

A COUNCIL OF EQUALS

Note: This is from Biblical Eldership, by Alexander Strauch.

By definition, the elder structure of government is a collective form of leadership in which each elder shares equally the position, authority, and responsibility of the office. There are different names for this type of leadership structure. More formally it is called collective, corporate, or collegiate leadership. In contemporary terms it is referred to as multiple church leadership, plurality, shared leadership, or team leadership.

The Benefits of a Council of Equals

Balancing people's weaknesses

Collective leadership can provide a church leader with critically needed recognition of and balance for his faults and deficiencies. In a team leadership structure different members complement one another and balance one another's weaknesses.

Lightening the work load

Shared pastoral leadership also helps to lighten a very heavy workload. If the long hours, weighty responsibilities, and problems of shepherding a congregation of people are not enough to overwhelm a person, then dealing with people's sins and listening to seemingly endless complaints and bitter conflicts can crush a person.

Providing accountability

The collective leadership of a biblical eldership provides a formal structure for genuine accountability. Only when there is genuine accountability between equals in leadership is there any hope for breaking down the horrible abuse of pastoral authority that plagues many churches. Human leaders, even Christian ones, are sinners and they only accomplish God's will imperfectly. Multiple leaders, therefore, will serve as a 'check and balance' on each other and serve as a safeguard against the very human tendency to play God over other people. Shared leadership provides close accountability, genuine partnership, and peer relationships. Shared leadership also provides the local church shepherd with accountability for his work. Church leaders (like all of us) can be lazy, forgetful, fearful, or too busy to fulfill their responsibilities. Thus they need colleagues in ministry to whom they are answerable for their work.

FIRST AMONG A COUNCIL OF EQUALS: LEADERS AMONG LEADERS

An extremely important but terribly misunderstood aspect of biblical eldership is the principle of "first among equals." Failure to understand the concept of "first among equals" (I Tim. 5:17) has caused some elderships to be tragically ineffective in their pastoral care and leadership.

Although elders act jointly as a council and share equal authority and responsibility for the leadership of the church, all are not equal in their giftedness, biblical knowledge, leadership ability, experience, or dedication. Therefore, those among the elders who are particularly gifted leaders and/or teachers will naturally stand out among the other elders as leaders and teachers within the leadership body.

The principle of "first among equals" is observed first in our Lord's dealings with the twelve apostles. Jesus chose twelve apostles, all of whom He empowered to preach and heal, but He singled out three for special attention—Peter, James, and John ("first ones among equals").

Among the three, as well as among the Twelve, Peter stood out as the most prominent (“first among equals”).

Among the three, as well as the Twelve, Peter is unquestionably first among his equals. In all four lists of the apostles’ names, Peter’s name is first (Matt. 10:2-4; Mark 3:16-19; Luke 6:14-16; Acts 1:13). Matthew actually refers to Peter as “the first” (Matt. 10:2). By calling Peter “the first,” Matthew means “first among his equals.”

Jesus charged Peter to “strengthen your brothers” (Luke 22:32). Jesus acknowledged Peter as first among his brothers, the natural leader and motivator. He knew that they would need Peter’s leadership to help them through the dark days immediately following their Lord’s departure.

As the natural leader, the chief speaker, the man of action, Peter challenged, energized, strengthened, and ignited the group. Without Peter, the group would have been less effective. When surrounded by eleven other apostles who were his equals, Peter became stronger, more balanced, and was protected from his impetuous nature and his fears. In spite of his outstanding leadership and speaking ability, *Peter possessed no legal or official rank or title above the other eleven. They were not his subordinates. They were not his staff or team of assistants. He wasn’t the apostles’ “senior pastor”.* Peter was simply first among his equals, and that by our Lord’s own approval.

The concept of “first among equals” is further evidenced by the relationship of Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey. Paul and Barnabas were both apostles (Acts 13:1-3; 14:4; 15:36-39; 1 Cor. 9:1-6), yet Paul was first between the two because he was “the chief speaker” and dynamic leader (Acts 13:13; 14:12). Although Paul was plainly the more gifted of the two apostles, he held no formal ranking over Barnabas; they labored as partners in the work of the gospel.

The “first among equals” concept is evidenced by the way in which congregations are to honor their elders. Paul wrote specific instructions concerning elders to the church in Ephesus: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who work hard at preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle the ox while he is threshing,’ and ‘The laborer is worthy of his wages’” (1 Tim. 5:17, 18). All elders must be able to teach the Word, but not all desire to work fully at preaching and teaching. Those who are gifted in teaching and spend the time to do so should be properly acknowledged by the local church. They should receive double honor.

This doesn’t mean, however, that elders who are first among their equals do all the thinking and decision-making for the group or that they are the pastors while the others are merely elders.

The advantage of the principle of “first among equals” is that *it allows for functional, gift-based diversity within the eldership team without creating an official, superior office over fellow elders.* Just as the leading apostles, such as Peter and John, bore no special title or formal distinctions from the other apostles, elders who receive double honor form no official class or receive no special title. The differences among the elders are functional, not formal.

The principle of “first among equals” allows within the elders’ council a highly gifted leader(s) and/or teacher(s) to use his God-given gift to its full potential.

“First among equals” provides desperately needed protection from the all-too-common pitfalls of egoism, greed, personality imbalance, and unholy ambition to which highly gifted leaders and teachers may succumb. An exceptionally gifted leader or teacher can lead and teach with all his zeal and might, as the scripture commands a leader and teacher to do (Rom. 12:7, 8), and yet be held accountable to fellow leaders and teachers. The Christian leader or teacher who

refuses brotherly accountability is self-deceived and is headed for self-destruction. The Christian leader who really knows his Bible and has an honest view of his sinfulness and weaknesses understands his undeniable need for the checks and balances provided by fellow colleagues.