

The Purpose of a Structured Household

A Structured Household: Elders, Deacons, with the Saints / Multiple Passages / October 25, 2026

Introduction:

This morning, we are starting an important sermon series in the life of our church on the biblical roles of elders, deacons, and the saints. We'll consider God's design and purpose for these roles today before unpacking the responsibilities of each in the coming weeks. To aid our understanding in what this means for us, we are also holding special all church classes, starting on November 8, that will follow the sermons on each role to dig deeper into them together. We encourage you to make plans to join us for these classes if you call GracePoint home. Let me start with why we are taking time for this. Psalm 127:1 says, "Unless the Lord builds the house, those who build it labor in vain. Unless the Lord watches over the city, the watchman stays awake in vain." Paul communicates something similar in 1 Corinthians 3. In verses 5-7, he shows God is the one who gives growth to His people. Then in verses 10-15, he encourages God's workers to "take care" how they build on the foundation of Christ, and God will disclose whether they built with "gold, silver, and precious stones," or with "wood, hay, and straw." Similar to the old fable of the three little pigs, it matters what we build with. Only, Paul isn't speaking of attacks from the enemy, but God revealing by fire and rewarding the quality of our work. Family, these Scriptures remind us to remain dependent on God in everything and take great care to build the church in the right way. And we walk in both truths by having Scripture guide every aspect of church life. If we build the church in our own strength and wisdom, our efforts will be in vain because we built with wood, hay, and straw. When it comes to leadership, every church has to make decisions on how to structure its leadership as a non-profit organization in the U.S. Churches have approached these decisions differently and the pivotal question we need to ask is, have we built with the right materials? Or have we let culture, fears, tradition, and secular business practices overly influence those decisions? This series aims to ask how Scripture addresses the structure of God's household to guide conversations we will have as a church body this year about our leadership structure. Even if GracePoint isn't your home church, I pray this will help you better understand God's design for His gathered people and encourage your faith. We will cover a lot of Scriptures this morning, so we provided handouts to make it easier to follow. We will start with an overview of God's design for the leadership of His people, and end by considering the purpose in His design. We need to begin in the Old Testament to see how,

God Promised Shepherd-Leaders for His People

Through Abraham, God covenanted with Israel, calling them to be His people and a light to the nations. Towards the end of the Old Covenant, the people of Israel were a mess, constantly turning away from God and chasing idols despite all God had done for them, due in large part to wicked leaders leading the people astray. Jeremiah and Ezekiel were prophets of God sent to deliver words of judgement because of their rejection of God's authority. However, their words weren't only of judgement and included hope. Look at Ezekiel 34:23. The Lord says, "I will set up over them one shepherd, my servant David, and he shall feed them: he shall feed them and be their shepherd." God promised to provide a faithful leader, from the lineage of David, to be their shepherd. The idea of a shepherd connected directly with God's own care for His people in leading, feeding, and protecting them. The Psalms consistently capture this, with Psalm 23 coming immediately to mind. Some of their most faithful leaders, like Moses and David, were also spoken of as shepherds. So, it's no surprise that this is the kind of leader God would promise for His people. Yet, God's promises went deeper. Look at Jeremiah 3:15 and 23:4, where God says, "I will give you shepherds after my own heart, who will feed you with knowledge and understanding." And, "I will set shepherds over them who will care for them, and they shall fear no more, nor be dismayed, neither shall any be missing, declares the Lord." God's promises included additional faithful shepherds who would come under the one shepherd to feed and care for His people. We will dig deeper into the specific nature of Shepherd-leaders next week. For now, it is important to see this role in God's design. When we come to the New Testament, we see,

