

GOVERNMENT AND LEADERSHIP IN A MESSIANIC JEWISH CONGREGATION

by Michael Rudolph

Standing astride the traditions of Judaism and Christianity, Messianic Jewish congregations are often laboratories for testing competing views 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 but some of the terms commonly used to refer to the heads of Messianic Jewish congregations.

Were only preference or nomenclature the issue, this subject would be trivial, for it would matter little 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, regrettably, some of those which are commonly employed are either not biblically authorized or are culturally inauthentic. It is the author's hope that this paper will clarify the Bible's position and the Jewish tradition in regard to leadership, and be a help to those who wish to conform more closely to those Jewish practices which are consistent with biblical teaching and example.¹

Servant Leadership

In both the Old and the New Covenant Scriptures, one clearly sees that God's ideal of leadership is servant hood (Deuteronomy 10:12; Mark 10:43-44).² Only God is to be elevated – not even the most prominent human leader (1 Peter 4:11). When Moses arrogantly scolded the Israelites and struck a rock to which he was only instructed to speak, God punished him (Numbers 20:2-12); 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 earthly reign, said:

“...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.” ... “For I have not spoken on My own authority; but the Father who sent Me gave Me a command, what I should say and what I should speak.” (John 5:19, 12:49).

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.³ When one considers God's New Covenant

¹Bible quotations throughout this paper are from "The New King James Version", The Holy Bible (Nashville: Thomas Nelson Publishers, 1982), with the words "Christ" replaced by "Messiah", "Jesus" replaced by "Yeshua", and "church" replaced by "assembly."

²See also, Matthew 20:28; Luke 22:27; John 13:4-5, 13:14, 21:16.

³Examples of divine appointments to serve others: John 15:16; Acts 9:15, 20:35; 2 Corinthians 3:6, 5:18; Ephesians 3:7-9; 1 Timothy 1:12.

servants of old, 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:

“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.” (Matthew 21:21).

“Most assuredly, I say to you, he who believes in Me, the works that I do he will do also; and greater works than these he will do, because I go to My Father.” (John 14:12)

Some servant leaders work in ministry full time and are financially supported there from, 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 (Acts 18:3) to support himself so as not be a burden to others (1 Thessalonians 2:9; 2 Thessalonians 3:8). Clearly, whether or not one's ministry provides one with financial sustenance is not an indicator of its importance.

Priestly Leadership

Priestly leadership is that which furthers the reconciliation between man and God. Abraham can be said to have performed a priestly role because he fathered the nation that was appointed by God to be a light to the rest of the world (Genesis 12:1, 17:1-4). God planned that his Covenant with Abraham would eventually be the vehicle for reconciling mankind to himself through covenant bonding with Messiah Yeshua.

Under the Sinai Covenant, Aaron and his sons served as God's appointed priests to the Israelites (Exodus 28:1). 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.⁴ 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)⁵.

Under the New Covenant, responsibility for the priesthood was transferred to Yeshua, who was made High Priest (Hebrews 4:14), and to his spiritual offspring, we who are his disciples (1 Peter 2:5; Revelation 1:5-6). Under Yeshua, the priesthood was broadened to include both Jew and non-Jew (1 Peter 2:9-10), and the recipients of priestly ministry were also expanded to include both Israelites and Gentiles (Acts 10:44-45). When Yeshua sent his disciples out to "the ends of the earth" to preach, witness, and exhibit the power of God (Matthew 28:18-20; Mark 16:14-18), it was a priestly commission that was 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 (Hebrews 7:15-17), sacrificed himself –

⁴"Priests and Priesthood", Encyclopedia Judaica, Menahem Haran, vol. 13, pp. 1076-1080 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).

⁵See also, Isaiah 49:6, 60:3, 61:6; Romans 15:7-13.

the ultimate unblemished lamb for the atonement of the world (John 1:29).

Governmental Leadership

At every stage of history, God repeated his same basic plan of government – either himself (directly) or his chosen anointed⁶ in charge, and a second cadre of responsible officials to assist.

The family is the most foundational governmental entity, 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 (husband) in charge of his family (Ephesians 5:22-24, 6:4), and gave him a woman (wife) for a helper (Genesis 2:18-25) 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.

With the appointment of Moses, came a new group of helpers called elders.⁷ Elder assistance to Moses was first suggested by Moses' father-in-law Jethro (Exodus 18:14-27), but the totality of Scripture demonstrates that the institution of eldership was God's idea:⁸

“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’” (Numbers 11:16-17).

