord, not from any human authority or body,

so that his apostleship was in no way inferior to that of the Twelve.

With Paul as the point man, as it were, for expanding the apostolate, the number soon increased. Both Paul and Barnabas are called apostles in Acts 14:4, 14. The list that can be compiled from the New Testament also includes at least Apollos (1 Cor. 4:6, 9), Silvanus and Timothy (1 Thess. 1:1), Titus (2 Cor. 8:23), and Epaphroditus (Phil. 2:25). It must also include Andronicus and a woman, Junia (Rom. 16:7). In three of Paul's letters we find lists of spiritual gifts, and in three of these lists we find apostles, in each case heading the list (1 Cor. 12:28; 12:29, 30; Eph. 4:11). By placing apostleship among the *charismata*, Paul completes its democratization, making it available to anyone to whom the Holy Spirit should choose to distribute it.

Another gift associated with leadership is prophecy. Ephesians 2:20 declares that the church is built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, Christ Jesus Himself being the cornerstone. The sequence "apostles and prophets," rather than "prophets and apostles," suggests reference to the New Testament prophets, not those of the Old Testament.

While apostleship occurs in only three of Paul's lists, prophecy appears in all of them. In Peter's Pentecost sermon, he begins by quoting Joel's prediction that in the last days your sons and your daughters will

prophesy, and God will pour out His Spirit on His menservants and maidservants (Acts 2:17, 18). The Book of Acts is witness to the presence of prophets in the early church—often several in one congregation. Thus, in the church at Antioch, five prophets and teachers (13:1, 2) are named. They included Barnabas and Saul (Paul), who are elsewhere known as apostles. This shows that the reception of one gift did not preclude others, and indeed apostles at times had visions and delivered inspired speech. Philip the evangelist had four unmarried daughters who prophesied (21:9), and in the next verse we read of Agabus, also mentioned in 11:28, whose prophesying was of a near-term predictive nature.

The Corinthian church also included multiple prophets, including women, who were instructed to do their public prophesying with their heads covered (1 Cor. 11:3-10). Paul told the Corinthian Christians to desire especially the gift of prophecy (14:1), and apparently several members had it, for they are admonished to speak one at a time: "Let two or three prophets speak, and let the others judge. But if anything is revealed to another who sits by, let the first keep silent. For you can all prophesy one by one, that all may learn and all may be encouraged. And the spirits of the prophets are subject to the prophets. For God is not the author of

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First Peter 4:10, 11 also suggests that the prophetic gift was common and expected. Such was not the case later.

Familial Leadership

The brothers of Jesus did not believe in Him during His earthly ministry (Mark 3:31-35; John 7:5). Something apparently happened, however, to bring them to belief, and this was probably the special post-resurrection appearance of Jesus to His brother James (1 Cor. 15:7).

As a result, at least James and perhaps other brothers not only came to

be counted among the early believers, but also became leaders in the church. Two New Testament epistles (James and Jude) are traditionally ascribed to them. James became the leader of the Jerusalem church when Peter fled (Acts 12:12-17), and thereafter he was the respected leader of Jewish Christianity.

When Paul visited the church leaders in Jerusalem after his conversion, he conferred only with Peter and James the Lord's brother, whom he seemed to count among the apostles (Gal. 1:18, 19). This James presided at the council that deliberated about what to require of Gentile converts to the gospel (Acts 15). In a later fateful visit to Jerusalem, Paul called upon James, who counseled him to make a gesture to placate the Jewish Christians (Acts 21:17-24). The incident portrays James as a mediator between Jewish and Gentile Christianity, forestalling a schism that later did take place.

Jewish Christianity, as was natural, continued to regard the blood

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relatives of Jesus with respect as leaders. Hegesippus (the second-century Jewish Christian historian), cited by Eusebius, supplies the names of some. James was succeeded by his cousin Simon (Simeon) bar Clopas, under whose leadership the Christians of Jerusalem fled to Pella during the Jewish war. He was chosen by the surviving relatives of Jesus.² He was crucified in A.D. 107. The relatives of Jesus were known as the *desposynoi*,³ which can perhaps be translated the “Master’s people.” The last in this line, counted by Eusebius as the last Jewish bishop of Jerusalem, was Judas surnamed Kuriakos, probably martyred in the time of the Bar Cochba rebellion.

We hear no more about the *desposynoi* after A.D. 135. If any survived, they would have been associated with the increasingly isolated Ebionites.

Appointive Leaders

Acts 6 reports that administrative questions threatened to distract the

Twelve from their ministry of preaching and teaching (vss. 1, 2). The Hellenistic Jewish Christians were complaining that their widows were not receiving what they should in the daily distribution of supplies to the needy. The apostles directed that the believers select seven men, of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, to perform this work (vs. 3). This was done, and judging from the Hellenistic names of the seven, they were chosen from among those who had complained; indeed, one was a proselyte (a Gentile who had become a Jew). They brought the Seven before the apostles, and having prayed they laid their hands upon them. This was the beginning of the appointive ministry, leaders selected by the people and given authority by the laying on of hands.

