

# KINGDOM GOVERNMENT & SPIRITUAL GIFTS

By Michael Rudolph

## Three Levels of Government

There are three levels of government described in the New Covenant Scriptures. The first and highest level is that of the King (King Messiah) who rules from heaven, and extends His Kingdom to earth. The King rules directly through the Holy Spirit. He is assisted by angels and earthly servants, chief of whom are apostles and prophets (Luke 11:49; Ephesians 3:1-7).<sup>1</sup>

The next level is the level of inter-congregational government headed by apostles. In addition to being individually gifted (at minimum apostolically), apostles are sent by the King (e.g. Galatians 1:1) to plant or strengthen congregations, bring them under the King's authority, and govern them in the King's name. In their capacity as inter-congregational elders, apostles are the King's emissaries for uniting and unifying the body of believers.<sup>2</sup> Apostles rarely minister alone. To govern effectively, they gather to themselves persons such as prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, and others who have gifts that compliment their own (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-12).

Next is the level of congregational government headed by congregational elders. Elders are overseers or rulers (1 Timothy 5:17). Ideally, a congregation's initial elders are appointed by apostles, and groomed to take over the governance of their respective congregations (Acts 14:23; Titus 1:5).<sup>3</sup> As with apostles, in order to compliment their own gifts and govern effectively, congregational elders gather to themselves persons such as prophets, teachers, workers of miracles, and others (1 Corinthians 12:28; Ephesians 4:11-12). Congregational elders may also appoint subordinate officers known as deacons (Acts 6:1-6). Deacons, like elders, are individually and variously gifted, and it is natural for congregational elders to utilize them in the areas of their gifts. Nevertheless deacons are, first and foremost, servants in their respective congregations, and part of the governmental infrastructure.

## Governing Ministers and Spiritual Gifts

Scripture teaches that there is a difference between governing ministers and gifted or gift ministers.<sup>4</sup> This is illustrated in Acts chapter 15, in which a controversy regarding doctrine was

---

<sup>1</sup> The uniqueness of apostles and prophets is that apostles minister in governmental authority, while prophets minister in the revelation of God. Together, these form the foundation for all the other gifts in the household of God (1 Corinthians 14:1-4; Ephesians 2:19-20).

<sup>2</sup> These conclusions are drawn from observing the activities of the apostles as they are described in the New Covenant Scriptures. After planting congregations they would move on, but continue to exercise oversight through correspondence and sometimes through return visits (Acts 15:36).

<sup>3</sup> In Scripture, after the apostle moved on, the elders who were appointed continued to govern with only occasional intervention. One new responsibility they had was to appoint their own successors.

brought before a council of apostles and elders at Jerusalem (verse 2). In their deliberations, Scripture from the Old Covenant prophets was invoked (verses 15-17), the process of prophecy was employed (verse 28), and New Covenant prophets were in attendance (verses 30-32). Nevertheless, the controversy was judged by apostles and elders only (Acts 15:6, 16:4) – not by prophets or any other gift or gifted ministers who might have been present. The Council’s decision was then proclaimed by James, who was an apostle (Acts 15:13-21), and it was confirmed by the remaining apostles and elders (Acts 15:22). Only the apostles and elders had authority to decide the matter. Others who were present, even those with gifts, did not.

### **Gift vs. Gifted**

The reader may have noticed this paper’s repeated reference to “gifted” or “gift ministers.” Scripturally, there is a difference. All believers are commissioned to minister (Matthew 28:16-20), and all who pray can expect to receive one or more gifts (1 Corinthians 1:7, 12:7-10; 1 Timothy 4:14). Anyone who receives a spiritual gift may be said to be “gifted,” and is expected to use the gift to serve others (1 Corinthians 14:12; 1 Peter 4:10). There are, however, some who are specially appointed for the service of equipping the body of believers, almost to the extent of occupying an office in their gift. These are the so-called “gift” ministers referred to in 1 Corinthians 12:28 and Ephesians 4:11-12.<sup>5</sup> These ministers are not only “gifted” – they are themselves God’s “gifts” to the body of believers.

### **A Common Mistake**

When governing authority and giftedness reside in the same person, we sometimes make the mistake of presuming that his authority comes from his gift or gift office rather than from his eldership. The most common example of this today is the prevalent belief that pastors are necessarily the heads of their congregations. A pastor (or any other gift or gifted minister) may indeed also be an elder,<sup>6</sup> and if he is, it is by virtue of his eldership and not his pastoral gift or pastoral office that he has the authority to govern.<sup>7</sup> If he is not currently a sitting elder,<sup>8</sup> he may nevertheless serve his congregation as a shepherd (Jeremiah 3:15),<sup>9</sup> provided he is authorized to do so by the congregation’s governing elders to whom God has given the primary responsibility for

---

<sup>4</sup> There are some ways in which they are also the same. For example, in Acts 20:28 and 1 Peter 5:1-2, one sees that elders have responsibility for pastoring. Also, in James 5:14-15, one sees that elders have responsibility for prayer for the sick.

