

The Gospel Herald

“As the truth is in Jesus” (Ephesians 4:21)

For The LORD’S PILGRIMS, STRANGERS & SOJOURNERS

by
Donald E. Martin, Sr.

The Plural Ministry

INTRODUCTION:

In the following article, I would like to set forth three areas as they relate to their scriptural support. This article has not been compiled to imply that there is no such position(s) as PASTOR, ELDER, TEACHER, OVERSEER, BISHOP, or EVANGELIST. These titles are scriptural as God shall raise up those with such gifts of the ministry in the local assembly, yet not as dictators or lords over all other members of the local body of believers. The plural ministry is not a mere ideal of man, but a New Testament admonition “for the edification of all.”

- First: The plural ministry as a scriptural concept*
Second: The dangers of the singular ministry
Third: The values and advantages of the Plural ministry

I. The plural ministry as the scriptural ideal

The foundation and beginning of the Christian Church is based upon the person of the Lord Jesus Christ, and built by him, the Churches living Head. Christ selected twelve men from his followers (Luke 6:13) and taught them. As we shall later note, this was the beginning of the “plural” ministry.

The men chosen were not educated in men’s wisdom, but instructed at the feet of the Master. The world had made an observation “that these men had been with Jesus”. These men became the leaders of the Christian Church following the ascension of the Lord Jesus. We note further in the ministry of Christ that on one occasion he appointed 70 (Luke 10:1) and sent them out two by two. This again places emphasis on the “Plural” ministry. In the beginning of this study let us examine the first ordination in the first chapter of the Acts of the apostles.

Judas had perished as a traitor and died a suicide (vv.16-18). A need of replacement was felt, and two men were found qualified (vv. 21-23). Since two were qualified for this office, they resorted to prayer and the use of the lot. The determined will of God was manifest in the choice of Matthias (v.26). We now have a ministry that numbered twelve for a congregation of one hundred and twenty. This was indeed a “plural” ministry.

In the sixth chapter of Acts we find seven additional men chosen to meet the additional needs of a rapidly growing congregation. The Church had made tremendous growth, having now at least five thousand members (Acts 4:4). The apostles were unable to meet the needs of this large growth among the Lords Church. At the request of the apostles, the congregation prayerfully selected seven men, who were brought to the apostles and approved by them. We commonly call them “Deacons” because of their responsibility of ministering to the physical needs of the congregation although some were involved in the preaching of the gospel such as Philip “the Evangelist” (Acts 21:8). We now have nineteen ministers in a very large congregation in Jerusalem. We hear of over-worked ministers in our day, but the early Church met this need by choosing more ministerial assistance from the laity.

Let us look at the Church at Antioch, which later became the home base for most of the extension gospel ministry in the region. This church may have begun with one set apart Elder, but did not remain so for long. As we examine the developments, the Church at Jerusalem became scattered because of persecution. Some of the scattered Christians ministered and witnessed the gospel as far as Antioch in Syria, where a number responded to their gospel ministering and were added to the Lords Church(s). Barnabas was sent out by the Jerusalem Church to care for the work. After investigation, he apparently felt the need for more assistance. At least he does not attempt to do it all alone. He now calls Paul to assist him with the work of the ministry. The ministry is now in the “Plural”. But Acts 13:1, it would seem that the Church was experiencing growth and we find five men now ministering the work of God. Someone had aptly commented, “An excellently cared for Church.”

*We do not see anything in the New Testament of what is so common today as the “**one-man ministry concept**” set over a congregation of our Lord’s local gathered Church.*

In one congregation, there could possibly be a number of brethren gifted to minister the gospel in the assembly without jealousy, envy and discord. Paul and Barnabas were later sent out, yet there were three ministers remaining behind to care for the work.

As we observe the examples of the Churches established as a result of the apostle’/disciples’ itinerate ministering. These churches needed leadership. Because of Paul’s previous persecution of the Church of Christ and the divine calling of Paul, he was not permitted to remain long in some locations. Paul, retracing his steps during his first itinerate traveling preaching the gospel (Acts 14:22-23) ordained “Elders”

(Plural) in every Church. The word “Elder” could be translated or interpreted as “pastor, overseer, and or bishop. Later we find that Paul left Titus at Crete (Titus 1:5) to set things in order. We find that the divine order was the “Plural ministry”. Titus was told to ordain “Elders” (plural) in every city. WE have no record that more than one Church existed in these cities. It is also implied that the “Elders” were chosen from the local congregation and not brought in from some distant place. All through Paul’s ministry as a chosen apostle of God, we see much of the same pattern.

