



Brothers, Not Bosses: Recovering Biblical Church Leadership

Acts 20:17, 28 | Titus 1:5–7 | 1 Peter 5:1–2
1 Timothy 3 | Ephesians 4:11 | Matthew 23:8–12

"You are all brothers." — Matthew 23:8b

INTRODUCTION

If you have spent any time in Western evangelical Christianity, you have been surrounded by titles. **"Pastor John."** **"Bishop Williams."** **"Senior Pastor,"** **"Executive Pastor,"** **"Teaching Pastor."**

Pulpits tower above congregations. Church websites feature one face front-and-centre as the face of the ministry.

But I want to ask you a question this morning not to be provocative, but because it matters deeply.

Where did any of that come from?

Is it from Scripture?

Or is it something the church absorbed from the world?

Here at **World Christian Fellowship**, we call one another brothers. Not because we are being informal, not because we lack structure, but because that is exactly the language Jesus used.

This morning we will examine what the Bible actually says about church leadership, trace how history departed from it, confront the celebrity culture crisis that departure has produced, and return to the design God gave His church from the very beginning.

Central Question: Did God design the church to be led by a single titled executive or by a plurality of brothers serving together?

What the Bible calls Church Leaders?

The New Testament never uses a single term for church leadership in isolation. It uses three Greek words and uses them interchangeably for the same people:

1. *Presbuteros* — Elders.

This word means "older, mature man in the faith." It speaks to the character of the leader. Seasoned, proven, and spiritually formed over time.

Acts 20:17, *"From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders (presbuteros) of the church."*

2. *Episkopos* — Overseers (Bishops)

Episkopos means "one who watches over" — a guardian. It describes the function of the leader. The KJV renders it "bishop", but it simply means overseer, carrying no suggestion of rank above other churches or leaders.

Acts 20:28, *"The Holy Spirit has made you overseers (episkopous), to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood."*

3. *Poimen* — Shepherd (Pastor)

Poimen means "shepherd" one who feeds, tends, and protects the flock.

The English word "pastor" comes from the Latin translation. Critically, ***poimen*** is translated "pastor" only once in the English Bible (**Ephesians 4:11**).

Every other occurrence is translated "shepherd."

Ephesians 4:11, *"And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds (**poimenas**) and teachers..."*

These are not three separate offices. They are three lenses describing the same men their maturity (elder), their function (overseer), and their care (shepherd).

The proof is in the passages where Paul uses all three terms in the same breath:

Acts 20:17, *From Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called for the elders of the church.*

Acts 20:28, *Therefore take heed to yourselves and to all the flock, among which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to shepherd the church of God which He purchased with His own blood.*

Titus 1:5, *For this reason I left you in Crete, that you should set in order the things that are lacking, and appoint elders in every city as I commanded you*

Titus 1:7, *For a bishop must be blameless, as a steward of God, not self-willed, not quick-tempered, not given to wine, not violent, not greedy for money,*

1 Peter 5:1-2, *The elders who are among you I exhort, I who am a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, and also a partaker of the glory that will be revealed: ²Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;*

|| God's Design: A Plurality of Leaders.

Look carefully at every one of those passages. The words are always plural.

- Not an elder — elders.
- Not an overseer — overseers.

This is consistent across every New Testament church:

- **Philippians 1:1** — overseers and deacons (no single pastor title)
- **James 5:14** — "Let him call for the elders of the church"
- **Acts 14:23** — "They appointed elders for them in every church"
- **Hebrews 13:17** — "Obey your leaders" (plural)

God designed plural leadership for profound reasons:

- **Protection from abuse** — no single man wields unchecked authority
- **Protection from error** — multiple men guard against false teaching

- **Mutual accountability** — leaders answer to each other, not just themselves
- **Depth of care** — members receive multi-gifted spiritual care
- **Humility modelled** — the structure itself preaches: no man is "the" man

1 Corinthians 12:21, "The eye cannot say to the hand, 'I have no need of you.'"

The body needs many parts. So does its leadership.