From that event and throughout Old Covenant history, elder rule under an anointed head-of-government⁹ was God's best for Israel. Joshua followed Moses,¹⁰ and then came a succession of judges, kings, members of tribunals and others.^{11,12} All of these leaders worked with and received counsel from local elders¹³ who reportedly were ordained by the laying-on of hands in

⁶When God anointed a person for leadership, it was always with the expectation that the anointed person was to act under God's direction. For Yeshua expressing this principle in regard to his own mission, see John 5:19 and 12:49.

⁷zagen, Hebrew singular; πρεσβυτερος, Greek.

⁸For examples of elder rule in Deuteronomy, see verses 19:12; 21:3,6,19; 22:15 and 25:9.

⁹See footnote 6.

¹⁰For Moses imparting a portion of his Spirit to Joshua by the laying on of hands, see Numbers 27:22-23, read along with Deuteronomy 34:9.

¹¹Pir'key A'vot 1:1

¹²The establishment of judicial bodies (such as the Great Sanhedrin and smaller tribunals) is commanded in Scripture (Deuteronomy 16:18). See also, Maimonides, Yad, Sanhedrin 1:1-3.

¹³"Elder", Encyclopedia Judaica, Moshe Weinfeld, vol. 6, p. 578 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).

an unbroken chain from the original seventy.^{14,15} The New Covenant continued the pattern of elder rule (1 Timothy 5:17)^{16,17} under an anointed head-of-government, the very large difference being, that the head-of-government was now the Messiah himself (Isaiah 9:7).¹⁸

Equipping Leadership

Equipping means imparting to another something that enables or assists 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 (Genesis 1:29), while the manna (Exodus 16:4) and water (Exodus 17:6) 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 the natural expectation of his creation.

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 (Exodus 40:34-35); God's recorded Word (his Scriptures) that teaches us about Him, commands us according to his law, and guides us in his wisdom (Exodus 32:15-16); the Messiah who became flesh to walk among us, teach us and then die for us (John 1:14, 3:16); the Holy Spirit who indwelt prophets of old, and now indwells all disciples of Yeshua, giving comfort, counsel and spiritual gifts (Acts 1:4-5);¹⁹ and finally, God's unfailing love for us, for which reason He provided all of the aforementioned and more (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).²⁰ His plan is to achieve world redemption through regenerated mankind -- his original creation.

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

“Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it.”
(Proverbs 22:6).

¹⁴Maimonides, Yad, Sanhedrin 4:2.

¹⁵See also, "Mantle of Leadership" and *s'miychah*, infra.

¹⁶See also, Titus 1:5; Hebrews 13:17.

¹⁷For examples of elders serving in New Covenant functions, see Acts 15:2; James 5:14.

¹⁸See also, Jeremiah 23:5; Daniel 7:14; John 1:49, 18:37; Revelation 7:14, 19:16.

¹⁹See also, Ezekiel 36:27; John 14:17; 1 Corinthians 3:16.

²⁰See also, Ezekiel 44:23; John 21:15-17; 2 Timothy 2:24.

“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” (Deuteronomy 6:4-9).

Scripture reveals the kinds of equipping leaders that 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.” (Ephesians 4:11-12).

The continuing verses of Scripture 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 (Ephesians 4:13-16).

The author proposes that the five Ephesians 4 ministries fall into two categories – pastoral and prophetic. The prophetic ministries are prophet and teacher,²¹ and the pastoral ministries are pastor, apostle and evangelist.²² 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 the Gentile nations.²³ The prophetic gift, the teaching gift and the pastoral gift, were, however, in obvious operation; Moses, for example, possessed all three.

Mantle of Leadership

Ordination to leadership is often understood as merely "installing or elevating a special officer of the congregation".²⁴ True Biblical ordination, on the other hand, 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.²⁵

²¹The prophet receives revelational messages from God and delivers them to whom they are intended. The gift teacher receives revelational understanding of Scripture, and transmits that understanding to others.

²²Pastors are shepherds -- caretakers of sheep; the word "pastor" also refers to congregational leaders who care for men within the congregation. Evangelists care for men by preaching the Word of God to the world outside of the congregation, in the hope that those who hear may come to belief. Apostles establish new congregations of those who have come to faith, and temporarily act as the congregation's only leader until other leaders are raised up.