Of the many references which speak of the ministry in a definite assembly throughout the early Christian churches, it is referred to without exception in the “plural”. The Church at Ephesus (Acts 20:17,28), at Philippi (Phil.1:1), at Crete (Titus 1:5), at Thessalonica (I Thess.5:12), all are referred to as having a “plural” ministry. In other general references to the Church, such as in Hebrews 13:7 and James 5:14, the leadership and ministry was not “singular”, but in the “plural” perception.

We must conclude that the “plural” ministry is the scriptural “Ideal”. We believe God has thus ordained the “plural” ministry in operation for the good and best interest of his called out local assemblies. The closer we stay to the scriptural example of the “plural” ministry the less problems we will have in the congregations of Gods Church, seeking to esteem others greater than ourselves that the gifts of the ministry may be manifested for the edification of the whole assembly.

II. DANGERS ARISING FROM THE “SINGULAR” MINISTRY

Often in our current society whenever the Christian (so called) church turns to a “singular” minister, it involves a salaried minister elder/pastor in most cases. The typical one man “singular” ministry in most cases elevates the Pastor as the sole spokesman in the church ministry. Although, most assemblies have men designated as Deacons, most are recommended and or chosen by the pastor to such position as not to “challenge” the Pastors position and or authority. This “singular” ministry often makes the Pastor as the “leader” of the assembly rather than its “Servant”. The pastor is to “serve” the assembly, to oversee her spiritual and material needs, and minister the whole counsel of Gods word as a faithful shepherd called to watch for the souls of those which make up the Church assembly.

With the “hireling” ministry, there is the tendency to be influenced by those which are the heavy financial supporters of the assembly. When a minister considers a church for pastoral responsibility, he is often tempted to consider how large the support will be. Rural assemblies or smaller churches naturally will be considered as second best for the “professional” influenced minister. As before reviewed, each assembly had a “plural” ministry and operated on different principles. Jesus plainly condemns the “hireling” spirit in a minister and shows the danger(s) of placing material gain or personal advantage ahead of the spiritual needs of the flock of God (Jn. 10: 12.13).

The apostle Peter also speaks out against ministerial service being rendered for “filthy lucre” (I Peter 5:2). Paul told the Corinthian Church, “I seek not yours, but you” (II Corin.12:14).

One writer says thus, “The word of God is emphatically against preaching or doing any other gospel work for money. Gospel work has no money value; it cannot be measured by dollars and cents. The Bible condemns men who serve for filthy lucre and disqualifies from the office of the ministry those who would enter for money (I Tim.3:3; Tit. 1:7,11; I Peter 5:2). The gospel is **FREE**.”

When the minister is hired, there is the tendency to think and consider the ministry as being on the same level as other occupations:

When considering a vocation, a man might think, “shall I be a farmer, doctor, teacher, or perhaps a preacher?” The doctrines of the Bible speak to this point: “If the ministers work is to be placed upon a plane with all other professions, it is but natural that the commercial phase would go with it, and so it would not be surprising to hear that a certain minister with brilliant talents has been called of the Lord (supposedly) from a lower position to a higher one. This commercial spirit among salaried ministers takes such a deep root that the minister often arbitrarily demands his salary and collects by any means the law allows him. The spirit of the gospel is the spirit of sacrifice. The spirit of commercialism is antagonistic to the spirit of sacrifice, and when allowed to get into the work of the ministry it kills the very purpose for which the gospel was first preached. A salaried ministry is a snare to entrap into its employ brilliant young men who have not the first qualification for the sacred office. They consider that here is a clean honorable profession open to them. It does not require the wearing of everyday clothes, or soiled hands or hard work.”

The salary can easily become a MUZZLE to the minister:

It has a tendency to be the hands of the minister to the congregation or representative board that hired him. He may be tempted to refrain from speaking concerning sins that may be in the congregation lest he place in jeopardy his job and means of earning a livelihood. The monthly love offering can be even more dangerous, for the size of the offering can easily affect the manner of his preaching. The minister seeks to avoid offending in any way the liberal givers lest it affect his financial source. Congregations may soon learn their powers and may resist necessary teaching and discipline, knowing they can easily dismiss the preacher who may speak to plainly to suit them. The minister then just becomes another “dumb dog that cannot bark” (Isa. 56:10). The scriptures declare, “he that is called in the Lord is the Lord’s FREEMAN”, and admonishes “be ye not servants of men” (I Corin. 7:22,23). To go into a contract to preach the gospel on a money basis robs the servants of the Lord of the FREEDOM and places their feet in an entangling and dangerous snare.

