

Government & Leadership In a Messianic Jewish Congregation

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Messianic Jewish congregations stand astride the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, and are often laboratories for testing competing models of government and leadership. Some congregations are ruled by elders, others by pastors, and still others by the democratic vote of their members. *Pastor, rabbi, and spiritual leader* are some of the terms commonly used to refer to the pastoral heads of our congregations.

Were only preference or nomenclature at issue, this subject would be trivial, because it wouldn't matter which title or leadership model were embraced. The fact is, however, that each model of congregational government and leader title makes a statement of importance and, therefore, those that are selected should be biblically sound and culturally authentic.

What I hope is that this message will clarify the Bible's position and the Jewish tradition in regard to leadership, and be helpful in your efforts to conform closely to those Jewish practices which are consistent with biblical teaching and example.

I will begin with Servant Leadership.

In both the Old and the New Covenant Scriptures, one clearly sees that God's ideal of leadership is servant hood. And according to 1 Peter 4:11, only God is to be elevated -- not even the most prominent of human leaders. When Moses, in arrogantly, scolded the Israelites and struck a rock to which he was only instructed to speak, God punished him; this stands as a warning that when God elects to work through us, it is he, and not we, who must receive the glory. Even Yeshua, during his time on earth, said according to [John 5:19](#) and [12:49](#):

“Most assuredly, I say to you, the Son can do nothing of Himself, but what He sees the Father do; for whatever He does, the Son also does in like manner.”

[see also, [Deuteronomy 10:12](#); [Mark 10:43-44](#)]

Throughout history, God chose men and women to serve him, and empowered them for their special tasks. Most often, these tasks involved ministering to the needs of others, so that those others also might come to the place of serving God. When one considers God's anointed servants of the New Covenant, one realizes that no matter how empowered of the Spirit, the servant possessed nothing which was not also freely available to those whom he served. Yeshua illustrated this when he said to his disciples in [Matthew 21:21](#):

“Assuredly, I say to you, if you have faith and do not doubt, you will not only do what was done to the fig tree, but also if you say to this mountain, 'Be removed and be cast into the sea', it will be done.”

Some servant leaders work in ministry full time and may even be financially supported by their

ministry, while others pursue economically productive occupations, and serve God around and within the constraints of those occupations. The most striking example of a secularly-employed leader of great renown is the apostle Paul, who made tents to support himself, so as not be a burden to others. Clearly, whether or not one's ministry provides one with financial sustenance is not an indicator of its importance.

The second category of leadership I will address is Priestly Leadership.

Priestly leadership is that which furthers reconciliation between man and God. Abraham can be said to have performed a priestly role because he fathered the nation which was appointed by God to be a light to the world. And God planned it so that his covenant with Abraham would eventually be His vehicle for reconciling mankind to Himself through our covenant bonding with Yeshua.

Under the Sinai covenant, Aaron and his sons served as God's appointed priests to the Israelites. They consulted with *Urim* and *Thummim*, judged, taught, and ministered to the community in a variety of ways – especially through the sacrificial system of the Tabernacle and the Temple. And just as Aaron and his sons served as priests to the Israelites, so also, God made Israel a priestly nation to the rest of the world. [Exodus 19:6, 28:1]

Under the New Covenant, responsibility for the priesthood was transferred to Yeshua, who was made High Priest. Priesthood was also imparted to Yeshua's spiritual offspring, we who are his disciples. Under Yeshua, the priesthood was broadened to include both Jew and non-Jew, and the recipients of priestly ministry were also enlarged to include both Israelites and Gentiles. When Yeshua sent his disciples out to "the ends of the earth" to preach, witness, and exhibit the power of God, it was a priestly commission that He imparted. And in the same way that Aaron, the High Priest of the Levitical priesthood, sacrificed unblemished animals for the atonement of Israel, so also Yeshua, the High Priest of the Melchizedek priesthood sacrificed himself – the ultimate unblemished lamb – for the atonement of the world. [Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:14-18; John 1:29; Acts 10:44-45; Hebrews 4:14, 7:15-17; 1 Peter 2:5, 9-10; Revelation 1:5-6]

The third kind of leadership I will mention is Governmental Leadership.

At every stage of history, God repeated his same basic plan of government – either himself (directly) or his chosen anointed to be in charge, and a second cadre of responsible officials to assist.