²³Joseph R. Rosenbloom, Conversion to Judaism: From the Biblical Period to the Present, pp. 3-31 (Cincinnati: Hebrew Union College Press, 1978).

²⁴"Ordain", The Zondervan Pictorial Encyclopedia of the Bible, W. White, Jr., vol. 4, p. 543 (Grand Rapids: Zondervan Publishing House, 1977).

²⁵There is no single word in Scripture for "ordination" that would convey a certainty of its official existence. The word $\chi\epsilon\delta\omicron\tau\omicron\nu\epsilon\acute{\iota}\nu$ translated "appointed" in Acts 14:23 has been understood to mean "ordained." Reference:

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. Priests, for example, were ordained with oil (Leviticus 8:30), while the Levites were ordained by *s'miychah*,²⁶ the laying on of hands (Numbers 8:10-12).²⁷ Kings and prophets too were anointed -- probably with oil (1 Kings 19:15-16), while Elisha was ordained by being covered with Elijah's cloak (1 Kings 19:19-21).²⁸ After the giving of the Law at Mt. Sinai, God sovereignly transferred a portion of Moses' spirit to seventy elders (Numbers 11:16-26). After that, transfers of spirit and authority continued from elder to elder by *s'miychah*:

“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” (*Maim Yad, Sanh 4:2*).^{29,30}

Ordination under the New Covenant has some similarities and some differences from ordinations under the old. One similarity is the variability of how 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.³¹ In one case, spiritual gifts were imparted through prophecy and the laying on of hands (1 Timothy 6:7; 2 Timothy 1:6); therefore, one may justifiably conclude that man may, on occasion, participate in the impartation of spiritual gifts. There is, however, no New Covenant Scriptural precedent for men ordaining individuals into Ephesians 4 gift ministries.³² As for the ordination of kings, it is now un-needed, since Yeshua has become our only king.

The manner of appointing New Covenant elders and deacons is in marked contrast to the previously mentioned ministries. Every example in Scripture depicts elders installing other elders (or deacons) (Acts 6:3-7, 14:23; Titus 1:5), and almost certainly with the laying on of

"ordination", Dictionary of the Apostolic Church, Arthur John MacLean, vol. II, p. 114, Ed.: James Hastings (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House, 1973).

²⁶Literal meaning: "leaning of the hands".

²⁷For uses of *s'miychah* other than in ordinations, see Leviticus 1:4; Acts 8:14-17, 28:8.

²⁸A play on words. The Hebrew word for "cloak" is "*aderet*," also translated "mantle."

²⁹"*Semikhah*", Encyclopedia Judaica, Aaron Rothkoff, vol. 14, p. 1140 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).

³⁰See also, Pirke Avoth 1.1 for alleged similar transmission of the oral law.

³¹The sending out of Saul and Barnabus with fasting, prayer and the laying on of hands, was for their mission – not for initiation into office (Acts 13:1-3).

³²One may reach an opposite conclusion if one considers analogous Old Covenant examples, eg., Joshua, Elisha, David, etc.

hands (1 Timothy 5:17-22).³³ 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).

The Local Congregation: 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'shiyvot*),³⁴ and synagogues.^{35,36,37} 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 these early academies, the later academies generally included a court (*beyt diyn*),³⁸ and it is not unlikely that the Jewish judicial council of Yeshua's time (*San'hed'riyn*) could trace its beginnings to the Babylonian academies. Synagogues were institutions developed solely for prayer and study.^{39,40} Although overseen by elders,⁴¹ its prayer services functioned through the general participation of all its male members, with coordination and administration by a specially appointed elder known as the *ρχισυνωγος* (*Archisynagogus*) or *Rosh haK'nesset*.⁴² Every educated man in the congregation was deemed qualified to serve and lead in every capacity, and was expected to do so.⁴³

After Yeshua's death and resurrection, his apostles formed local congregations that had greater authority than the synagogue, for they were the places from which New Covenant elders

³³The subject of 1 Timothy 5:17-22 is eldership. Verse 22, therefore, contemplates the appointment of elders by laying on of hands.

³⁴Some authorities date the *y'shiyvah* earlier.

³⁵Hayim H. Donin, To Pray As A Jew, p. 12 (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1980).

³⁶Abraham Millgram, Jewish Worship, p. 67 (Philadelphia: Jewish Publication Society of America, 1971).

³⁷"Synagogue", Encyclopaedia Judaica, Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, vol. 15, p. 580 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971), expresses the view that the synagogue originated during the Babylonian exile, but notes that Talmudic sources attribute the synagogue's origin to Moses.