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First it should be noted that the laying on of hands did not bestow a spiritual gift; the Seven were already full of the Spirit, and that was one of the reasons that they were chosen (Acts 6:3). But the recognition of the gift by the community by the laying on of hands, as in the cases of Paul and Barnabas and of Timothy (Acts 13:2, 3; 1 Tim. 1:18; 4:14), was continued. Second, they were chosen by their peers, apparently elected in some fashion. Third, their office was created for pragmatic reasons, to fill a need (Acts 6:3). Fourth, they received the laying on of hands—whether from the apostles or the whole community—and this ceremony gave them some authority that they lacked before.

“The people set apart in this way are explicitly depicted as Spirit-filled leaders, who have already had a significant ministry. The laying on of hands by those assembled therefore does not signify the bestowal of a ministry, or of the Spirit, but rather that from now on their ministry is no longer an individual one: they are from this point on representatives of their community. What they do, they do not undertake in their own name, but in the name of the community that has set them apart as its representatives.”⁴

What was the office assigned to

the seven men of Acts? The office is not named. It has been traditionally assumed that they were deacons, perhaps because the words *diakonia* and *diakonein* are used in 6:1, 2. But the use of this word and its cognates is hardly decisive, for in 6:4 and 1:25 the same word is used for the ministry of the apostles. It is necessary to lay aside conceptions and distinctions that developed later. The words *diakonein*, *diakonia*, and *diakonos* mean, respectively, “to serve,” “service,” and “servant”; or “to minister,” “ministry,” and “minister.” But the fact is that the word *diakonos* (“deacon”) is never used in the Book of Acts. On the other hand, *presbyteros*, meaning “elder,” is frequent and used as a title for a church officer.

The first occurrence of *presbyteros* with the latter meaning is in Acts 11:30, where we are told that the famine relief for the Judean believers that Barnabas and Paul brought was delivered over to the elders. In other words, the kind of work for which the Seven were appointed in Acts 6 is said to be done by the elders in 11:30. Furthermore, the way elders were appointed in the churches as reported in 14:23 resembles the way the Seven were chosen. The word used in this verse is *cheirotoneo*, which literally means to raise one’s hand in voting. Finally, in Acts 15 we hear of only two offices in Jerusalem, those of apostle and elder. We must conclude that the

church at this early stage knew of only one appointive ministry, which Luke designated *elder*.

But what of the traditional designation of the Seven as deacons? It must be recognized that to begin with there was only one appointive ministry. The Book of Acts records no other. Since there was only one, the officer could be called either *diakonos* (suggested by *diakonein* in 6:2), a word describing function, or *presbyteros*, a word describing dignity. Only later did this one appointive ministry bifurcate into two levels or ranks, and the two terms came to be used to designate the two levels of ministry. A similar branching into two ranks took place still later, making a distinction between bishop and elder, terms that earlier had been interchangeable. The final result, in the time of Ignatius, was a three-tiered ministry of bishops, elders, and deacons. When the appointive ministry was first begun, when it was only one without any ranks in it, the office could probably be best described in a hyphenated term, elder-deacon.

The first indication of a distinction between elder and deacon is in the salutation of Philippians 1:1, mentioning bishops and deacons. This is now a two-tiered ministry, indicating that bishop was still synonymous with elder. That *elder* and *bishop* were synonymous terms can be demonstrated from several New Testament passages. In Acts 20, the

same people are called elders (*presbyteroi*) in verse 17 and overseers (*episkopoi*) in verse 28. In Titus 1:5-7, Paul speaks of appointing elders and then lists the qualifications of bishops (compare 1 Timothy 3:1; 4:14; 5:17, 19). The distinction between deacon and elder/bishop is hardened in the pastoral epistles, especially in 1 Timothy 3:1-13.

As in many young religious movements, the shape of the leadership was fluid and evolving. It should not be surprising to see local variations, as well as change over time. Though Paul is able to address a church in Philippi that has a twofold formal leadership, at Corinth it is another matter. There is no mention of any officers. No elder presides at the Lord's Supper (1 Cor. 11:21), and no treasurer receives the contribution for the saints (16:2). Apparently Paul finds no one there trustworthy to lead. Rather Paul himself is their pastor, by remote control. He sends representatives to check up on them, and he sends letters to guide them.

For better or for worse, further development occurred. Soon after New Testament times, the office of elder/bishop bifurcates into elder and bishop, just as elder/deacon had bifurcated earlier. Ignatius of Antioch, writing about A.D. 108, promoted the threefold ministry of deacon, elder, and bishop with such vehemence that implies it was a relatively recent innovation.

