Ordered · God's Design for Church Life

Order in Polity

Elder-led, deacon-served, congregationally informed

1 PETER 5:1–4

Where We Are

Good evening. We are in our series called *Ordered: God's Design for Church Life*, where we're looking at God's design for the gathering of believers, commonly called the church. God has a design for what we do when we gather and for how the church functions, and because His way is the best way, we want to do church the way God tells us to do church.

Last week we taught on worship. We saw that worship in the New Testament isn't tied to a song but to a lifestyle of sacrifice and a heart to do all things for the glory of God. We talked about the importance of singing together and making melody in our hearts to the Lord, and we discovered that this moment in our gathering has both a vertical and a horizontal audience. We sing to the Lord, yes. But we also sing to one another as a way to build up the body and let the word of Christ dwell richly in our hearts.

Today we're talking not about worship, but about **polity**. It's a funny word many may not be familiar with. Polity is the word we use to describe the church's leadership structure. I get that it may not sound like the most interesting topic in the world, but this is one of those subjects that affects everyone in this room. Bad church polity destroys people; proper church polity disciples them. Many of the leadership failures that have surfaced lately across every denomination have their root in bad polity, not bad policy. So this matters.

This is also a sermon that will be heavily Legacy-specific. That isn't normal for my sermons, but it's important that you understand how we function and why we function that way.

The Model We've Inherited

I'd like to begin with a series of statements we're going to work through in detail. Churches today are largely run by **Lead Pastors**. What's most common in non-denominational and charismatic circles is one person who functions as Lead or Senior Pastor. This Lead Pastor is responsible for vision-casting, teaching, meeting with members, counseling, building and managing church operations, and making decisions.

In other words, the Lead Pastor is part pastor, part CEO, part visionary, part entrepreneur, part prophet, part counselor, and part teacher. What tends to happen in this model is that a church can be built into an empire. If it's built off of one highly skilled, decisive leader, then there's no limit to what a charismatic person can accomplish. We see this in the world all the time, Elon Musk, Bill Gates, Steve Jobs, and we see it in the church world too, with figures like Steven Furtick, Mark Driscoll, and Mike Bickle.

These kinds of leaders can have massive success at a rapid rate and make extraordinary contributions to the kingdom of God. Many pastors function very well in this model and finish well. But there's real danger here, and it can kill pastors before they ever really begin. The pressure to be good at everything, and the expectation that one person will meet every need, destroys pastors regularly. It ensures that only the pastors who wear all of those hats well survive. If you're a solid Bible teacher who lives to shepherd and be present for your flock, but you're not an entrepreneur or a CEO, you get crushed by the competition.

It can also kill pastors by allowing their platform to outpace their maturity, so that they become conceited and fall, which is exactly what produces the high-profile leadership failures we keep seeing. This model usually involves a board of elders in some capacity, but they tend to function in one of two ways: either the elders **oversee** the pastor and he answers to them, or the elders **serve** the pastor and answer to him, yes-men who merely give advice.

> *When the lead pastor is the only voice and the only authority, the church inherits every weakness alongside every gift.*

There Is No Lead Pastor in the Bible

Nowhere in the New Testament do we find a lead pastor. We don't have qualifications for pastors, we don't have instructions to appoint pastors, and we don't have an example of anyone being called a pastor. I'm going to let that sit with you for a second.

There is no pastor in the Bible because that is not an office of governance in the New Testament. "Pastor" describes a *function* or a *gifting*, not a designated office that leads the church. That guy I just described, part pastor, teacher, counselor, CEO, visionary, entrepreneur, he doesn't exist in the New Testament framework for the local church.

So here's the big question: in the New Testament, who leads the church if it's not the lead pastor? There are two offices associated with leadership in the church, a variety of giftings and even emphases, but only two offices: **elders** and **deacons**.

Led by Elders

The Bible says the church is led by a group of elders, qualified individuals whose job is to oversee the body together. There is no major elder above the rest and no minor elder beneath the others. It's just elders. They all share responsibility for and leadership of the church. We have eighteen instances in the New Testament where elders are clearly seen as, and called, the leaders of the church.

WHERE THE NEW TESTAMENT NAMES THE ELDERS

Acts 11:30, The church at Antioch sends famine relief to the elders in Judea.

Acts 14:23, Paul and Barnabas appoint elders in every church.

Acts 15:2, The dispute over circumcision is brought before the apostles and elders in Jerusalem.

Acts 15:4, Paul and Barnabas are welcomed by the apostles and elders.

Acts 15:6, The apostles and elders gather to consider the matter.

