

OBJECTIONS AND RESPONSES ABOUT MODERN IDEAS OF LEADERSHIP

by [Frank Viola](#) (excerpted from the book, [Reimagining Church](#))

To be honest is to confront the truth. However unpleasant and inconvenient the truth may be, I believe we must expose and face it. - Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

I am not here attacking Christianity, but only the institutional mantle that cloaks it. - Pierre Berton

For centuries, certain texts in the New Testament have been mishandled to support hierarchical/positional leadership structures in the church. This mishandling has caused no small damage to the body of Christ.

The notion of hierarchical/positional authority is partly the result of mistranslations and misinterpretations of certain biblical passages. These mistranslations and misinterpretations have been influenced by cultural biases that have cluttered the original meaning of the biblical language. Such biases have transformed simple words into heavily loaded ecclesiastical titles. As a result, they have eroded the original landscape of the church.

Thus a fresh reading of the New Testament in its original language is necessary for properly understanding certain texts. For instance, a look at the original Greek yields the following insights:

- Bishops are simply guardians -(episkopoi), not high-church officials.
- Pastors are caretakers (poimen), not professional Pulpiteers.
- Ministers are busboys (diakonos), not clergymen.
- Elders are wise old men (presbuteros), not ecclesiastical officers.

Thankfully, a growing number of New Testament scholars are pointing out that the "leadership" terminology of the New Testament possesses descriptive accents denoting special functions rather than formal positions.

What follows is a list of common objections to the idea that church leadership is nonofficial, nontitular, and nonhierarchical. Each objection is followed by a response.

Objections from Acts and Paul's Epistles

1. Don 't Acts 1:20; Romans 11:13,• 12:4; and 1 Timothy 3:1, 10, 12 speak of church officials?

The word office in these passages is a mistranslation. It has no equivalent in the original Greek. Nowhere in the Greek New Testament do we find the equivalent of office used in connection with any ministry,

function, or leader in the church. The Greek word for office is only used to refer to the Lord Jesus Christ in His high priestly office (Heb. 5-7). It's also used to refer to the Levitical priesthood (Luke 1:8).

The King James Version mistranslates Romans 11:13b to be "I magnify mine office." But the Greek word translated "office" means service, not Frank Viola

From the book Reimagining Church office. So a better translation of Romans 11:13b is "I magnify my service [diakonia]."

Similarly, Romans 12:4b is better translated "All the members do not have the same function [praxis] " The Greek word praxis means a doing, a practice, or a function rather than an office or position. The NIV and the NASE reflect this better translation.

Finally, 1 Timothy 3:1 says the following in the KJV: "If a man desires the office of a bishop ..." But a more accurate translation puts it this way: "If anyone aspires to oversight "1

2. 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus are called the Pastoral Epistles. So that means that Timothy and Titus were pastors, right?

No, it does not. Paul's letters to Timothy and Titus were first dubbed the "Pastoral Epistles" as recently as the eighteenth century.² But this is a misguided label.

Timothy and Titus were not local pastors. They were apostolic coworkers who were mostly on the move. They only occasionally spent a long - period of time in a single place. (For instance, Paul sent Titus to Crete and Timothy to Ephesus to strengthen the churches there and sort out local problems.)

Because Timothy and Titus were itinerant church planters, Paul never called them pastors or elders. These men were not resident ministers. They were part of Paul's apostolic circle-a circle that was noted for its constant traveling (Rom. 16:21; 1 Cor. 16:10; 2 Cor. 8:23; 1 Thess.

1:1; 2:6; 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:10). Therefore, calling these three letters the "Pastoral Epistles" reflects a modern bias, not an objective processing of the truth.

3. Don't Paul's lists of qualifications in the Pastoral Epistles, namely 1 Timothy 3:1-7 and Titus 1:7-9, prove that elders are church officers?

All that's written in 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy, and Titus must be understood from the standpoint that Paul was writing to his apostolic coworkers, not to churches. This explains some of the differences between these epistles and the rest of Paul's letters. In Timothy and Titus, for example, the body metaphor is absent. The "brethren" are only occasionally mentioned. And there is little emphasis on mutual ministry.

By the same token, we don't find anything resembling nascent Catholicism in these epistles. The Spirit of God as well as His gifts are mentioned. And leaders are understood to gain recognition by their example rather than by any held position.

What we have in these texts, then, are the essential qualities of a true overseer, not a list of qualifications for an office that can be ticked off with a pencil.

The summation of these qualities is: spiritual character and faithful-ness-godliness and responsibility. Paul's lists, therefore, merely served as guides to Timothy and Titus in helping them identify and affirm overseers in the churches with which they worked (1 Tim. 5:22; Titus• 1:5).