³⁸"Academies in Babylonia and Erez Israel", Encyclopedia Judaica, Moshe Beer, vol. 2, pp. 201-202 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).

³⁹Hayim H. Donin, p. 12.

⁴⁰Abraham Millgram, p. 67.

⁴¹Emil Schurer, The History of the Jewish People in the Age of Jesus Christ, vol. 2, pp. 434-5, T & T Clark, Ltd. (Edinburgh: 1986).

⁴²In Acts 13:15, Paul and Barnabas are addressed by the Archisynagogus.

⁴³Emil Schurer, vol. 2, pp. 434-5.

governed the community and judged the controversies of its members. The following Scriptures exemplify the judicial function of the New Covenant congregation:

“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.”
(Matthew 18:15-20).

“*Dare any of you, having a matter against another, go to law before the unrighteous, and not before the saints?*” (1 Corinthians 6:1)?

When Yeshua taught about New Covenant congregations, he used an Aramaic or Hebrew equivalent to ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*), the Greek word for "congregation" which appears three times in the Gospel Scriptures (Matthew 16:18, 18:17). Strong's Greek Dictionary defines ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*) as:

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

Yeshua's words in Matthew 18:15-20 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 ἐκκλησία (*ekklesia*) which can possibly apply to Yeshua's teachings about his congregation is:

“a calling out, ie. a popular meeting, espec. a religious congregation (Jewish synagogue) – 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 the judicial function of the *Sanhedrin*.⁴⁴

If this is so, two historically extra biblical institutions may have become Biblical through combining them, and by Yeshua's endorsement.⁴⁵

⁴⁴See footnote 12.

⁴⁵The believers' "meeting" or "assembly" is referred to as a synagogue (James 2:2).

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*^{46,47} left Judaism in crisis with the synagogue as the only surviving Jewish institution. Soon, new courts (*beyt dinim*) and academies (*y'shiyvat*) 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.⁴⁸ The *Chasidim* of middle Europe carried the idea of a head Rabbi or *tsadik* even further by creating the concept of "*Rebbe*,"⁴⁹ a rabbi elevated to be in charge of the community because he supposedly had special revelation, powers, and authority from God.⁵⁰

Congregational Headship and Authority

Synagogue headship evolved from the administrative oversight of a *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 generally a clear demarcation between spiritual and business matters. On the spiritual side, the Head Rabbi is sometimes assisted by other rabbis and a cantor, 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 writs of divorce are generally carried out by a regional Jewish court (*bet din*). Spiritual discipline of congregational members and adjudication of conflicts between individuals is rare, if it exists at all, and discipline of disorderly members is generally carried out by the synagogue Board. 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 the Rabbi, Congregational Leader, Pastor, or a similar term. In some congregations, this head leader has virtually no accountability; in others, he is accountable to elders, to the general membership, or to both.

The New Covenant Biblical example emphasizes leadership by a plurality of elders who are the governing authorities in their congregations:⁵¹

⁴⁶Emil Schurer, vol. 2, p. 209.

⁴⁷"Sanhedrin", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Hugo Mantel, vol. 14, p. 836 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).

⁴⁸"Rabbi, Rabbinate", *Encyclopedia Judaica*, Ed., vol. 13, p. 1447, Jerusalem, 1971.

⁴⁹A *Yiddish* word.

⁵⁰Joseph Telushkin, *Jewish Literacy*, pp. 216-217, William Morrow and Company, Inc. (New York: 1991).

⁵¹See "Governmental Leadership", *supra*.

“Let the elders who rule well be counted worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in the word and doctrine.” (1 Timothy 5:17).

“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.” (Hebrews 13:17).

Except for congregations in their formative stages, no one elder is identified in the New Covenant Scriptures as a congregation's titular head.⁵² An exception is seen in the case of a relatively new congregation which is led by its founding apostle until the time that elders are recognized and ordained. When that was accomplished, the apostle generally moved on, but continued to have a fatherly concern for the congregation, and authority to return to teach, correct, and advise. This is not to say that all the elders fulfilled the same functions, and that one elder did not rise to prominence. It is natural and healthy for elders to recognize each others' giftings, and to defer to those among themselves who are clearly anointed in areas of service. It is also natural for one to take the lead. 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 can be expected to be primarily teachers, and these should be encouraged to pray for understanding so they will equip the body with Biblical truth through their teaching. It is the same for the other gifts.