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The twofold ministry was still the pattern when Clement of Rome wrote to the church of Corinth about A.D. 95, as it was for the communities represented by the early church manual called the *Didache*, which in its present form would date about A.D. 135. But hardly had another generation passed before the threefold hierarchical ministry with the supremacy of the bishop prevailed and became the norm. Not only that, but the other types of leadership had disappeared or were disappearing, at least in the mainstream church that became catholic orthodoxy. The *desposynoi* apparently had simply become extinct. The apostles and prophets had been replaced by the bishops, the gifts of the Spirit by elected officers.

The Disappearance of Apostles and Prophets

In 1936, A. G. Daniells, former president of the General Conference of Seventh-day Adventists and colleague of Ellen White, published a

book in which he sought to show that "The gift of prophecy was to abide with the church from Adam to the second advent of our Lord . . . It did not cease with the apostles, but is traceable through the centuries to the last days of human history, just before the return of our Lord."³ We must look for the gift, however, in minority, dissident, remnant movements. The book's burden was to recount, through Scripture and history, instances to prove this, including such examples as the Montanist movement in the second century and the Camisards among the Huguenots, and culminating with the ministry of Ellen White, whom Daniells had known personally. One senses that Daniells would have been deeply distressed had he foreseen that Adventist history would continue more than 90 years without an acknowledged living prophet. But it is a situation with ample precedent.

Pharisaic Judaism and its successor, Rabbinic Judaism, believed that the prophetic gift had died out after

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Zechariah, Haggai, and Malachi, and hence closed the canon. Already Psalm 74:9 laments, "There is no longer any prophet; Nor is there any among us who knows how long."

First Maccabees 9:27 says, "Thus there was great distress in all Israel, such as had not been since the time that the prophets ceased to appear among them" (cf. 4:46; 14:41). The apocryphal Prayer of Azariah declares, "At this time there is no prince, or prophet, or leader" (verse 15). The Rabbis declared, "When Haggai, Zechariah, and Malachi, the last of the prophets died, the Holy Spirit disappeared from Israel."⁶

What this meant to the rabbis was that the prophets are replaced by the scribes, and instead of new revelation, there is exegesis of old revelation. There is no more torah left in heaven to be revealed, for it is all given into the hands of the sages to interpret and apply it.

Indeed, they may have seen this development as a fulfillment of the prophecy in Zechariah 13:2-6: "I

will . . . cause the prophets and the unclean spirit to depart from the land. It shall come to pass that if anyone still prophesies, then his father and mother who begot him will say to him, "You shall not live, because you have spoken lies in the name of the Lord." And his father and mother who begot him shall thrust him through when he prophesies. And it shall be in that day that every prophet will be ashamed of his vision when he prophesies; they will not wear a robe of coarse hair to deceive. But he will say, "I am no prophet, I am a farmer; for a man taught me to keep cattle from my youth." And one will say to him, "What are these wounds between your arms?" Then he will answer, "Those with which I was wounded in the house of my friends.""⁷

These words reveal the reason for the disappearance of prophecy in Israel: False prophets had brought the claim of having the prophetic gift into disrepute. This belief was not universal, for among common peo-

ple there remained a lively willingness to accept prophetic manifestations. It was well enough established to influence attitudes toward John the Baptist and Jesus. The need of leaders was to maintain control. There was ever a danger that that popular enthusiasm for a charismatic leader might get out of control.

This feeling also explains the phenomenon of pseudepigrapha, especially popular in the Qumran community. Since new prophets were out of the question, the composition of prophetic writings, whether true or false, had to be done in the name of dead prophets.

As the shift comes from Judaism to Christianity, already in the Apocalypse, itself written by a prophet, there is a concern about the false: The church in Ephesus is commended because they have tested those who call themselves apostles but are not, and found them to be false (Rev. 2:2).

Jesus' warning in the Olivet discourse against false christs and false prophets (Mark 13:22) probably has primary reference to a phenomenon in Judaism preceding the catastrophe of A.D. 70, well reported by Josephus, but Christians would have had no difficulty in reapplying it to Christian claimants.

In the little church manual known as the *Didache*, a major concern is false apostles and prophets—the two are lumped together. Chapter 11 lists

some six tests to apply to them, for example: "When an Apostle goes forth let him accept nothing but bread till he reach his night's lodging; but if he ask for money, he is a false prophet" (vs. 6). Clearly, the worry is about false apostles/prophets, who were bringing the gift of prophecy into disrepute by exploiting the name of Christ (12:5).