In addition, the flavor of these texts in the Greek is one of function rather than officialdom. Paul himself doesn't call an overseer an office-bearer, but a "noble task" (1 Tim. 3: 1b). Moreover, functional language is employed when Paul commends honor to those elders who "guide well" and who "labor" in teaching (1 Tim. 5:17 NKJV).

Consequently, to conflate the overseers in these texts with modern ecclesiastical officials-like the modern pastor- is pure fantasy. It's a function of our tendency to bring our organizational conventions to the New Testament and read them back into it. It's the result of a learned cultural framework that we bring to the text and nothing more. In short, the language of function rather than office dominates the "Pastoral Epistles" just as it does Paul's other letters.³

4. First Corinthians 12:28 says, "And in the church God has appointed first of all apostles, second prophets, third teachers... . "Doesn't this text envision a hierarchy of church officials?"

Again, this question is indicative of our penchant for reading Scripture with the tainted spectacles of human hierarchy. It's a peculiarly Western foible to insist that every relationship be conceived in terms of a one-up/ one-down hierarchical mode. Thus whenever we see an ordered list in the New Testament (like 1 Corinthians 12:28), we can't seem to keep ourselves from connecting the dots of hierarchy.

While we twenty-first-century Westerners like to think in terms of organizational flow charts, the Bible never does. So it's an unwarranted assumption to think that every ordered list in Scripture is some sort of a veiled command hierarchy. Simply put, to see hierarchy in Paul's catalog of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28 represents a culturally biased misreading of Paul. The question of authority structures is not being asked anywhere in this text. Therefore, we do not exegete hierarchy from it; we impose it upon it.

A more natural reading of this passage understands the ordering to reflect a logical priority rather than a hierarchical one. In other words, the order reflects greater gifting with respect to church building. This interpretation meshes nicely with the immediate context in which it appears (1 Cor. 12, 13, 14).

To unfold that, Paul is saying that within the scope of church building, the apostle's ministry is the most fundamental. That's because apostles give birth to the church and sustain it during its prenatal development. Apostles break the ground and plant the seed of the ekklesia.

Since apostles lay the foundation of the church, they're also ranked first (chronologically) in the work of church building (Rom. 15:19-20; 1 Cor. 3:10; Eph. 2:20). Significantly, while apostles are placed first in the church-building scheme, they rank last in the eyes of the world (Matt. 20: 16; 1 Cor. 4:9).

Prophets appear second in Paul's list. This indicates that they immediately follow the apostles in their value to church building. Much confusion (and abuse) surrounds the function of the prophet today. Briefly, prophets supply the church with spiritual vision and encouragement through prophetic utterances. Like apostles, prophets unfold the mystery of God's purpose for the present and the future (Acts 15:32; Eph. 3:4-5). They also root out the weeds so the church can grow unhindered.

Teachers are mentioned third. They follow the prophets in their value to church building. Teachers put the church on solid biblical ground. They supply instruction concerning God's ways. They also shepherd God's people through hard times.

To continue the metaphor, teachers water the seed and fertilize the soil so the church can flourish and blossom. If we examine the ministry of the teacher with an eye for chronology, teachers build the superstructure of the church after the apostles have established the ground floor.

This interpretation of 1 Corinthians 12:28 follows the path of Paul's thought far better than that of a hierarchical command structure where apostles "pull rank" on prophets, and prophets do the same with teachers. It also brings to the fore an important spiritual principle: The absence of hierarchical authority doesn't mean egalitarian gifting.

While the New Testament affirms that all are gifted and all have ministry, it equally demonstrates that God disperses His gifts in a diverse way (1 Cor. 12:4-6). Every gift is valuable to the body of Christ. But some gifts are greater than others within their respected spheres (Matt. 25: 14ff; 1 Cor. 12:22-24, 31; 14:5).

This doesn't mean that those with greater gifts are greater in authority (or intrinsic worth) in some formal sense. But God has called each of us to a different work. And some have greater gifts for different tasks (Matt. 25:14ff.; Rom. 12:6; Eph. 4:7) . . .

Within the sphere of our gifts, each member is indispensable to the general building up of the church—even those members whose gifts are not outwardly impressive (1 Cor. 12:22-25). Therefore, every Christian in the Lord's house is responsible for using and increasing his or her gifts. And we are all warned against hiding them in the napkin of fear (Matt. 25:25).

In short, the idea that 1 Corinthians 12:28 denotes some sort of church hierarchy lacks argumentative force. The text has in mind greater gifting with a subtext of the chronological order of church building (some plant, then some water, etc.-1 Cor. 3:6). It doesn't indicate a pecking order of an ecclesiastical hierarchy or an authoritative ladder for Christians to climb.

