

I wonder if you have been a part of a church crisis? Church drama. A church split? Division? A turn for the worse? A severe decline. Perhaps a doctrinal decline. I ask this question and what happened to cause it every membership class and 9 out of 10 times it has to do with a leadership problem. Leadership guru John Maxwell often says, "Everything rises and falls with leadership." He's 100% right. But many Christians don't care much about church leadership or what the Bible has to say about church government. But if this is where things often go south, perhaps we should think more deeply about it. I hope you agree. We get to do that morning as we kick off our series through the letter to the Philippians (921). We'll look at who we are and how the church should be structured.

A couple weeks ago, we looked at how this church was formed. It started with a wealthy woman, a slave girl, and a Roman jailer. A decade later, Paul writes this thank you letter to the local church at Philippi, which was a leading Roman city in modern day Macedonia. / We're going to take our time walking through this letter. Let me encourage you to be reading it and re-reading it. Get it into your bones and your bloodstream and you'll come in here ready to hear from the Lord.

This is God's Word for you. I have been praying this letter shapes us. This letter, like all Scripture, is written for spiritual formation, that we might know and reflect God. If we are not formed into the image of Christ as a result of this letter, we are doing something wrong. Let's prayerfully soak in this wonderful book.

**1-2** (this is the Word .... ) - Paul and Timothy. Paul had invested in Timothy. That's what leaders do. They train leaders. They raise em up. The 222 principle from 2 Tim 2:2: "and what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men, who will be able to teach others also." Four generations of disciples: Paul to Timothy to faithful men who will teach others. We are disciples who make disciples.

And he describes himself and Timothy as servants of Christ Jesus, but the word used here is actually "slave," not servant. The ESV has a footnote. Using "servant" weakens the force of the word, doesn't it? A servant is not a slave. A servant gives service to someone; a slave belongs to someone. Paul and Timothy are just slaves. So are we. We are called slaves of Christ over a dozen times in the NT. In 1<sup>st</sup> C Greco-Roman culture, slavery was very common and it was nothing like the slavery we know of here in the United States, most notably it was not race-based. Around 20% of the population in Philippi was slaves. One of every 5!

Back in the Gospels, Jesus had said, "But it shall not be so among you. But whoever would be great among you must be your servant, and whoever would be first among you must be slave of all. For even the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many" (Mark 10:43-45, cf. 2:7). Christians are slaves to Christ and slaves of all! We die to self and put others first. The letter to Galatians is all about freedom. **Gal 5:1, 13.**

What are some implications of being a slave of Christ? First and foremost, our lives are not our own. 1 Cor 6:19 you are not your own you were bought with a price. He owns us. We look to our master for our marching orders. We are at his disposal. The Self is evicted from the throne and Jesus Christ the Lord takes center stage. And ironically, only in service to him do we become free. Lord, make me a slave that I might be free. This is a liberating bondage. True freedom consists of being redeemed and owned by Jesus Christ.

Sometimes non-Christians scoff at this idea of losing their beloved freedom, but don't get it twisted, all people are slaves to something. All people have a "lower-case L" lord, but there is only one Lord that liberates. An enslaving lord may be money, relationships, sex, family, children, marriage, status, power, health, comfort. If

you look to any of those lousy lords, you will be let down. They will enslave you ultimately. As Augustine prayed, our hearts are restless until they find their rest in you.

Paul and Timothy are slaves of Christ Jesus. This is written to the *saints* in Christ Jesus. Saints are those set apart by God, holy ones. It has background in the OT: Deut 7:6-8: “For you are a people *holy* to the LORD your God. The LORD your God has chosen you to be a people for his treasured possession, out of all the peoples who are on the face of the earth. It was not because you were more in number than any other people that the LORD set his love on you and chose you, for you were the fewest of all peoples, but it is because the LORD loves you and is keeping the oath that he swore to your fathers, that the LORD has brought you out with a mighty hand and redeemed you from the house of slavery, from the hand of Pharaoh king of Egypt.”

All Christians are saints. Our Catholic friends are just wrong on this one. Saints are not some special class of Christians. All Christians are saints. When we believe, we are set apart by the Spirit of God. If you are a Christian, you are a saint. Doesn't matter what kind of day you've had. You're a saint. It's a status given by grace. Sup saints. You know a little something about the church at Corinth, right? That church was a hot mess. They were all divided about all sorts of things. They were falling into the cult of personality, suing one another, permitting rampant immorality, confused on marriage and singleness and sexuality, judging each other based on spiritual gifts, using the Lord's Supper as an opportunity to stuff their face and get drunk, and some were questioning the resurrection. Yet. Do you know how Paul starts the letter? 1 Cor 1:2: “To the church of God that is in Corinth, to those sanctified (sainted) in Christ Jesus, called to be saints together with all those who in every place call upon the name of our Lord Jesus Christ, both their Lord and ours,” We are saints, not because we are saintly, but because we have been set apart by the sovereign working of the Spirit.