The singular and salaried ministry leads to an ever-changing ministry with its many dangers:

Since he is hired, he can also be fired when the newness of his message wears off or if he speaks too plainly concerning sin or worldliness within the congregation. The ever-changing ministry leads to a breakdown of scriptural discipline. To please the Board which hired him, it becomes difficult to preach the truth and almost impossible for the minister to suggest discipline for the unruly. Instead of a God-called ministry praying and counseling together relative to the needs of the church assembly, there is often a church council who have been elected according to the whims of the moment instead of being chosen on the basis of scriptural qualifications. The authority is removed from God's appointed and anointed leaders and placed upon such a church board of Deacons often hand picked often by the minister.

Another danger in the singular hired ministry is the political maneuvering to gain certain objectives:

Concerning church politics, may we quote from the book "Pastor in profile", "Another goal in preacher politics is another church. To observe the behavior of some men, you would think God has ceased from placing his ministers. It seems that some preachers look to other preachers, rather unto God to get them to another church assembly. He that sits in the heavens must laugh as he observes the various individuals and groups going into action all over the country when a desirable pastorate becomes available. Letters, telephone calls, telegrams, and personal contacts fly fast and thick. When a prominent church pastorate become vacant it would be interesting to know the following things: A. How many preachers race for the denominational minutes to study the record of that church. B. How many preachers ask the Lord to give them an opportunity to serve that church. C. How many cliques go into action to place one of their men in that pastorate.

A short paragraph from a church publication well summarizes this point as to the dangers of an ever-changing singular ministry. "Short pastorates tempt pastors to borrow the trick of political democracy and go "candidating" and hunting the easiest job with the biggest salary rather than working through difficult situations and helping small congregations in their struggles to maintain a gospel lighthouse in their locality."

The singular ministry usually suggests that seminary training be an absolute qualification for the ministry:

In no way would wish to minimize the value of the scriptural qualification concerning “aptness” to teach, for we believe that a minister cannot long labor effectively unless he is a student of the word. However, in the singular ministry where the total responsibility of leadership falls on one man, it is immediately assumed that, in order for him to meet the need of the whole group, he should be a graduate of a divinity school.

In the desire to obtain trained men, it has become necessary to bring in ministers who are foreign to the needs and problems of the church community and who are untried and unproven in church administration and leadership. The Bible rather suggest that leaders be ordained according to Scriptural qualifications in every church from the laity who have their roots in the community (Acts 14:34, Tit. 1:5).

There is a tendency in seminary training to emphasize the personal call above the call by and through the church. Most of us have read of the illustration of the man who thought he saw a “P.C.,” in the clouds and thought it meant to “preach Christ”, when it could have easily meant “plow Corn” or “paint churches” or be a doorkeeper in the house of the Lord; or it might have been just a call to a closer walk with God. One writer emphasizes this point when he says, The compound call, the inward personal call with the call of the church, would constitute the real call of God. We can hardly omit the second. When we accept the testimony of one man that he has felt the call we are placing confidence very much in the personal conviction of one individual. That may easily be as unsafe as the opinion of the group; in fact, more so. We would hardly recognize the convictions of a young man who volunteered to be a president of one of our college or the head of our publishing house, yet the ministry is certainly no less important.

The New Testament pattern was to ordain at home for the home base or to ordain at home to be sent out. Knowing human nature, we dare never to allow the personal call, whether real or imaginary, to be set ahead of the call by and through the church.

When we evaluate the influence of seminaries upon the church in the past and even down to the present, it certainly should fill us with a deep concern for the church. We often heard that the seminaries of theology are spiritual “cemeteries.” This is more than a clever expression, for seminaries of the past have contributed to the apostacy of the church and I believe that the indications are that they are doing the same today. Often more time is spent in the study of “Human Philosophy” than in the study of the word of God. The result is that the word of God is being questioned and it’s authority undermined. Concerning the doctrinal decline of the most so called Christian denominations we have assemblies corrupted with modernism, and where real Bible standards and discipline are largely a thing of the past. A certain writer says, “ The Seminary schools and colleges have become training centers to instruct their students on leadership concepts in their denominations with a contemporary mindset in accordance with the apostate times in which we live and a general laxity of discipline

and a sympathetic attitude toward liberalism, and a hesitancy on the part of the vast untrained ministry to take a bold stand against the more learned men”.

The effect of Neo-orthodox teaching is becoming more and more evident, as the authority of the scripture is either rejected or reasoned away. We do not minimize the importance of knowing the scripture and being able to teach it effectively, but why is it that the testimony and practice of a large percentage of seminary and college graduates is contrary to the word of God as well as to the historical and Biblical position of the Christian church? Can we not see that the singular, salaried and seminary-trained leadership coupled with the church council form of congregational administration can contribute only to the apostasy of the church? The so-called “lay preachers” called by God through the church has been more effective in maintaining and promoting Biblical standards than have the seminary-trained “hirelings.”