5. Don't Acts 20:28; 1 Thessalonians 5:12; 1 Timothy 5:17; and Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24 say that elders have {"the rule over" the church?

The words "rule" and "over" in these texts are a poor fit with the rest of the New Testament. And there's no analog for them in the Greek text. This is yet another case where certain translations have confused the modern reader by employing culturally conditioned religious terminology.

The word "rule" in Hebrews 13:7, 17, 24 is translated from the Greek word hegeomai. It simply means to guide or go before. In his Translation of Hebrews, New Testament scholar F. F. Bruce translates hegeomai into "guides."⁴ This word carries the thought of "those who guide you" rather than "those who rule over you."

Similarly, in 1 Thessalonians 5:12, the word "over" is translated from the Greek word proistemi. It carries the idea of standing in front of, super-intending, guarding, and providing care for Robert Banks and F. F. Bruce explain that this term doesn't carry the technical force of an official designation, for it's used in the participle rather than the noun form. It's also positioned as the second in the midst of two other nonofficial participles. ⁵ Bruce translates 1 Thessalonians 5:12-13 as follows: "Now we ask you brothers to know those who work hard among you and care for you in the Lord and instruct you, and esteem them very highly in love because of their work."⁶

The same word (proistemi) appears in 1 Timothy 5:17. It, too, is incorrectly translated "rule" in the KJV and NASB. In addition, in Acts 20:28, the Greek text says that the elders are "en" (among) the flock rather than "over" them (as the KJV puts it)

In a similar vein, Paul's statement that overseers must "rule [proistemi] their own houses well" in 1 Timothy 3:4-5 doesn't point to their ability to wield power. It rather points to their capacity to supervise, manage, and nurture others. Incidentally, managing the household didn't envision managing the nuclear family. It involved much more than that. It involved managing married and unmarried relatives as well as servants.

In all these passages, the basic thought is that of watching rather than bossing.

1. Superintending rather than dominating.
2. Facilitating rather than dictating.
3. Guiding rather than ruling.

The Greek text conveys an image of one who stands within the flock, guarding and caring for it (as a leading-servant would). It's reminiscent of a shepherd who looks out for the sheep-not one who drives them from behind or rules them from above.

Again, the thrust of apostolic teaching consistently demonstrates that God's idea of church leadership is at odds with those conventional leadership roles that are based on top-heavy rule.

6. Doesn't Romans 12:8 (KJV) teach that God gifts some believers to rule in the church? There Paul says, "He that ruleth, {should do so} with diligence."

The KJV uses the word "ruleth" in this text. But the Greek word that appears here is *proistemi*. Again, this word envisions one who super-intends and gives aid to others. It doesn't refer to one who governs or controls them. So the text is better translated, "He that guards and gives care should do so with diligence." Paul's thought here is clearly one of earnest oversight rather than dictatorial rulership.

7. Don't Acts 14:23 and Titus 1:5 teach that elders are ordained, implying that they are church officers?

The mention of apostolic recognition (endorsement) is at least as friendly to the functional mind-set as it is to the positional interpretation. In Titus 1:5, the word translated "ordain" in the Greek is *kathistemi*. One meaning of this word is "to declare, to show to be."

In Acts 14:23, the word is *cheirotoneo*. It means "to stretch forth the hand" or "to choose." Both terms can be understood to mean the acknowledgment of those whom others have already endorsed.

Second, there's not a shred of textual evidence to support the idea that biblical recognition bestows or confers authority. Paul never vested certain ones with authority over the remaining members of the community. The Holy Spirit makes overseers, not overlords (Acts 20:28).

Elders exist in the church before they are outwardly recognized. Apostolic endorsement merely makes public that which the Spirit has already accomplished. The laying on of hands is a token of fellowship, oneness, and affirmation. It's not one of special grace or transferred authority. It's a profound error, therefore, to confuse biblical recognition with ecclesiastical ordination. The laying on of hands doesn't qualify religious specialists to do what lesser mortals cannot.⁷

Instead, biblical recognition is merely the outward confirmation of those who have already been charged by the Spirit to a specific task. It serves as a visible testimony that publicly endorses those who "have the goods."

In many contemporary house churches, public recognition constitutes a Trojan horse of sorts. Some men just can't handle the recognition. It inflates their egos. The title gives them a power trip. Worse still, it transforms some people into control freaks.

We must remember that in the first century it was the itinerant workers who publicly acknowledged overseers (Act 14:23; Titus 1:5). Therefore, it falls upon extra-local workers today (with the input of the church) to discern the timing and method of how overseers are to be acknowledged. ⁸ The recognition of overseers when they emerge should not be pressed into any rigid mold. Some church planters directly recognize overseers. Others do so tacitly.