III How did they departed from the Pattern?

The 1st Century: Plurality in Practice

Every first-century evidence points to a team of elders in each local congregation. Paul and Barnabas *"appointed elders for them in every church"* (Acts 14:23).

Jerusalem, Galatia, Ephesus, Philippi, Crete — all had plural leadership.

The 2nd Century: The Rise of the Single Bishop

By the early second century, **Ignatius of Antioch** (c. **107 AD**) began urging churches to submit to "the bishop" (singular) as distinct from and elevated above the elder council. What had once been one elder among equals became the man in charge.

3rd and 4th Centuries: Imperial Structure

Cyprian of Carthage (~250 AD) declared: *"The bishop is the church."* When **Constantine** converted in **312 A.D.**, the church was restructured along Roman imperial hierarchy.

Bishops corresponded to provincial governors. The church did not copy the empire intentionally, but it happened gradually, through pragmatism and cultural absorption.

Medieval & Reformation Period

The medieval church enshrined hierarchy into doctrine.

Though the Protestant Reformation rightly recovered Scripture's authority, most branches retained the single-pastor model, simply removing the bishop above him.

The *"senior pastor"* emerged as the commanding figure at the centre of congregational life.

The Modern Era: The Pastor-CEO

By the **20th century**, the single-pastor model was so embedded in evangelical culture that questioning it felt like heresy.

Church leadership books were written about the "vision-casting senior pastor."

Conferences were headlined by celebrity pastors. Church websites featured one face, one brand, one man.

The one-pastor model is not ancient or biblical. It is a historical drift that began in the second century and accelerated for over 1,800 years.

IV Celebrity Culture: When the Pulpit becomes a Stage?

The drift from biblical plurality did not stop at mere structural reorganisation. It produced something far more dangerous in the modern era: the celebrity pastor culture.

And it has left the church in a state of crisis.

How was Celebrity culture born in the Church?

The megachurch movement of the **1980s and 90s** collided with the rise of media Christianity. Television ministries, Christian radio, publishing empires, and eventually social media.

A pastor was no longer just a shepherd of one flock. He became a brand.

His face appeared on books, conference banners, podcast covers, and YouTube thumbnails. His name became the church's identity. The congregation existed to fill the seats of his vision.

This model borrowed directly from secular celebrity culture. The charismatic personality at the centre, the platform constantly growing, the audience consuming content, the followers who feel personally connected to someone who does not know them.

The language of business market share, influence, reach, branding entered the sanctuary.

What Scripture says about this?

1 Corinthians 1:12–13, *Now I say this, that each of you says, "I am of Paul," or "I am of Apollos," or "I am of Cephas," or "I am of Christ."*¹³ *Is Christ divided? Was*

Paul crucified for you? Or were you baptized in the name of Paul?

Paul was horrified that the Corinthian church was dividing itself around personalities and Paul himself was one of the personalities!

He called it immaturity, carnality, and a sign of still being in the flesh.

1 Corinthians 3:3–4, *for you are still carnal. For where there are envy, strife, and divisions among you, are you not carnal and behaving like mere men? ⁴For when one says, “I am of Paul,” and another, “I am of Apollos,” are you not carnal?*

If Paul rebuked the Corinthians for rallying around him, what would he say to churches that have built their entire identity around a modern celebrity pastor?

1 Corinthians 3:5–7, *Who then is Paul, and who is Apollos, but ministers through whom you believed, as the Lord gave to each one? ⁶I planted, Apollos watered, but God gave the increase. ⁷So then neither he who plants is anything, nor he who waters, but God who gives the increase.*

The Devastating Fruit.

Celebrity pastor culture has produced a trail of wreckage that is now impossible to ignore:

- **Moral collapse:** Dozens of high-profile pastors’ men with millions of followers, global platforms, and “anointed” reputations have fallen into adultery, abuse, fraud, and manipulation.