The family is the most foundational governmental entity described in Scripture – both in its being the smallest, and also in its being the unit upon which larger governmental units are modeled. As with all governments, the family has a defined leadership and rules for conducting its interpersonal affairs. God placed the man (the husband) in charge of his family, and gave him a woman (a wife) for a helper, so that together they could govern their children. God continued patriarchal rule through Abraham, Isaac, Jacob, Jacob's sons, and then their sons as heads of the twelve tribes. [Genesis 2:18-25; Ephesians 5:22-24, 6:4]

Shortly after the appointment of Moses, there came a new group of helpers called elders. Elder

assistance to Moses was first suggested by Moses' father-in-law Jethro, but the totality of Scripture demonstrates that the institution of eldership was God's idea, for we read in Numbers 11:16-17:

“So the Lord said to Moses: “Gather to Me seventy men of the elders of Israel, whom you know to be the elders of the people and officers over them; bring them to the tabernacle of meeting, that they may stand there with you. Then I will come down and talk with you there. I will take of the Spirit that is upon you and will put the same upon them; and they shall bear the burden of the people with you, that you may not bear it yourself alone.”

From that event and throughout the rest of Mosaic Covenant history, elder rule under an anointed head-of-government was God's best for Israel. Joshua followed Moses, and then came a succession of judges, kings, members of tribunals and others. All of these leaders worked with and received counsel from local elders who reportedly were ordained by the laying-on of hands in an unbroken chain from the original seventy. The New Covenant continued the pattern of elder rule under an anointed head-of-government, the very large difference being, that the head-of-government was now *Mashiach* himself.

The fourth category of leadership I will speak about is Equipping Leadership.

“Equipping,” means imparting, to another person, something that enables him or assists him in fulfilling a task. Scripture reveals that throughout history, God Himself has been our principal equipper, and has provided for us, both through the natural phenomena of his creation, as well as through selective sovereign acts. The earth, which produces food when worked and planted, is an example of sustenance provided through the creation, while the manna and water which God gave to the Israelites during their travels in the desert exemplify the many sovereign acts of provision that God brought about contrary to natural expectation. [Genesis 1:29; Exodus 16:4, 17:6]

God not only equips his people physically and materially, but also spiritually. Some examples of God's spiritual equipping include the "Glory of the Lord" that filled the Tabernacle and led Israel through the desert; God's recorded Word (His Scriptures), teaches us about Him, commands us according to his law, and guides us by His wisdom; Also, He sent Messiah who became flesh, to walk among us, teach us, and then die for us; also the Holy Spirit who indwelt prophets of old, and now indwells all disciples of Yeshua who are willing to receive Him. He gives us comfort, counsel, spiritual gifts and, finally, God's unfailing love for us, through which He provides all of the aforementioned and more. [Exodus 32:15-16; 40:34-35; John 1:14, 3:16; Acts 1:4-5; 1 John 4:9-11]

In addition to being our provider, God is also our example of an equipping leader. After equipping us, God nurtures us to maturity, and then exhorts us to likewise equip others (Leviticus 10:8-11). His plan is to achieve world redemption through regenerated mankind – the mankind of His original creation.

Once again, the family unit is the principal place where equipping leadership originates:

Proverbs 22:6:

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”

Deuteronomy 6:4-9:

“Hear, O Israel: The Lord our God, the Lord is one! You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, with all your soul, and with all your might. And these words which I command you today shall be in your heart; you shall teach them diligently to your children, and shall talk of them when you sit in your house, when you walk by the way, when you lie down, and when you rise up. You shall bind them as a sign on your hand, and they shall be as frontlets between your eyes. You shall write them on the doorposts of your house and on your gates.”

In Ephesians 4:11-12, Scripture reveals the kinds of equipping leaders God has given us:

“And He himself gave some to be apostles, some prophets, some evangelists, and some pastors and teachers, for the equipping of the body of Messiah.”

The verses that follow verse 12, explain that these gifted leaders are needed by the body of believers until it matures to the place that it is no longer susceptible to false doctrine and deception, and until all the members of the body carry their share of ministry, and the body grows and becomes edified in love.

These are sometimes called the five-fold gift ministries, and I would like to suggest that they fall into two main categories – pastoral and prophetic. The prophetic ministries are prophet and teacher, and the pastoral ministries are pastor, apostle and evangelist. If it is not clear to you why the teacher is prophetic, let me explain that the gift of teacher is not merely having a good teaching technique; it is acquiring understanding from God prophetically, and then having the ability to convey it to others in a way that they understand. Before Yeshua, apostles and evangelists were not identified as ministry categories per se, however, Israel was well-known for its dissemination of knowledge about God, and for proselytizing to the gentile nations. The prophetic gift, the teaching gift and the pastoral gift, were, of course, in obvious operation; Moses, for example, possessed all three.