One theologian writes, “‘Holy’ people are unholy people, who nevertheless as such have been singled out, claimed, and requisitioned by God for his control, for his use, for himself who is holy. Their holiness is and remains in Christ Jesus. It is in him that they are holy; it is from this point of view that they are to be addressed as such, in no other respect.”<sup>1</sup>

This is written to the saints *in Christ Jesus*. This little phrase “in Christ Jesus” and its variations occurs 21x in this letter. Union with Christ. We are united to Christ by faith. We are His and He is ours. He is our representative. Our lives are forever united to his life. His life is ours. His death is ours. His resurrection is ours. His future is ours. His victory is ours. His love from the Father is now ours too. Paul says we are in Christ and in (*en*) Philippi. We are dual citizens, in the world but not of it. This is a particularly important truth for those in a major Roman colony like Philippi. They were very proud of their Roman citizenship. **1:27, 3:20**. We are in the United States, but more important we are in Christ. Our heavenly citizenship trumps all others.

So, Paul the slave writes to the saints, in Christ and in Philippi, *with the overseers and deacons* – **1**. In other words, he is writing to the local church in Philippi: the people and the leaders. To the saints and to her leaders. The NLT paraphrases this verse that way: “I am writing to all of God's holy people in Philippi who belong to Christ Jesus, including the church leaders and deacons.” Not just to the saints and not just to the leaders, to both. There are two leadership offices in the NT: overseer and deacon. The King James translated overseer as “bishop.” I'm still trying to get my title changed to Bishop Blake.

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<sup>1</sup> *Epistle to the Philippians* (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2002), 10.

Overseers and deacons. It can be a tad confusing though, because the NT uses three different titles for the same office: an overseer is an elder is a pastor. Those nouns are interchangeable. In 1 Pet 5, Peter / In Acts 20, Paul is speaking to / In Titus 1:5, Paul lays out the qualifications for elders, then two verses later calls them overseers. Why? Because an elder is an overseer is a pastor. Our confession is the BFM2000 and the messengers of the SBC voted to amend it last year. It now says this: "Its two scriptural offices are that of pastor/elder/overseer and deacon. While both men and women are gifted for service in the church, the office of pastor/elder/overseer is limited to men as qualified by Scripture." It used to just say its two scriptural offices are pastor and deacon and they amended it to "pastor/elder/overseer." That's the right move.

The Bible teaches that the church is led by a plurality of elders/overseers/pastors and served by deacons. And this church in Philippi got to it. It was planted with a core group consisting of a wealthy woman, a slave girl, and a Roman jailer and they did NT missions. They shared the gospel. People got saved. Started a church and raised up leaders. This is the pattern of the book of Acts. Acts 14:21-23: "When they had preached the gospel to that city and had made many disciples, they returned to Lystra and to Iconium and to Antioch, strengthening the souls of the disciples, encouraging them to continue in the faith, and saying that through many tribulations we must enter the kingdom of God.

And when they had appointed elders for them in every church, with prayer and fasting they committed them to the Lord in whom they had believed." This is NT missions. Church planting. Preach the gospel, make disciples, encourage perseverance, appoint a plurality of elders in every church. Go to the next city.

God wants his church, his house rightly ordered. God has house rules. He gave us three books on how to structure his church: 1 Tim, 2 Tim, Titus. We call them the pastoral epistles. 1 Tim 3:14-15: "Although I hope to come to you soon, I am writing you these instructions so that, if I am delayed, you will know how people ought to conduct themselves in God's household, which is the church of the living God" (NIV). We want to conduct our selves rightly, like the church at Phillipi did, which made them effective for mission, which is why Paul is writing this thank you letter.

So here Paul writes to the two offices: overseer and deacon, but the church fathers went astray pretty quickly in church history. Ignatius is the first time we see a distinction between bishops and elders. That was still in the 1<sup>st</sup> C! He elevated the singular Bishop above the rest. Tradition went wrong early. He had a practical reason for doing so: unity. Obey the bishop. As wrong ideas came in, it was an easy fix: obey the bishop. But. . . what is the Bishop goes astray? This is why we affirm *sola Scriptura*. We value Church Tradition, but Scripture is the final authority. The Bible is the norming norm because men are fallible.