<sup>5</sup> The list in Ephesians 4:11-12 is sometimes referred to as “the five-fold gift ministries.”

<sup>6</sup> The Lord Himself is both king and shepherd (Psalm 23).

<sup>7</sup> For Scriptures which show that shepherding and governing are distinct functions, see 2 Samuel 5:2, 1 Chronicles 11:2, Jeremiah 51:23 and Acts 20:28.

<sup>8</sup> A person may be an elder in spiritual maturity without sitting on a congregation’s governing board.

<sup>9</sup> A shepherd (Greek word *poima-ino* and the Hebrew word *ra’ah*) is one who feeds or takes care of sheep (Genesis 46:32; Psalm 23; Isaiah 40:11; Ezekiel 34:2). An elder (from the Greek word *presbuteros* or *episkopos* and from the Hebrew word *zaqen*) is an overseer of mature age – one who guards or watches over the welfare of others (Hebrews 13:17).

shepherding (Acts 20:28; 1 Peter 5:1-2).<sup>10</sup> Since a pastor who is not an elder may not exercise governing authority, he cannot be the head of his congregation.

What has been said concerning pastors is also true of prophets, gift teachers, evangelists and the other gift ministers. Unless they are also apostles or elders, they have no governmental authority, and must exercise their gifts under those who do.

### **Headship and Plurality in Government**

Scripture reveals that apostles sometimes ministered in groups and sometimes alone. Peter ministered with John (Acts 3:1-10), and Paul with Barnabas until they separated (Acts 13:1-3). Then, Barnabas traveled with Mark (Acts 15:39), and Paul with Silas (Acts 15:40).<sup>11</sup> There were also times when larger groups of apostles ministered together (Acts 4:33, 5:12), and other times when apostles ministered alone. (Acts 9:17-20, 32-43; 18:24-28).

Except for when congregations were in the midst of being planted, there are no examples in Scripture showing congregational elders governing alone. There are, however, some verses of Scripture in which ambiguous language has been credited as evidence for the existence of head or lead elders.

The first such Scriptures reveal captains, rulers, and officers<sup>12</sup> being made heads over groups of from 1000 down to 10 men (Exodus 18:19-21; Deuteronomy 1:12-15; 1 Chronicles 26:26, 27:1). While it is unlikely that more than one person was put in charge of a group as small as 10, the Hebrew syntax unquestionably allows for more than one leader being assigned to any of the groupings.

A second group of Scriptures describes how God anointed seventy elders of Israel with the Spirit taken from Moses, thereby enabling them to assist Moses in bearing the people's burdens (Numbers 11:16-17, 24-25). Scripture does not, however, reveal the kinds of groups in which these elders served.

A third group of Scriptures reveals the special leadership role of James<sup>13</sup> (Acts 12:16-17, 15:13-21), and still another verse of Scripture reveals that, as between Paul and Barnabas, Paul was the chief speaker (Acts 14:12). Paul could not, however, have had greater authority than Barnabas, for had that been the case, Barnabas could not have left Paul and gone his separate way (Acts 13:1-3). A reference which is sometimes offered to support the existence of headship in elder or apostolic groups is Revelation 1:20-3:22; it is uncertain here as to who the messengers to the seven congregations are.

---

<sup>10</sup> See also, Matthew 2:6.

<sup>11</sup> Before Sinai, and until Aaron was anointed high priest, Moses and Aaron ministered together apostolically.

<sup>12</sup> Derived from the Hebrew words *sar*, *ro'eh*, and *shoter*.

<sup>13</sup> James was an apostle.

The Scriptures referenced above comprise little evidence that God intends there to be a head apostle for each group of apostles and a head elder for each congregation's eldership. That notwithstanding, Scripture does not preclude such cases of prominence, and it is reasonable to expect, as a result of special anointing and gifting, that certain elders will sometimes rise to prominence and recognition beyond that of their peers. When that happens and the Lord leads, such gifted elders need not hesitate to move individually and powerfully in their gifts. In doing so, however, they must not forget that their governing authority as elders is only to be used in conjunction with their fellow elders.

It may also happen, from time to time, that a non-elder is recognized to have special anointing and gifting. He too may operate powerfully and prominently in his gift, but he has no governing authority, and must be in submission, with his gift, to the elders who have the oversight.

December 20, 1997