The bottom line is that when we attach the recognition of elders to special ceremonies, licenses, seminary degrees, etc., we are speaking where the Bible doesn't speak.

We do well to keep in mind that in the New Testament the principle of recognizing elders exists. But the method is open. And it always has the sense of recognizing a dynamic function rather than placing into a static office.

In addition, we are on safe scriptural ground if elders are recognized by extra-local workers who know the church well. This safeguards the church from being controlled and manipulated by local, self-appointed leadership.

8. Doesn't Paul use the word "apostle" as an official title when speaking of himself

Contrary to popular thinking, most of Paul's correspondence contains a subtext that affirms that he is not an office-apostle. Granted, Paul regularly makes known his special function in the salutation of his letters (e.g. "Paul, an apostle of Jesus Christ"). But he never once identifies himself as "the apostle Paul."

This is a meaningful distinction. The former is a description of a special function based on divine commission. The latter is an official title. As previously stated, nowhere in the New Testament do we find any ministry or function in the body used as a title before the names of God's servants. Christians who are "title happy" need to seriously reflect on this.

9. Doesn't Ephesians 4:11 envision a clergy? It says, "And He gave some as apostles, and some as prophets, and some as evangelists, and some as pastors and teachers" (NASE).

Not at all. Ephesians 4 has in view those gifts that equip the church for its diversity of service (vv. 12-16). The gifts listed in this text are actually gifted persons who empower the church (vv. 8, 11). They are not the gifts that the Holy Spirit distributes to each individual as He wills (1 Cor. 12:11).

Put another way, Ephesians 4 is not discussing gifts given to men and women. It's discussing gifted men and women who are given to the church. Apostles, prophets, evangelists, and pastors/teachers are people given by the ascended Lord to His church for its formation, coordination, and building up. (See my article "Rethinking the Fivefold Ministry" for details, www.ptmin.org/fivefold.htm.)

Their chief task is to nurture the believing community into responsible roles. Their success is rooted in their ability to empower and mobilize God's people for the work of the ministry. In this way, the Ephesians 4 gifts equip the body to fulfill God's eternal purpose.

These ascension gifts are not offices nor are they formal positions. The Greek has no definite article connected with these terms. They are merely brethren with peculiar "enabling" gifts designed to cultivate the ministries of their fellow brethren.

In short, Ephesians 4: 11 doesn't envision a hired clergy, a professional ministry, or a special priest craft. Neither are they a special class of Christians. Like Paul's catalog of gifts in 1 Corinthians 12:28, Ephesians 4 has in view special functions rather than formal positions.

10. Doesn't the mention of "governments" or "administration" in 1 Corinthians 12:28 show that the early church possessed church officials?

The Greek word translated "governments" in the KJV and "administration" in the NIV is *kubernesis*. According to New Testament scholar Gordon Fee,

The noun occurs three times in the LXX [the Greek Old Testament], where it carries the verbal idea of giving 'guidance' to someone. Since the word "administration" in contemporary English conjures up the idea of administrative skills, which is a far cry from what Paul had in mind the better translation here might be "acts of guidance," although it is likely that it refers to giving wise counsel to the community as a whole, not simply to other individuals.⁹

In this light, to invest an official form of church polity into this word is unwarranted and untenable. The only "government" that the Ekklesia knows is the undiluted government of Jesus Christ (Isa. 9:6). "While overseers supply supervision and guidance to a local church, they don't "govern" or "rule" it. Thus the terms "governments"- and "administration" are poor translations.

11. Doesn't the Bible say that Timothy was "ordained the first bishop of the church of Ephesus"? And doesn't it also say that Titus was "ordained the first bishop of the church of the Cretans"?

Some editions of the KJV have these notes annexed to the end of the so-called Pastoral Epistles. But they don't appear in the Greek text. The translators of the KJV inserted them in the seventeenth century.

As we have already stated, both Timothy and Titus were not bishops.

Nor were they pastors. They were Paul's apostolic coworkers-church planters, if you will (Rom. 16:21; 1 Cor. 16:10; 2 Cor. 8:23; 1Thess. 1:1; 2:6; 3:2; 2 Tim. 2:15; 4:10).

Significantly, the monarchical episcopate (the bishop system) did not take root until long after the New Testament was completed. Hence, the historical evidence that Timothy and Titus were "first bishops" is just as scanty as the idea that Peter was the "first bishop" of Rome. All of these suppositions conflict with the New Testament narrative as well as with church history. They are human inventions that have no biblical basis.

12. Acts 15:22 mentions "chief men among the brethren" (KJV). Doesn't this imply the existence of hierarchical authority in the early church?