Because no one held them accountable.

Because accountability structures were dismantled to serve the vision of one man.

- **Spiritual abuse:** When a single leader holds all authority, the congregation is left defenceless. Survivors of spiritually abusive churches describe cultures of fear, unquestioning loyalty, and silencing of dissent. All enabled by the one-man model.
- **Congregation collapse:** When the celebrity pastor falls or simply leaves the church often cannot survive. The people were not disciples of Christ, but they were disciples of the pastor.

Remove the pastor, remove the church.

- **Consumerism replacing community:** Celebrity culture turns the congregation into an audience. People church-hop seeking the best experience, the most entertaining preacher, the biggest production.

The New Testament's vision of a body mutually dependent, deeply known, bearing one another's burdens is replaced by a weekly performance.

- **False doctrine shielded by celebrity:** When a pastor's platform grows large enough, even his theological errors become defended by loyal followers. Correction is dismissed as jealousy or attack. The celebrity becomes untouchable and the very opposite of the accountable plurality God designed.

Named without Fear: A Pattern of fallen Towers.

We need not name names to recognise the pattern. In just the past two decades, the church has watched leaders of global ministries

men with stadiums full of followers, bestselling books, and television programs

- exposed for secret sin,
- manipulation of staff,
- financial corruption, and
- abuse of power.

In nearly every case, post-mortems reveal the same structural failure.

- No real accountability,
- Isolated decision-making,
- Boards that functioned as cheerleaders rather than overseers, and
- Culture where questioning the leader was treated as spiritual rebellion.

This is not a coincidence.

This is the inevitable fruit of a system that has no biblical root.

When you build a church around a man instead of around Christ, when you centralise authority in one personality instead of distributing it among qualified brothers, you have constructed the very conditions in which abuse thrives and truth suffocates.

1 Peter 5:2-3, *Shepherd the flock of God which is among you, serving as overseers, not by compulsion but willingly, not for dishonest gain but eagerly;³ nor as being lords over those entrusted to you, but being examples to the flock;*

The Antidote is already in Scripture.

The answer is not to distrust all leadership. It is to return to God's design. Plural eldership, mutual accountability, transparent governance, and servant-brotherhood do not eliminate the possibility of sin — but they create the structural conditions where sin is far less likely to go unchecked and far more likely to be corrected before it destroys.

At **World Christian Fellowship**, we refuse to build around a personality. We do not cultivate a celebrity. We cultivate brothers qualified, accountable, servant-hearted men who shepherd together, who correct one another, and who point always to the Chief Shepherd, not to themselves.

V What Jesus said about Titles?

Matthew 23:8–12, *"But you, do not be called 'Rabbi'; for One is your Teacher, the Christ, and you are all brethren. ⁹Do not call anyone on earth your father; for One is your Father, He who is in heaven. ¹⁰And do not be called teachers; for One is your Teacher, the Christ. ¹¹But he who is greatest among you shall be your servant. ¹²And whoever exalts himself will be humbled, and he who humbles himself will be exalted."*

Jesus is not giving a minor stylistic preference. He is drawing a line between the kingdom of God and the religious culture of the world. In the world, titles denote rank and superiority. In the kingdom, there is one Teacher, one Father, one Lord — and all His people are brothers.

"Pastor Bob" is not just informal culture. Using "Pastor" as a personal title echoes exactly the kind of religious honorific Jesus told His disciples to reject.

VI Why we call each other brothers?

At WCF we have made a deliberate, biblically grounded choice. We do not use "Pastor" as a title. We call each other brothers — and that is theology, not informality:

- Jesus meant what He said: "you are all brothers" (**Matthew 23:8**)
- The NT pattern of plural eldership is God's wisdom for the church's health
- Shepherding is a function of service, not a badge of status
- Every member is a priest before God (**1 Peter 2:9**)
- When leaders are brothers first, Christ alone is exalted

Does this eliminate leadership?