True prophets, however, were still to be welcomed (13:1). There is in 15:1, 2 an intimation of another reason for uneasiness about prophets: "Appoint therefore for yourselves bishops and deacons worthy of the Lord, meek men, and not lovers of money, and truthful and approved, for they also minister to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers. Therefore do not despise them, for they are your honorable men together with the prophets and teachers." Why would the bishops and deacons be despised? Because the charismatic prophets and teachers were more exciting and constituted an uncontrollable locus of power in the church.

One reason that the bishops were able to take over from the apostles and prophets was that some of them claimed divine inspiration. Thus Clement of Rome (in the name of the Roman congregation) wrote: "You will give us joy and gladness, if you are obedient to the things which we have written through the Holy Spirit" (1 Clement 63:2).

Ignatius wrote: “Even if some desired to deceive me after the flesh, the spirit is not deceived, for it is from God. For it knoweth whence it comes and whither it goes and tests secret things. I cried out while I was with you, I spoke with a great voice,—with God’s own voice,—Give heed to the bishop, and to the presbytery and deacons. But some suspected me of saying this because I had previous knowledge of the division of some persons: but He in whom I am bound is my witness that I had no knowledge of this from any human being, but the Spirit was preaching, and saying this, ‘Do nothing without the bishop, keep your flesh as the temple of God, love unity, flee from divisions, be imitators of Jesus Christ, as was He also of his Father.’”⁷

Thus the transition from apostles/prophets to bishops could be a relatively smooth one. As the *Didache* said, “They also minister to you the ministry of the prophets and teachers.”

So the prophetic gift faded out because it fell into disrepute. It happened in Israel and in the early church. But about the year A.D. 156 there was an attempt to revive it by a man named Montanus, who also reinvigorated the expectation of the imminent second coming of Christ. Associated with him were also two prophetesses, Prisca and Maximilla. Eventually the new prophecy failed. Perhaps it deserved to, but the only sources of knowledge about it may be

biased, being from those who opposed it.

Prophets constitute a power center that is independent from and potentially a rival to officially constituted authority. A prophet is not elected by anyone or accountable to anyone except God. Prophets may rebuke a king, an apostle, a bishop, or a General Conference president. They provide a check and balance to all these and even to officially chosen councils. They are by definition inconvenient persons, and we try to get them out of the way by whatever method is available and appropriate: kill them, reject them, ignore them, marginalize them, co-opt them, or dispatch them to Australia.

So, repeatedly in history, prophets have been suppressed and replaced by scholars and administrators. The writings of dead prophets can be dealt with and domesticated—they hold no more surprises. But a living prophet is a loose cannon that cannot be controlled. Jesus said: “Woe to you! For you build the tombs of the prophets, and your fathers killed them. In fact, you bear witness that you approve the deeds of your fathers; for they indeed killed them, and you build their tombs” (Luke 11:47, 48). We honor dead prophets but fear live ones. There have always been well-meaning leaders who want to restrict the exercise of the gift, such as Joshua, to whom Moses said, “Oh, that all the Lord’s people were proph-

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ets and that the Lord would put His Spirit upon them!” (Num. 11:29). All this is probably inevitable and to be expected, but nonetheless to be lamented.

Adventism has classically listed the gift of prophecy as one of the marks of the remnant church. (The doctrine that the time of spiritual gifts has ended is called cessationism, and it was vigorously opposed by classical Adventism.) But we have not had an acknowledged living prophet for more than 90 years, and we suffer because of it. We search Ellen White’s writings, published and unpublished, and even the Adventist *hadith*, for answers to many pressing questions of our time, but we search in vain. Either the answers are not to be found, or they are equivocal. We have issues that were unknown and, as far as we can tell, unforeseen in her time. The mere possession of inspired writings is not a distinguishing mark, for any denomination that has the Bible can claim that it has such a mark. So

there is no substitute for a living prophetic voice or voices.

We are faced, then, with a serious dilemma. On the one hand, false prophets are a very great danger. On the other hand, having no prophet is an equally great danger. (It is like driving down the highway with one’s eyes blindfolded.) Can we flee from one danger without falling into the arms of the other? □

REFERENCES

¹ All Scripture references in this article are quoted from the New King James Version of the Bible.

² Eusebius, *Ecclesiastical History* 3.11.1.

³ *Ibid.*, 3.20.6.

⁴ Kevin Giles, *What on Earth Is the Church? An Exploration in New Testament Theology* (Downers Grove, Ill.: InterVarsity, 1995), p. 95.

⁵ Arthur Grosvenor Daniells, *The Abiding Gift of Prophecy* (Mountain View, Calif.: Pacific Press Publ. Assn., 1936), p. 6.

⁶ Tosefta, *Sotah* 13:2. For all these references I am indebted to Werner Foerster, *From the Exile to Christ: A Historical Introduction to Palestinian Judaism* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1964), p. 4.

⁷ Ignatius, *Philadelphians* 7.1, 2.