The pastoral gift needs special mention because of the frequency with which pastors are made the titular heads of congregations. Not only is there no Biblical example of such a thing, but except for the Ephesians 4 reference, there is no further mention of the term "pastor" in all of the New Covenant Scriptures. This would hardly seem to be sufficient Biblical authority to justify elevating those who have the pastoral gift to a position superior to other elders and other gift ministers. Yet, ironically, the gift which is spoken of least in New Covenant Scripture is the one which receives the most attention in the ecclesiastical world.

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 its pastors, and that the authorized role of the pastor is to lead by example and to feed God's flock with knowledge and understanding:

⁵²Some believe that the "angels of the seven churches" (Revelation 1:20-3:22) is a reference to elders, pastors or other officials who are the authoritative titular heads of their local congregations (John Wesley, Explanatory Notes Upon the New Testament, vol. II (Grand Rapids: Baker Book House Company, 1983)). More recent commentaries set forth other views which characterize the "angels" as heavenly guardians or the prevailing spirit of the churches (Leon Morris, The Book of Revelation, Tyndale New Testament Commentaries, revised edition, pp. 56-57 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1988)). See also, Robert H. Mounce, The Book of Revelation, The New International Commentary on the New Testament, p. 82 (Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans Publishing Co., 1984); R. H. Charles, A Critical and Exegetical Commentary on the Revelation of St. John, The International Critical Commentary, p. 34 (Edinburgh: T & T Clark, 1985). The author's view is that each of these angels or messengers is an apostle with spiritual responsibility for all the congregations of a designated city or region.

“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.” (Acts 20:28).

“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.” (1 Peter 5:1-3).

“And I will give you shepherds according to My heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding.” (Jeremiah 3:15).⁵³

Historically, pastors falling into sin have brought spiritual ruin to many a new and undisciplined believer that followed and trusted. This is warned against in Jeremiah 23:1-2, and one cannot but surmise that the prominence which has been given to pastors in modern times has been a contributing factor.

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 must be avoided. In the Bible, men of God are seldom observed using titles; they most often are referred to just by name. So it was, for example, that Moses is referred to as "Moses", David as "David", Saul as "Saul", and so forth. Occasionally, 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" (1 Kings 1:31) and "King Saul" (1 Samuel 18:6). Similarly, in the modern Jewish community we hear of "Moshe Rabenu," and the title Rabbi is in common usage. The Apostle Paul sometimes referred to his offices descriptively:

“Greeting (from) Paul, an apostle of Yeshua the Messiah by the will of God, and Timothy our brother.” (Colossians 1:1).

“... to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle, and a teacher of the Gentiles.” (2 Timothy 1:11).

Although Paul does not refer to himself as "Preacher Paul", "Apostle Paul", or "Rabbi Paul", others may have addressed him in such a manner.⁵⁴ Indeed, there appears to be no Biblical basis to either promote or preclude the use of titles and descriptive designations for congregational leaders.

⁵³See also, Jeremiah 23:4, Ezekiel 34:23 and John 21:17.

⁵⁴Similar to John's disciples addressing Yeshua as "Rabbi" (meaning teacher) in John 1:38.

The titles “*Rav*” and “*Rabbi*”⁵⁵ need special mention. They are universally used by all branches of Judaism and, for that reason, a growing number of Messianic Jewish leaders have adopted it as a positive statement of cultural identification. Those who oppose such usage usually give one or more of the following reasons: (a) the titles imply special training prior to ordination; (b) the titles imply an adherence to rabbinic authority; (c) the titles can mislead by inferring that those who hold them are non-messianic; (d) Matthew 23:6-8 seems to instruct against their use.

As to the first objection, if use of “*rav*” and “*rabbi*” is limited to congregational elders, specialized training (or its equivalent) and ordination should have already occurred. The content and length of rabbinic training is already far from being uniform among the various branches of Judaism, and there is therefore no existing standard to have to adhere to. As to the second objection, rabbinical authority has nothing to do with the term “*rabbi*”; it has to do with how one interprets Deuteronomy 17:8-11.⁵⁶ As to the third objection, if “*rav*” and “*rabbi*” become widely used among Messianic Jewish leaders, everyone will eventually become aware of this use. However, until that recognition occurs, it may be prudent to precede the words “*rav*” and “*rabbi*” with the modifying words “*Messianic*” or “*Messianic Jewish*”.