Of course not.

Scripture is clear that some men are called, tested, qualified, and recognised as elders' men who watch over souls, who teach and correct doctrine, who shepherd the flock (**Hebrews 13:17**).

We honour and submit to those men. But they lead as servant-brothers, not as spiritual executives.

Mark 10:42–45, *But Jesus called them to Himself and said to them, "You know that those who are considered rulers over the Gentiles lord it over them, and their great ones exercise authority over them."⁴³ Yet it shall not be so among you; but whoever desires to become great among*

you shall be your servant. ⁴⁴And whoever of you desires to be first shall be slave of all. ⁴⁵For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give His life a ransom for many."

Conclusion: The Village elder and the stranger.

There is an old story set not in a modern city but in a small village far from the noise of celebrity and conference stages.

In this village there was no single religious leader with a title. There was no sign at the meeting house bearing one man's name. Instead, every week, a group of older men — farmers, craftsmen, a schoolteacher, a fisherman gathered with the congregation.

They took turns reading Scripture.

They prayed for the sick by name.

They settled disputes with patience.

When a young man was tempted to leave the faith, it was not one celebrity's podcast that kept him — it was old Marcus sitting with him on his porch for three hours, sharing his own doubts and his deeper faith.

One day a stranger passed through — a man who had grown up in a great city church, the kind with a famous pastor and a thousand-seat auditorium. He attended the village meeting and sat quietly, confused.

Afterwards he asked one of the older men:

"Who is your pastor?"

Who leads this church?"

The old man smiled and said: "Christ leads this church. The rest of us are just brothers trying to keep up with Him."

The stranger was unsettled at first. He had come from a world where the pastor was the church — where the Sunday experience was designed around one man's gifts, one man's vision, one man's voice. He had not noticed, until this moment, how thin the ice had always been beneath his faith. Because his faith had been built, in part, on a man and men fall.

He stayed in the village for a week. He watched the brothers care for a dying widow. He watched a young elder humbly receive correction from an older one. He watched the congregation flourish — not because one brilliant man was at the helm, but because many ordinary men were faithfully present.

When he finally left, he wrote in his journal: *"I think I have been attending a performance for years, calling it church. This week I finally saw the thing itself."*

Brothers and sisters — we are that village.

We are not impressive by the world's standards.

We do not have a celebrity.

We do not have a stage production.

We have something far better: the design of God, the Word of God, and the Spirit of God — working through a community of servant-brothers who are accountable to each other and to the Chief Shepherd.

The modern church has tried celebrity.

It has tried the one-man show.

The ruins are everywhere to see.

It is time to go back to the basics. Back to the Bible. Back to the brothers. Back to Christ.

1 Peter 5:4, *"And when the chief Shepherd appears, you will receive the unfading crown of glory."*

Soli Deo Gloria

REFLECTION & APPLICATION

Personal: Have I elevated any pastor or teacher to a place where their word carries more weight than Scripture?

Am I a disciple of Christ, or a disciple of a personality?

Community: How do I treat the brothers who lead among us?

Do I honour their servant-leadership, or do I compare them unfavourably to celebrity pastors I follow online?

Culture: What does my language reveal?

Do I speak of this church as "their" church or "our" church?

Am I a consumer or a member of the body?

Prayer: Pray for the elders among us — that God would keep them humble, accountable, and faithful.

Pray that WCF would always reflect God's design, not the worlds.

Celebrity Culture Warning Passages:

- **1 Corinthians 1:12–13; 3:3–7** — dividing around personalities
- **1 Peter 5:2–3** — not domineering, but examples
- **Ezekiel 34:1–6** — God's word against shepherds who feed themselves
- **Matthew 23:8–12** — against religious titles and hierarchy
- **Mark 10:42–45** — servant leadership, not lording authority