Mantle of Leadership

In today's world, ordination to leadership is often understood as a mere investiture -- installing or elevating a leader or officer of a congregation. In the Rabbinical Jewish community, ordination or *s'miycha* is most often conferred by seminaries, and synagogue officials are normally appointed without great ceremony. True biblical ordination, however, is always accompanied by anointing – that is, by God's mantle of the Holy Spirit, who not only identifies God's chosen leader, but also gives him authority and power to serve effectively.

This anointing, or impartation of Holy Spirit power, comes about in various ways. On occasion,

God Himself cloaks an individual with his Spirit; other times, He ordains with man's participation. The *kohanim*, the priests, for example, were ordained with oil, while the other Levites were ordained by *s'miychah*, the laying on of hands. Kings and prophets too were anointed – probably with oil, and Elisha was ordained by being covered with Elijah's cloak. After the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai, God sovereignly transferred a portion of Moses' spirit to seventy elders, and after that, transfers of His Spirit and authority continued from elder to elder by the laying on of hands of *s'miychah*. We know this from Maimonides' writings in the *Mishneh Torah*, *Sanhedrin 4:2*:

“The elders ordained by Moses ordained their successors, who in turn ordained others, so that there existed an unbroken chain of ordination from Moses down to the time of the Second Temple.”

For other information about the succession of eldership, we can read *Pirke Avoth 1:1*, and the Encyclopaedia Judaica's article on *Semikhah*.

Ordination under the New Covenant has some similarities and some differences from ordinations under the Old (or Mosaic) Covenant. One similarity is the variety of ways God's anointing can be acquired. Disciples of Yeshua are given a new spirit, and are immersed by the Holy Spirit into the New Covenant Priesthood. Ordination of New Covenant prophets is not specifically mentioned in Scripture, nor is ordination mentioned for any of the other Ephesians 4 ministries. But because 1 Timothy 6:7 and 2 Timothy 1:6 describe how spiritual gifts were imparted through prophecy and the laying on of hands, we can justifiably conclude that man can, when God authorizes it, participate in the impartation of spiritual gifts. There is, however, no New Covenant Scriptural precedent for men ordaining individuals into Ephesians 4 gift ministries and, as for the ordination of kings, it is now un-needed since Yeshua has become our only king.

The New Covenant way of appointing elders and deacons is in marked contrast to the previously mentioned ministries. Every example in Scripture depicts elders installing other elders (or deacons), and almost certainly with the laying on of hands. So central is human participation in the appointment of elders, that elders who ordain others are warned that they are accountable for the sins of the men they place in office. 1 Timothy 5:22 states:

“Do not lay hands on anyone hastily, nor share in other people's sins; keep yourself pure.” [See also, Acts 6:3-7, 14:23; Titus 1:5]

Let's now look at The Local Congregation – its History, Organization and Function.

In the years before exile, life for an Israelite centered around his tribal community and The Temple. With the Babylonian exile and the Temple's destruction, the focus of Jewish community life shifted to two newly-formed gatherings – academies (*y'shiyivot*), and synagogues. Academies were schools for study of the oral law, and eventually became centers for authoritative opinions concerning community practice (*halachah*). Although we know little of the early academies, the later academies generally included a court (a *beyt diyn*), and it is not unlikely that the Jewish judicial council of Yeshua's time (the *Sanhedrin*) could trace its beginnings to the Babylonian

academies. Synagogues were institutions developed solely for prayer and study. Although overseen by elders, their prayer services functioned through the general participation of all their male members, with coordination and administration by a specially appointed elder known as the *Archisynagogus* or *Rosh haK'nesset*. Every educated man in the congregation was deemed qualified to serve and lead in every capacity, and was expected to do so. This, by the way, is still a hallmark of synagogue life, and why, especially the weekly *Shachrit service and the Torah Service*, is so participatory.