The KJV translates this text using the terms "chief men"-which gives it a hierarchical flavor. However, the Greek word for "chief" is *hegeomai*. And it simply means "leading" or "guiding." (See the NASB and NIV.)

This text underscores the fact that Judas (not Iscariot) and Silas were among the respected brothers in the Jerusalem church. They were responsible men - probably elders as well as prophets (Acts 15:32). For this reason the church of Jerusalem selected them as temporary messengers to Antioch (compare with Prov. 10:26; 25: 19). Therefore, to extract hierarchy from this verse cannot be justified.

13. Doesn't Paul s metaphor of the body of Christ demonstrate that authority works in a hierarchical mode? That is, when the Head signals to the hand, it must first signal to the arm. So the hand must submit to the arm in order for it to obey the Head.

Anyone who is conversant with human anatomy knows that the above description reflects a flawed understanding of how the physical body works.

The brain sends direct signals to those body parts it seeks to control through the peripheral nervous system. Consequently, the head controls all of the body's parts immediately and directly through the nerves. It doesn't pass its impulses through a chain-of-command schema invoking other body parts.

Thus the head doesn't command the arm to tell the hand what to do. Instead, the head is connected to the entire body through the nervous system. For this reason, the proper application of the body metaphor preserves the unvarnished truth that there is only one source of authority

in the church-Jesus Christ. And all members are connected by His life and placed under His direct control.

In this regard, the Bible is crystal clear in its teaching that Jesus Christ is the only mediator between God and man (1 Tim. 2:5). While the old economy had human ' mediators, the new covenant knows no such thing. As participants of the new covenant, we need no mediator to tell us to know the Lord. All who are under this covenant may know Him directly-"from the; least of them to the greatest" (Heb. 8:6-11). Mutual subjection, not hierarchical submission, is what engenders the proper coordination of the body of Christ.

14. Every physical body has a head. Therefore, every local body of believers needs a head. If it doesn't have one, it will be chaotic. Pastors are the heads of local churches. They are little heads under Christ's headship.

This idea is born out of the imaginations of fallen humans. There is not a shred of biblical support for such an idea. The Bible never refers to a human being as a "head" of a church. This title exclusively belongs to Jesus Christ. He is the only Head of each local assembly. The church has no head under His own. Therefore, those who claim to be heads of churches supplant the executive headship of Christ.

15. Don't John 5:30; John 14:28, 31; and 1 Corinthians 11:3 teach a hierarchical relationship within the Trinity?

No, they do not. These passages don't have in view the Son's eternal relationship with His Father in the Godhead. They instead refer to His temporal relationship as a human being who voluntarily submitted Himself to His Father's will. In the Godhead, the Father and the Son experience communality and mutual submission through the Spirit.

Kevin Giles accurately says, "Nothing in Scripture indicates that the Father-Son-Spirit are eternally hierarchically ordered in being, work/ function, or authority."¹⁰

For this reason, historic orthodoxy rejects the eternal subordination of the Son of God. It instead accepts the temporal subordination of the Son in His incarnation. ¹¹ Christ's subordination to the Father was temporal, voluntary, and limited to the time of His incarnation (Phil. 2:4- 11). Gilbert Belzikian explains,

It is impossible within the confines of orthodoxy to derive a model for an order of hierarchy among humans .from the ontological structure of the Trinity since all three persons are equal in essence. Moreover, because Christ's functional subjection is not an eternal condition but a task-driven, temporary phase of ministry, it is presented in Scripture as a model of servanthood and mutual submission for all believers (Phil 2:5-11).¹²

Kevin Giles adds, "Historic orthodoxy has never accepted hierarchical ordering in the Trinity." ¹³ To paraphrase the Athanasian Creed, the Son is only inferior to the Father in relation to His manhood; He is equal with the Father in relation to the Godhead. ¹⁴ Scripture confirms this in many places. One example is when the writer of Hebrews says that Jesus "learned obedience"-not as the Eternal Son, but in His incarnate state (Heb. 5:8).

Therefore, the New Testament never supports a hierarchical structure or chain-of-command relationship in the Godhead. The Trinity is a communion of coequal persons (Matt. 28:18; -John 5:18; 10:30; 14:9; Phil. 2:6). And the fellowship of the Godhead is egalitarian and nonhierarchical.

Again, Kevin Giles isolates the point, saying, "When a doctrine of the church builds on trinitarian thinking, there is no room for hierarchical ordering." ¹⁵ Miroslav Volf insightfully adds, "A hierarchical notion of the Trinity ends up underwriting an authoritarian practice in the church." ¹⁶

Objections from Other New Testament Documents

1. Doesn't Hebrews 13:17 command us to obey and submit to our leaders, implying that church leaders possess official authority?