Acts 15:22–23, The apostles and elders issue the official decision to the churches.

Acts 16:4, Paul delivers the decisions made by the apostles and elders.

Acts 20:17–38, Paul summons the Ephesian elders and charges them to shepherd and oversee the church.

Acts 21:18, Paul meets with James and all the elders in Jerusalem.

1 Timothy 3:1–7, Qualifications for overseers (the same office as elders).

1 Timothy 5:17–22, Elders who rule well are to be honored; instructions on accusations and ordination.

Titus 1:5–9, Titus is to appoint elders in every town; elder and overseer are used interchangeably.

James 5:14, The sick are instructed to call for the elders of the church.

1 Peter 5:1–4, Peter exhorts the elders to shepherd God's flock and exercise oversight.

2 John 1:1, The author identifies himself as "the elder."

3 John 1:1, The author again identifies himself as "the elder." (John's self-designation, showing the title in apostolic use.)

Hebrews 13:7, Believers are told to remember their leaders.

Hebrews 13:17, Believers are commanded to obey their leaders, who keep watch over their souls. ("Leaders," understood by many to be the church's elders.)

Notice what it does *not* say. It doesn't say, "If anyone is sick, call for the pastor." It doesn't say, "Appoint pastors in every city." So what does an elder do? The New Testament uses three words to describe the same man.

Elder

πρεσβύτερος · *presbyteros*

An older man; one who is mature or senior.

Overseer

ἐπίσκοπος · *episkopos*

One who watches over; a supervisor or guardian.

Pastor / Shepherd

ποιμήν · *poimēn*

A shepherd; one who feeds, protects, and cares for the sheep.

1 PETER 5:1–3

So I exhort the elders among you, as a fellow elder and a witness of the sufferings of Christ, as well as a partaker in the glory that is going to be revealed: shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight, not under compulsion, but willingly, as God would have you; not for shameful gain, but eagerly; not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

1 TIMOTHY 5:17

Let the elders who rule well be considered worthy of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

ACTS 20:28–31A

Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood. I know that after my departure fierce wolves will come in among you, not sparing the flock; and from among your own selves will arise men speaking twisted things, to draw away the disciples after them. Therefore be alert.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

TITUS 1:9

He must hold firm to the trustworthy word as taught, so that he may be able to give instruction in sound doctrine and also to rebuke those who contradict it.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

So here's the big idea. The elders are responsible for governing the church, shepherding the flock, exercising oversight, appointing leaders, guarding doctrine, and carrying out church discipline. Not every elder does all of these. Some carry other emphases, teaching and preaching, for instance. It's also worth noting that elders must be **qualified**.

> 1 TIMOTHY 3:1–7
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> *The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task. Therefore an overseer must be above reproach, the husband of one wife, sober-minded, self-controlled, respectable, hospitable, able to teach, not a drunkard, not violent but gentle, not quarrelsome, not a lover of money. He must manage his own household well, with all dignity keeping his children submissive, for if someone does not know how to manage his own household, how will he care for God's church? He must not be a recent convert, or he may become puffed up with conceit and fall into the condemnation of the devil. Moreover, he must be well thought of by outsiders, so that he may not fall into disgrace, into a snare of the devil.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Served by Deacons

While elders lead the church together, they also appoint deacons to help minister to the flock. Deacons exist to serve the body; in many churches they do a great deal of the grunt work. The office comes from its inception in Acts 6. The apostles are preaching, teaching, and praying, but there are real needs to be met, food for the poor, administration to be done, and they can't do it all. So they appoint what Greek calls a *diakoneo*, which means servant.

> ACTS 6:1–7
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> *Now in these days when the disciples were increasing in number, a complaint by the Hellenists arose against the Hebrews because their widows were being neglected in the daily distribution. And the twelve summoned the full number of the disciples and said, "It is not right that we should give up preaching the word of God to serve tables. Therefore, brothers, pick out from among you seven men of good repute, full of the Spirit and of wisdom, whom we will appoint to this duty. But we will devote ourselves to prayer and to the ministry of the word." And what they said pleased the whole gathering, and they chose Stephen, a man full of faith and of the Holy Spirit, and Philip, and Prochorus, and Nicanor, and Timon, and Parmenas, and Nicolaus, a proselyte of Antioch. These they set before the apostles, and they prayed and laid their hands on them. And the word of God continued to increase, and the number of the disciples multiplied greatly in Jerusalem, and a great many of the priests became obedient to the faith.*
>
> ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

Stephen would go on in the very next passage to perform signs and wonders, preach the gospel, and become the first martyr. By the time Paul wrote to Timothy and Titus, deacon had become a notable and needed position within the church. They had moved from someone stacking chairs to those helping the elders minister to and serve the flock. Deacons are given authority by the elders to lead various ministries; they were, and are, considered leaders in the church.