After Yeshua's death and resurrection, His apostles formed local congregations that had greater authority than did the synagogue, for they were the places from which New Covenant elders governed the community and judged the controversies of its members. The following Scripture exemplifies the judicial function of the New Covenant congregation:

Matthew 18:15-20

“Moreover, if your brother sins against you, go and tell him his fault between you and him alone. If he hears you, you have gained your brother. But if he will not hear you, take with you one or two more, that 'by the mouth of two or three witnesses every word may be established.' And if he refuses to hear them, tell it to the assembly. But if he refuses even to hear the assembly, let him be to you like a heathen and a tax collector. Assuredly, I say to you, whatever you bind on earth will be bound in heaven, and whatever you loose on earth will be loosed in heaven. Again I say to you that if two of you agree on earth concerning anything that they ask, it will be done for them by My Father in heaven. For where two or three are gathered together in My name, I am there in the midst of them.”

We understand that the “assembly” means those who oversee the congregation – the elders sitting as *dayanim* (or judges) convened in a court of elders (or *bet din*). We also read that disputes between believers are to be taken to the *bet din*, and not to the public courts:

1 Corinthians 6:1

“Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?”

When Yeshua taught about New Covenant congregations, he surely used the Aramaic or Hebrew equivalent of *ekklesia*, although the word for "congregation" was recorded in the Greek. Strong's Greek Dictionary defines *ekklesia* as:

“a calling out, ie. a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation (a Jewish synagogue, or Christian community of members on earth or saints in heaven or both) – an assembly, or a church.”

Yeshua's words in Matthew 18:15-20 that I quoted above, were spoken prior to the establishment of the first New Covenant congregation, and prior to anything that could be considered culturally "Christian". Therefore, the only part of the foregoing definition of *ekklesia* which can possibly

apply to Yeshua's teachings about his congregation is:

“a calling out, ie. a popular meeting, especially a religious congregation (i.e. a Jewish synagogue) – an assembly.”

Considering this definition along with the previously mentioned characteristics of the New Covenant congregation, one can make a strong case that Yeshua modeled his congregation after the existing synagogue, and incorporated in it, the judicial function of the Sanhedrin. If this is so, two historically extra biblical institutions may have become biblical through combining them, and by Yeshua's endorsement.

Meanwhile, the part of Judaism that rejected Yeshua as Messiah, continued along a different path. After 70 A.D., the destruction of the temple and the displacement of the *Sanhedrin* left Judaism in crisis, with the synagogue as its only surviving institution. Soon, new courts (*beyt diyuniym*) and academies (*y'shiyvot*) arose to provide foci for theological and philosophical debates and training, but the synagogue continued to develop as the center of Jewish life.

By the Fourteenth Century, institutional Judaism had progressed to where certain Rabbis were placed in charge of congregations, and some were even elevated to preside over towns, cities and other geopolitical entities. The *Chasidim* of middle Europe carried the idea of a head Rabbi or *tsadik* even further by creating the concept of "*Rebbe*", a rabbi who was elevated to be in charge of the community because he supposedly had special revelation, powers, and authority from God.

Let's now consider Congregational Headship and Authority.

Synagogue headship has evolved from the administrative oversight of the *Rosh Hak'nesset* to the spiritual leadership of a Head Rabbi. In addition, modern synagogues are generally governed by Boards of Directors led by a President, and there is a clear demarcation between spiritual and business matters. On the spiritual side, the Head Rabbi is sometimes assisted by other rabbis, a cantor, and a *shamash*, and the entire leadership cadre is set in office by vote of the membership. While the Head Rabbi's opinions are influential within his congregation, authoritative decisions on Jewish law (*halachah*) and on writs of divorce are generally carried out by regional Jewish courts (or *beyt diyuniym*). Spiritual discipline of congregational members and adjudication of conflicts between individuals are rare, if they exist at all, and discipline of disorderly members is generally carried out by the synagogue's Board that can do no more than cancel a person's membership in the synagogue. Programmatic leadership is usually accomplished through committees, with input from the Rabbi and approval of the Board.

New Covenant congregations developed differently. Most Messianic Jewish congregations recognize a head leader, and refer to him as "Pastor," "Rabbi," "Congregational Leader," or by a similar term. In some congregations, this head leader has virtually no accountability; he is the founder and king in chief. In other congregations, thank God, he is accountable either to elders, to the membership, or to both.

In contrast to these head-leader models, the biblical example emphasizes leadership by a plurality

of elders who are the governing authorities in their congregations. We see this model in 1 Timothy 5:17 which states:

“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.”