Again, a look at the Greek text proves useful here. The word translated "obey" in Hebrews 13:17 is not the garden-variety Greek word (*hupakouo*) that's usually employed in the New Testament for obedience. Rather, it's the word *peitho*. *Peitho* means to persuade or to win over. Because this word appears in the middle-passive form in Hebrews 13:17, the text ought to be translated "Allow yourselves to be persuaded by your leaders"

This text appears to be an exhortation to give weight to the instruction of local overseers • (and possibly apostolic workers). It's not an exhortation to obey them mindlessly. It implies persuasive power to convince and to win over rather than to coerce, force, or browbeat into submission. In the words of Greek scholar W. E. Vine, "The obedience suggested [in Hebrews 13:17] is not by submission to authority, but resulting from persuasion." 17

Likewise, the verb translated "submit" in this passage is the word *hupēiko*. It carries the idea of yielding, retiring, or withdrawing, as in surrendering after battle. Those who occupy themselves with spiritual oversight don't demand submission. By virtue of their wisdom and spiritual maturity, they are to be accorded with respect. Christians are encouraged to be uncommonly biased toward what they say. Not because of an external office they hold, but because of their godly character, spiritual stature, and sacrificial service to the people of God.

In the words of Hebrews 13:7, we are to "imitate their faith" as we "consider the outcome of their life." By so doing, we make their God-called task of spiritual oversight far easier to carry out (v. 17).

2. The Bible teaches that those who watch over the souls of the church will have to give an account to God. Doesn't this mean that these people have authority over others?

Hebrews 13:17 says that those who provide oversight are accountable to God for this task. But there's nothing in this text that warrants that they have special authority over other Christians.

Being accountable to God is not the equivalent of having authority. All believers are accountable to God (Matt. 12:36; 18:23; Luke 16:2; Rom. 3:19; 14:12; Heb. 4:13; 13:17; 1 Peter 4:5). But this doesn't mean that they have authority over others. (Incidentally, desiring dominion over others is carnal. It's not an outworking of God's grace, but of fallen flesh.)

3. Didn't Jesus endorse official authority when He commanded His disciples to obey the scribes and Pharisees because they sat in "Moses' seat"?

Not at all. What Jesus said about the scribes and Pharisees was a rebuke to their practice of assuming instructional authority when they possessed none. Matthew 23:2 says, "The scribes and the Pharisees have seated themselves in the chair of Moses" (NASB).

Our Lord was merely exposing the fact that the scribes and Pharisees were self-appointed teachers. And they usurped authority over the people (Matt. 23:5-7; Luke 20:46). His statement was an observation, not an endorsement.

The Lord made it unmistakably plain that despite their pretense before men, the scribes and Pharisees didn't have any authority (Matt. 23: 11-33). They taught the Law of Moses, but they didn't obey it (23:3b, 23).

In this light, the verse that follows, which says "therefore all that they tell you, do and observe" (v. 3a NASB) cannot be understood as a blanket endorsement of Pharisaical authority. This interpretation utterly contradicts the next verse (v. 4). It also contradicts those passages where we find Jesus resolutely breaking Pharisaical teaching-and commanding His disciples to do the same (Matt. 5:33-37; 12:1-4; 15:1-20; 16:6-12; 19:3-9; etc.).

Instead, this phrase must be interpreted by our Lord's reference to Moses' seat. Moses' seat is a literal reference to a special chair set aside in each synagogue from which the Old Testament Scriptures were read. 18

Whenever the scribes and Pharisees were seated in "Moses' chair," they read straight out of Scripture. Because Scripture has authority, what they read from this seat was binding (regardless of the hypocrisy of the readers). This is the essence of Jesus' statement. The lesson is that even if a self-styled, hypocritical teacher reads from the Bible, what he says from the Bible has authority.

Therefore, to project an endorsement of official authority onto the lips of the Savior in Matthew 23:2-3 is an example of Jesus co-opted by Roman Papalism. As such, it fails to keep pace with the historic context of the passage, and it reflects nothing of the Gospels themselves.

4. Doesn't the Greek New Testament support the idea that the church includes clergy and laity?

The clergy/laity dichotomy is a tragic fault line that runs throughout the history of Christendom. Yet despite the fact that multitudes have taken the low road of dogmatism to defend it, this dichotomy is without biblical warrant.

The word "laity" is derived from the Greek word *laos*. It simply means "the people." *Laos* includes all Christians--including elders. The word appears three times in 1 Peter 2:9-10, where Peter refers to "the people [*laos*] of God." Never in the New Testament does it refer to -only a portion of the assembly. It didn't take on this meaning until the third century.