III. Blessings of the Plural (scriptural) ministry

While no method of church administration is without its problems, yet there are distinct blessings and advantages if we follow the scriptural example and teaching.

The plural ministry instead of a “hireling” ministry can be largely self supporting. Why is this true? Largely because the ministerial responsibility can be divided between several brethren and does not fall upon one individual. While the call to the ministry is an added responsibility in the life of the believer that often taxes the one called to the utmost, yet when divided between several brethren it is not an impossible task by the grace of God. We believe that the self-supporting ministry is scriptural. The apostle Paul sets the example, even though his work was primarily that of an itinerate evangelist, which we would not hesitate to support in our day. Yet when he was at Thessalonica (II Thes.3:8-9), and at Corinth (Acts 18:3), he felt it best for the cause to endeavor to support himself.

The minister that seeks to be self supporting has the opportunity to teach by word and action and to set proper habit patterns in the area of business as he seeks to earn a living for himself. This was the Apostle Paul’s feeling as he labored among the Thessalonian Christians. “Neither did we eat any man’s bread for naught; but wrought with labor and travail night and day, that we might not be chargeable to any of you: not because we have not power, but to make ourselves an example unto you to follow us” (II Thess. 3:8, 9).

As the minister seeks to earn his own living, he is not set off from the congregation but he identifies himself as being on the same level with the other faithful assembly attendees. Anything which sets a minister apart from his pastoral care is a barrier to the most helpful relationships. The actual experience of seeking support himself and his family will help him to share and understand the problems of the assembly he has been called to serve. The minister, as well as his family, learns the value of money, the need

of thrift and industry, and that money simply does not grow on trees to be plucked off at will.

In many cases it will also help him to teach his children some form of occupation, and to spend time with them as they work together. A statement from an editorial written some years ago reads: "It is interesting to observe that just at the time we are moving towards a professional ministry, others with long experience are raising questions about it. One reads in the papers of a Pastor here and there who holds a factory job because he feels closer connection with the people if he works with them every day. We all have read of the worker – priests in France who were loathing to give up, by order of the Pope, what they felt was an excellent way to reach the non-church going masses. Are we about to forsake a system which others are just discovering is an effective means of exposing the truth to the common man?"

When the ministers are chosen from the laity, who have their roots in the community, the ministry as a rule is more permanent. When a minister is called of God through the church to a lifetime work, conditional upon his faithfulness to God, he immediately understands that he is not a hireling who can quit the ship when the going gets rough. His desire to please the people becomes secondary to his desire to please the Lord and serve Him. He feels that this is his flock of which God has given him oversight. This gives a sense of stability to the congregation since there is not a constant change in the leadership. Most people feel they do not want a foreigner who steps in for a few years and then is gone, but rather one who is a fellow traveler on the road to heaven. Even in other denominations there is the conviction that constant change is not the best and longer period of service are being encouraged.

In the plurality of the ministry there is always some variation of gifts and abilities which gives variety and balance in meeting the needs of the congregation as they together work for a common cause. The Plural ministry provides counsel and supervision for the younger and less experienced ministers. It does not place the complete responsibility of the assembly's leadership on the younger person as he begins the ministry. In the singular ministry, the young minister must take on the total responsibility as soon as he begins. To place the complete responsibility of an assembly to a more immature person with untried theories and unproven by experience, can result in spiritual loss that will be difficult for the assembly to regain. Younger ministers need the counsel and advice of those who are older so that they can keep their balance and continue in the right direction.

The plural ministry provides one of the best ways to meet the multitude of the church assembly's responsibilities. The assembly needs to recognize that the responsibility of the ministry is has increased tremendously during past fifty years. Therefore, the Plural ministry, even in our day and age, is not only scriptural, but is practical as well.

CONCLUSION

1. *The Plural ministry is scriptural and thus is God's will for the local church assembly.*
2. *Since our Lord's blessing, provisions and power can be expected by those in his will, local assemblies enjoying a plural ministry can also anticipate great spiritual strength.*
3. *A plural ministry should not and need not lead to competition between ministries if the entire assembly prayerfully gives ALL the glory to HE who alone is worthy, our beloved LORD JESUS CHRIST, by whom we have been adopted into by Gods free and sovereign grace alone free from any works, means and methods of mankind.*
4. *A plural ministry will, by the grace of God, result in a greater and purer edification of the body of believers since the required functions of the local assembly are not limited by the gift or gifts of ONE MAN.*
5. *Many errors and even heresies associated with local church assemblies today stem from the singular ministry and its tendencies toward materialism, politics, and professionalism.*

Respectfully submitted,

Originally compiled in 1982; revised January 25, 2016