Also, Hebrews 13:17 admonishes us:

“Obey those who rule over you, and be submissive, for they watch out for your souls, as those who must give account. Let them do so with joy and not with grief, for that would be unprofitable for you.”

In Scripture, except for congregations in their formative stages, no one elder is identified as the titular head, although some believe that in Revelation 1:20 - 3:22, the “angels of the seven *ekklesia*” is a reference to elders, pastors or other officials who are the authoritative heads of their local congregations; I do not. An exception was made in the case of relatively new congregations which continued to be led by their founding apostles until such time as elders were recognized and ordained. When this was accomplished, the apostle generally moved on, but continued to have a fathering concern for the congregation, as well as authority to return to teach, correct, and to advise the elders in their governing responsibilities.

Not all elders in a congregation fulfill the same functions, and it is usual for one or more elders to rise to prominence in particular areas. It is natural and healthy for elders to recognize each other's' gifts, and to defer to those among themselves who are clearly anointed in particular areas of service. According to Ephesians 4:11 et seq., some elders can be expected to have an apostolic calling, and these should be released to serve in that way. Other elders may be pastoral or can be expected to primarily teach, and these should be encouraged and permitted to function according to their gift. It is the same for the other gifts.

The pastoral gift needs special mention because of the frequency with which gift pastors are made the titular heads of their congregations. This is completely defensible from an organizational perspective, but it is important to understand that it is not a biblical mandate. Who then are the pastors that have been given to us, and what is their biblically authorized function? The following Scripture verses offer strong evidence that a congregation's elders are responsible for its pastoring, although not all of its elders may be gifted to perform the function personally:

Jeremiah 3:15

“And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.”

Acts 20:28

“Therefore take heed to yourselves and all the flock among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the assembly of God which He purchased with His own

blood.”

1 Peter 5:1-3

“The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Messiah, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed. Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by constraint but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly; nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock.”

Let’s now look briefly at Leadership Titles and Descriptive Designations.

The first thing which must be said of leadership titles and designations, is that if their use causes men to stumble – to be lifted up in pride or to be the object of adulation by others -- then they need to be avoided.

In Scripture, men of God are seldom observed using titles; they most often refer to themselves just by name. So it was, for example, that Moses referred to himself as "Moses", David as "David", Saul as "Saul", and so forth. To demonstrate respect for persons of note, it was (and still is) an optional practice to add a title ahead of a person's name; thus we find in Scripture titles such as "King David" and "King Saul," and in modern usage we speak of "the Apostle Paul," and in Jewish usage, "Moshe Rabenu" (meaning Moses our master). As a matter of additional interest, Paul sometimes referred to his offices descriptively such as in Colossians 1:1:

“Greeting (from) Paul, an apostle of Yeshua the Messiah by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.”

Similarly, we read in 2 Timothy 1:11:

“... to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.”

Although Paul does not refer to himself as "Preacher Paul", "Apostle Paul", or "Rabbi Paul," others may have addressed him in such a manner, and my conclusion is that there is no biblical basis to either promote or preclude the use of titles and descriptive designations for congregational and other leaders.

The titles “*rav*” and "rabbi") are common in traditional Judaism and, for that reason, a growing number of Messianic Jewish leaders are opting for their use as a positive statement of cultural identification. Those who are opposed give their reasons, but I believe that the titles are fine. I do advocate, however, that until more common acceptance of their use occurs, it is prudent to precede the words "*rav*" and "rabbi" with the modifying words "Messianic" or "Messianic Jewish."

So let’s Summarize.

1. There are four kinds of leadership in Scripture; they are servant leadership, priestly leadership, governmental leadership, and equipping leadership.

2. The five gift ministries listed in Ephesians 4 fall into two categories – pastoral and prophetic. The ministries of prophet and teacher are prophetic, and the ministries of pastor, apostle and evangelist are pastoral.

3. It is God's protective wisdom that congregations be governed by a plurality of elders who are also responsible for the congregation's pasturing, although those elders who themselves do not have the pastoral gift can fulfill their responsibilities by appointing and overseeing those who do.

4. Elders should be ordained by the laying-on of hands, and be expected to receive the anointing of the Holy Spirit. Their functions are to exercise priestly, governmental and equipping leadership, and to set an example of Biblical conduct for their communities.

5. In all facets of congregational leadership – its structure, its titles, attitudes of its individual leaders -- anything that promotes the exaltation of men is wrong! With that proviso, the use of descriptive designations and titles (including "Rabbi") is permissible.