The term "clergy" finds its roots in the Greek word *kleros*. It means "a lot or an inheritance." The word is used in 1 Peter 5:3, where Peter instructs the elders against being "lords over God's heritage [*kleros*]" (KJV). Significantly, the word is never used to refer to church leaders. Like *laos*, it refers to God's people--for they are His heritage.

According to the New Testament, then, all Christians are "clergy" (*kleros*) and all are "laity" (*laos*). We are the Lord's heritage and the Lord's people. To frame it another way, the New Testament doesn't dispose of clergy. It makes all believers clergy.

Therefore, the clergy/laity dichotomy is a postbiblical concept that's devoid of any scriptural warrant. It's also a bothersome menace to what God has called the church to be--a functioning body. There's no hint of the clergy/laity or minister/layman schema in the history, teaching, or vocabulary of the New

Testament. This schema is a religious artifact that stems from the postapostolic disjunction of secular and spiritual.¹⁹

In the secular/spiritual dichotomy, faith, prayer, and ministry are deemed the exclusive properties of an inner, sacrosanct world. A world that is detached from the whole fabric of life. But this disjunction is completely foreign to the New Testament ethos where all things are to bring glory to God----'even the stuff of everyday life (1 Cor. 10:31).

5. Don't the seven angels of the seven churches in the book of Revelation represent the presence of a single pastor in each local church?

The first three chapters of Revelation constitute a flimsy basis upon which to construct the doctrine of "single pastor." First, the reference to the angels of these churches is cryptic. John doesn't give us any clues about their identity. Scholars are not sure what they symbolize. (Some believe they point to literal angels. Others believe they are human messengers.)

Second, there's no analog for the idea of a "solo pastor" anywhere in the New Testament. Nor is there any text that likens pastors unto angels. Third, the idea that the seven angels refer to the "pastors" of the seven churches is in direct conflict with other New Testament texts. For instance, Acts 20: 17 and 20:28 tell us that the church of Ephesus had multiple shepherds (pastors), not one. This is true for all first-century churches that had elders. They were always plural (see chapter 9).

Therefore, to hang the "sola pastora" doctrine on one obscure passage in Revelation is sloppy and careless exegesis. ***The fact is, there is no support for the modern pastor in Revelation or in any other New Testament document.***

Objections from the Old Testament

1. In Exodus 18, Moses set up a hierarchy of rulers under him to help lead God's people. Isn't this a biblical pattern for hierarchical leadership?

If we read this account carefully, we'll discover that it was Moses'heathen father-in-law, Jethro, who conceived this idea (Ex. 18:14-27). There is no biblical evidence to suggest that God endorsed it. In fact, Jethro himself admitted that he wasn't sure if God would support it (Ex. 18:23).

Later in Israel's journeys, the Lord directed Moses to take a different course of action regarding the problem of oversight. God commanded Moses to commission elders to help bear the weight of responsibility. Accordingly, Moses selected those men who were already elder-ing (Num. 11:16).

This strategy was organic and functional. In this way, it was markedly different from Jethro's notion of a multilayered hierarchy of rulers.

2. Don't the Old Testament figures of Moses, Joshua, David, Solomon, etc. show that God's perfect will is to have a single leader over His people?

No, they don't. As previously stated, Moses and every other single leader in the Old Testament were shadows of the Lord Jesus Christ. They were not types of the modern-day single pastorate that was invented during the Reformation.

By contrast, God's will was to instill a theocracy in Israel. (A theocracy is a government where God is the sole King.) Regrettably, the people clamored for a human king, and the Lord gave them their fleshly desire to be like the other nations. But this was never His perfect will (1 Sam. 8:5-9).

Granted, the Lord still worked with His people under a human kingship but they suffered dire consequences as a result. In like manner, God still works through man-made systems today. Yet they always limit His full blessing. Unfortunately, many Christians still assume that they must have a visible leader to rule over them.

In sum, the Lord's perfect will was for His people to live and serve under His direct reign (Ex. 15:18; Num. 23:21; Deut. 33:5; 1 Sam. 8:7). Israel was called to be a "kingdom of priests" (Ex. 19:6). And she was to confer with the older, wiser men (elders) in times of crisis (Deut. 22: 15-18; 25:7-9).

But what Israel lost in her disobedience, the church gained (1 Peter 2:5, 9; Rev. 1:6). Tragically, however, many Christians have opted to return to the old covenant system of religious government even though God dismantled it long ago.

It should be noted that it's only because of an indwelling Spirit that God's idea of leadership and authority can be observed today. Since the indwelling Spirit was not experienced during Old Testament days, God condescended to the limitations of His people.