God's will is that the local church be led by a plurality of spiritually qualified overseers and served by a plurality of spiritually qualified deacons. First note, that it is always in the plural. Overseers *oversee*. Elders lead. 1 Tim 5:17: "Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching." They rule. They lead. But they lead from the Word. God is the authority, and he delegates his good authority through his Word, to faithful under-shepherds.

Here at SSBC we have an elder job description with 6 points: They are to pastor (care), oversee (lead), teach, pray, disciple, and model.

God says we need leaders. The church needs leadership. Our culture is down on authority, suspicious of leaders, even in the church, but godly authority is a good thing. 2 Sam 23:3-4: "When one rules justly over men, ruling in the fear of God, he dawns on them like the morning light, like the sun shining forth on a cloudless morning, like rain that makes grass to sprout from the earth." Godly authority is like sunshine, it causes flourishing. Which is why God's Word is so clear on spiritual qualifications for overseers. God values

character over competence. / A lot of churches are led by committees. Where minutes are kept but hours are lost. Their fav sport is the Indy 500 – they just go round and round without getting anywhere. There are two main problems with those: they are not in the Bible, but also the members are not vetted by Scriptural spiritual qualifications. So anyone with the time can serve on them. My first church was this way. Effectively led by unbelievers and spiritually immature believers. When I got there, the wife of one the of deacons expressed to me that her husband had no business being a deacon. And he was chair of the board!

What about deacons? What do they do? In his book on deacons, Matt Smethurst says deacons are model servants called to meet tangible needs, organize and mobilize acts of service, preserve the unity of the flock, and support the ministry of the elders.” **Acts 6:1-4.** Deacons play a vital role in a healthy church.

What does this mean for the saints? What is the right response to these leaders in a local church. Well, Pastor Appreciation Month is next month. J/K. Heb 13:17: “Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will have to give an account. Let them do this with joy and not with groaning, for that would be of no advantage to you.”<sup>1</sup> 1 Thess 5:12-13: “We ask you, brothers, to respect those who labor among you and are over you in the Lord and admonish you, and to esteem them very highly in love because of their work.” 1 Tim 5:17-18: “Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching. For the Scripture says, ‘You shall not muzzle an ox when it treads out the grain,’ and, ‘The laborer deserves his wages.’” Feels weird for me to say it but this is God, not me: obedience, submission, making the work easy, not making them groan, respect, high esteem, wages, double honor. / Thank you for embodying these verses so well.

**2** – Grace. The normal Greco-Roman word for hello was *xairein*. Paul says *xaris*. He changes “greetings” to grace.” He transforms the mundane in light of Jesus. He sanctifies the secular. Grace is often defined as undeserved favor but ill-deserved favor is more accurate. Grace is pardon for sin and power to overcome sin.

Grace to you. And peace. *Shalom* Not just absence of conflict but wholeness, completeness, flourishing. As one author puts it, “The webbing together of God, humans, and all creation in justice, fulfillment, and delight is what the Hebrew prophets call *shalom*.”<sup>2</sup> The way God intends for things to be.

Grace and peace from God our Father. He is our Father. We are his children. He doesn’t say your Father - singular, but “our” Father. Christianity is a corporate religion. No lone rangers. We are brothers and sisters with a heavenly Father. From God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ. Jesus is the *Lord* Jesus Christ. He is the king, the Lord of all. We are his servants. Slaves even. Christ is not a name, but a claim. It is not his last name, but his royal title. It means King. When you read Christ Jesus, think King Jesus.

This grace and peace come from God our Father and King Jesus. The Father and the Son are on the same plane. Our God is Triune: One God, three persons: Father, Son, and Spirit. In verse 2, we see the harmony between the Father and the Son. Grace and peace come from both of them. As the Church Father Ambrosiaster put it in the 4<sup>th</sup> C: “It is evident that while God is called *Father*, Christ Jesus is called *Lord*. Does it not then appear that the Lord does not possess equal dignity with the Father? That might seem true in the world of human beings, but between God the Father and Christ the Lord there is complete harmony.” As the Nicene Creed puts it, “We believe in one God, the Father almighty, maker of heaven and earth, of all things visible and invisible. And in one Lord Jesus Christ, the only Son of God, begotten from the Father before all

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<sup>2</sup> Plantinga, *Not the Way It's Supposed to Be*, 9.

ages, God from God, Light from Light, true God from true God, begotten, not made; of the same essence as the Father.”

Grace and peace from God through Christ. That’s it, isn’t it? This is the epitome of God’s action toward fallen humanity. Grace and peace from the Father through Christ. Because of Christ, we receive grace and shalom. Grace that leads to peace. Pardon, power that leads to flourishing. Who are we? We are who He says we are. We are slaves, saints, led by overseers, served by deacons, children of the Father, who have received grace and peace from God the Father through King Jesus.