Answering the fourth objection requires additional perspective. “*Rabiy*” derives from “*rav*” which, in Biblical Hebrew, literally means “great.”⁵⁷ By the generation after Hillel, the meaning of “*rav*” had become “master” as distinguished from “slave,”⁵⁸ and so “*rabiy*” literally meant “my master.” The titles “*rav*” and “*rabiy*” were used similarly, except that “*rabiy*” inferred ordination (*s'miychah*), whereas “*rav*” did not.⁵⁹

When the literal meaning of a word is not the meaning intended, the word is said to be an idiom. Such is the case for the word *ραββι*, the Greek transliteration of the Hebrew word *rabiy* and the English word “*rabbi*”:

“Then Yeshua turned, and seeing them following, said to them, “What do you seek?” They said to Him, “Rabbi” (which is to say, when translated, teacher), “where are you staying?” (John 1:38).

In this verse of Scripture, the title “*Rabbi*”, whose literal meaning has been shown to be “my

⁵⁵Transliterated spelling.

⁵⁶Deuteronomy 17:8-11 is the basis of rabbinic authority in interpreting Scripture. See Joel Roth, The Halakhic Process: A Systematic Analysis, pp. 115-116 (New York: The Jewish Theological Seminary of America, 1986).

⁵⁷“*Rabbi, Rabbinate*”, Encyclopedia Judaica, Louis Isaac Rabinowitz, vol. 13, pp. 1445-6 (Jerusalem: Keter, 1971).

⁵⁸ibid.

⁵⁹ibid. *Rabi* was used in the land of Israel, whereas *rav* was used by the sages in Babylonia.

master," is used idiomatically to mean "teacher".⁶⁰ Yeshua knew of this dual meaning of "Rabbi" and that its use was perfectly proper, so he chose to teach a lesson through the irony of seeming to forbid it.⁶¹ Referring to the scribes and the Pharisees, Yeshua exclaimed:

"They love ... greetings in the market places, and to be called by men, 'Rabbi, Rabbi.' But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Messiah, and you are all brethren." (Matthew 23:6-8).

We get a further indication of Yeshua's irony from the next verses:

"Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. And do not be called teachers; for one is your Teacher, the Messiah." (Matthew 23:9-10).

The Greek words for "father" and "teacher" in the foregoing Matthew 23:6-10 verses are derived from *πατηρ* and *καθηγητης* respectively. Although translated "teacher" in the New King James Version,⁶² neither *καθηγητης* nor any of its possible derivatives appear elsewhere in the New Covenant Greek text. Most of the other occurrences of "teacher" (including the parenthetical definition for "Rabbi" in John 1:38) are translated from derivatives of *διδσκαλος*:

"I am speaking the truth in Messiah and not lying -- a teacher of the Gentiles in faith and truth." (1 Timothy 2:7).

"... to which I was appointed a preacher, an apostle and a teacher of the Gentiles." (2 Timothy 1:11).

Also, as expected from the ironic use of these verses, there are several instances in Scripture where "father" (*πατηρ*) is clearly a proper descriptive term:

"Your father Abraham rejoiced to see My day, and he saw it and was glad." (John 8:56).

"Honor your father and mother ... And you, fathers ..." (Ephesians 6:2-3).

"Was not Abraham our father justified by works when he offered Isaac his son on the altar?" (James 2:21).

"I write to you fathers ... I have written to you fathers ..." (1 John 2:13-14).

Finally, Yeshua explained the point he was making:

⁶⁰The Greek word is a derivative of *διδσκαλος*.

⁶¹This is not the prevalent opinion of most commentators.

⁶²The King James Version translates *καθηγητης* as "master".

“But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. And whoever exalts himself will be abased, and he who humbles himself will be exalted.” (Matthew 23:11-12).

Clearly then, Yeshua was not forbidding use of the term "Rabbi," but was using the term ironically to teach against self-exaltation.

Summary and Conclusion

1. It is God's protective wisdom that congregations be governed by a plurality of elders who are also the pastors – not by a single head-leader unless in the formative stages, and the leader is in accountable submission to elder authority.
2. Elders are ordained by the laying-on of hands, to receive the transmitted anointing of the Holy Spirit. Their functions are to exercise priestly, governmental and equipping leadership, and to set an example of Biblical conduct in their communities.
3. In all facets of congregational leadership – structures, titles, leaders' attitudes – anything that promotes the exaltation of men is wrong! With that proviso, the use of descriptive designations and titles (including "Rabbi") is permissible.

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