When we come to the New Testament era, we discover that the indwelling Christ is the portion of all of God's children. And it is that portion that causes the church to rise to the supernatural level of the "priesthood of all believers." A level where all hierarchical, titular, and official leadership styles turn obsolete and counterproductive.

3. In Psalm 105:15) the Lord says) "Touch not mine anointed, and do my prophets no harm) (KJV). Doesn't this verse teach that some Christians (e.g.) pastors) have unquestioned authority?

Under the old covenant, God specially anointed prophets to be His oracles on the earth. Thus to speak against them was to speak against the Lord. But under the new covenant, the Spirit has been poured out upon all God's people. All who have received Christ (the Anointed One) are anointed by the Holy Spirit (1 John 2:27); therefore, all may prophesy (Acts 2:17- 18; 1 Cor. 14:24, 31).

In this way, the prayer of Moses that all of God's people would receive the Spirit and prophesy has been fulfilled since Pentecost (Num. 11:29; Acts 2: 16-18). Regrettably, Psalm 105:15 has been abused and

misapplied by clergy leaders and self-proclaiming "prophets" to control God's people and to deflect criticism.

But here's the truth. Under the new covenant, "touch not God's anointed" is the equivalent of "submit to one another out of reverence for Christ" (Eph. 5:21). For the Spirit's anointing has come upon all who have believed on the Messiah.

Therefore, "touch not God's anointed" applies to every Christian today. To deny this is to deny that all Christians have the anointing (1 John 2:20, 27).

The Problem of Mistranslation

In view of the foregoing points, some may wonder why the KJV obscures so many texts that have to do with ministry and oversight. "Why does the KJV repeatedly insert hierarchical/institutional terms (like "office") that are absent from the original documents?

The answer stems from the fact that the Anglican Church of the seventeenth century issued the KJV. That church rigidly espoused the wedding of the church and the state, and it possessed a mind-set that merged officialdom with Christianity.

King James VI of Scotland ordered the translation that bears his name (the King James Version). In so doing, the king acted in the capacity of the head of the Anglican Church-the state church of England. He then directed the fifty-four scholars who authored the translation not to depart from "traditional terminology" throughout the project.²⁰

For this reason, the KJV naturally reflects Anglicanism's hierarchical/institutional presuppositions. Words like ekklesia, episkopos, and diakonos were not accurately translated from the Greek. Instead, they were translated into the Anglican ecclesiastical jargon of the day: Ekklesia was translated into "church;" episkopos was translated into "bishop;" diakonos was translated into "minister" praxis was translated into "office;" proistemi was translated into "rule;" etc. The original KJV of 1611 went through four revisions up until 1769. Yet these errors were never corrected.

Thankfully, some modern translations have sought to rectify this problem. They have de-Anglicized many of the ecclesiastical terms found in the KJV. They have also accurately translated the Greek words that stand behind them. For example; ekklesia has been translated "assembly;" episkopos has been translated "overseer;" diakonos has been translated "servant;" praxis has been translated "function" and proistemi has been translated "guard."

The Mess We Find Ourselves in Today

The primary reason why our ideas on church leadership have strayed so far from God's will can be traced to our tendency to project Western political notions of government onto the biblical writers-

reading them back into the text. When we read words like "pastor," "overseer," and "elder," we immediately think in terms of governmental offices like "president," "senator," and "chief man."

So we regard elders, pastors, and overseers as sociological constructs (offices). We view them as vacant slots that possess a reality independent of the persons who populate them. We then ascribe mere men with unquestioned authority simply because they "hold office."

The New Testament notion of leadership is markedly different. As previously stated, there's no biblical warrant for the idea that church leadership is official. Neither is there any scriptural backing for the notion that some believers have authority over other believers. The only authority that exists in the church is Jesus Christ. Humans have no authority in themselves. Divine authority is vested only in the Head and expressed through the body.

Good leadership, therefore, is never authoritarian. It only displays authority when it's expressing the mind of Jesus Christ. The basic tasks of biblical leadership are facilitation, nurture, guidance, and service. To the degree that a member is modeling the will of God in one of those areas, to that degree he or she is leading.

It's no wonder that Paul never chose to use any of the forty-plus common Greek words for "office" and "authority" when discussing leaders. Again, Paul's favorite word for describing leadership is the opposite of what natural minds would suspect. It's diakonos, which means a "servant."

Excerpted from [Reimagining Church](#) by Frank Viola.

Source and documentation for the above is listed in the book.

See also [The Myth of Christian Leadership](#) - demonstrates how there was no clergy/laity class distinction in the New Testament church, but ALL believers are leaders in different areas.