Where elders are responsible for governing the church, shepherding the flock, exercising oversight, appointing leaders, guarding doctrine, and church discipline, everything else can be entrusted to deacons.

What About the Fivefold Ministry?

EPHESIANS 4:1–12

I therefore, a prisoner for the Lord, urge you to walk in a manner worthy of the calling to which you have been called, with all humility and gentleness, with patience, bearing with one another in love, eager to maintain the unity of the Spirit in the bond of peace. There is one body and one Spirit, just as you were called to the one hope that belongs to your call, one Lord, one faith, one baptism, one God and Father of all, who is over all and through all and in all. But grace was given to each one of us according to the measure of Christ's gift. Therefore it says, "When he ascended on high he led a host of captives, and he gave gifts to men." And he gave the apostles, the prophets, the evangelists, the shepherds and teachers, to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ.

ENGLISH STANDARD VERSION

These are gifts Christ gives to His church, and they appear alongside other gift-lists in Scripture. In **Romans 12:6–8**, Paul names prophecy, service, teaching, exhortation, giving, leading, and showing mercy. In **1 Corinthians 12:8–10**, he names words of wisdom and knowledge, faith, gifts of healing, miracles, prophecy, the distinguishing of spirits, kinds of tongues, and the interpretation of tongues. In **1 Corinthians 12:28**, he names apostles, prophets, teachers, miracles, gifts of healing, helps, administration, and various kinds of tongues. These describe how Christ equips and builds His body, they are gifts and functions, not the governing offices of the local church.

A MOMENT TO EXAMINE

Who Have You Asked to Be Your Everything?

Be honest for a moment. Have you quietly expected one man to be your counselor, your visionary, your CEO, your prophet, and your shepherd all at once, and then judged him when he couldn't carry all of it? The New Testament never asks a single pastor to be everything to everyone.

God gave the church a **plurality of qualified leaders** precisely so that no one man bears every weight, and so that no one man holds every ounce of power. That's not a compromise of God's design. It *is* God's design, and it's for your protection.

What This Means for Legacy Church

So what does all of this mean for Legacy Church? It shapes three commitments about how we're structured and where we're headed.

i. We Are Elder-Led

Here at Legacy we are led by a team of seven elders. Together they are the leadership of this church, no one man has all the power. We vote on matters pertaining to the church; big decisions require more than a majority, and my vote only counts as one. Seven elders means there's never a tie. That matters, because you need to know that we are shaping, guiding, guarding, and leading the church *together*. It has been the privilege of my life to serve with these men. Practically, this means that when you're interacting with an elder, you're interacting with a leader.

I know many people want the lead pastor to be the one walking them through a hard season, having them over for dinner, or counseling them. But I can't be that for everyone, and the Bible doesn't ask me to. So to align us more closely with Scripture, the elders and I have decided to change my title to better reflect my primary role. My title is changing from **Lead Pastor** to **Teaching Pastor**. I am an elder who works hard at teaching and preaching, and that is the primary, though not the only, way I pastor: through the Word. This isn't abnormal in the wider church world; it's just abnormal in non-denominational and charismatic circles. My function isn't changing. I'm simply changing my title to match how things are already set up. Part of this shift will be noticeable as early as next week, as we begin bringing our elders onto the platform in various ways. I will still carry the primary responsibility of preaching and teaching.

ii. We Will Be Deacon-Served

In the fall, we aim to introduce deacons. It will be an opportunity for you to step into a real place of leadership here at Legacy and to come alongside the elders to help us disciple those in our community.

iii. We Will Be Congregationally Informed

Elder-led, deacon-served, and congregationally informed. This means the congregation is *informed*, not kept in the dark, about big decisions. It also means the elders and deacons want to be *informed by you* about how we can better serve the body. To be congregationally informed, we have to know who that congregation is. Because of that, we are going to be rolling out **membership** here at Legacy. Membership will help us as leaders know who we're responsible for, who is signing up for accountability here versus who just shows up occasionally. It will help us know who is eligible for leadership positions, who receives priority when benevolence needs arise, and how to protect the flock as a whole. In the coming weeks we'll move forward on this, so you can expect to hear more soon.

Bad polity destroys people.
Proper polity disciples them.

Soli Deo Gloria