Jesus is the Good Shepherd & His Appointment of Under-Shepherds

Matthew and Luke open their gospels by proving Jesus is the promised descendent of David, and John shows He is the promised shepherd through Jesus' own confession. Look at John 10:14-16. Jesus says, "I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me, just as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep. And I have other sheep that are not of this fold. I must bring them also, and they will listen to my voice. So there will be one flock, one shepherd." Jesus emphatically declares He is the one shepherd over the flock of God. In 1 Peter 2:25, Peter calls Jesus, "the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls." This proclaims Jesus to be the shepherd God promised through Ezekiel. Look at Matthew 9:36-38 where Jesus hints at God's promise of additional shepherds, "When he [Jesus] saw the crowds, he had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd. Then he said to his disciples, 'The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore pray earnestly to the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest.'" Though often understood as evangelists or missionaries, the context suggests the harvest laborers being prayed for are primarily shepherds. I don't think it is a coincidence that Jesus sends the twelve apostles out immediately following this. Notice the purpose of their appointment in Mark 3:14, "And he [Jesus] appointed twelve (whom he also named apostles) so that they might be with him and he might send them out to preach and have authority to cast out demons." Jesus appointed the apostles to learn from Him and send them to carry on His shepherding work. Then, look at Jesus' call to Peter in John 21:15-17. Jesus tells Peter, "Feed my lambs" in verse 15, "Tend [shepherd] my sheep" in verse 16, and "feed my sheep" in verse 17. Note how He applies the shepherding work God spoke about through Jeremiah, of feeding and caring for His flock, to Peter. Serving as a representative of the apostles, Peter's commissioning reveals their role was the fulfillment of God's promises through Jeremiah. So, Christ is the one shepherd, and the apostles are the under-shepherds God promised for His people. Then, as the church is established, we see,

Leadership Formed to Ensure the Ministry of Under-Shepherds Continued

In Acts 1-5, we see the apostles fulfilling their role as under-shepherds by feeding, or teaching, and caring for Christ's church. Then, we come to a pivotal moment in Acts 6 where a leadership need arises over a concern of neglected care for widows. This need was important in the church but, rather than solving it themselves, the apostles form a leadership group to address this need. Look their reasoning in Acts 6:2-4, "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." They appointed leadership over the widow care to ensure they could fulfill their calling to shepherd by devoting their time to prayer and the ministry of the Word. Following this, they lay their hands on the seven, commissioning them with authority to perform their duty. This delineation of leadership served the express purpose of ensuring the shepherding ministry wasn't neglected and, as we continue in the New Testament, we see church leadership formed around this delineation of responsibilities. In Acts 14:23, Paul appoints elders in every Gentile church before completing his mission. And in Acts 15, we see elders working alongside the apostles to determine the decisions around Gentile inclusion in God's new covenant people and shepherding the church in how to respond. Then, in Acts 20, Paul calls the Ephesian elders to Miletus, and tells them in verse 28, "Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers, to care for [shepherd] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood." The use of shepherding imagery shows us elders continued the shepherd-leader function of the apostles. Note also how Paul calls them overseers. This will be important as we move forward. I know this is a lot and we're almost done with this overview. So hang with me. In Paul's letters, a second group of leaders appears alongside elders/overseers. Look at Philippians 1:1, Paul writes, "To all the saints in Christ Jesus who are at Philippi, with the overseers and deacons." Note how the saints at Philippi are distinct from overseers/elders and deacons. We discover deacons were an official leadership role through Paul's instructions to Timothy in 1 Timothy 3. Look at 1 Timothy 3:1. Paul says, "If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task."

“Office of overseer” is one word, used in Acts 1:20 to refer to Judas’ role as an apostle. It carries the ideas of watching over something or someone, exercising supervision or management, confirming this was a official leadership role in the church. Move down to verse 8, where Paul says, “Deacons likewise.” The Greek for “likewise” indicates something similar but distinct from what proceeded, meaning this is a similar official role but distinct from elders. Deacons is a transliteration of the word for “servants,” and the verb form of this word is used to describe the work of the Seven in Acts 6. With elders/overseers continuing the shepherd-leader function of apostles, this suggests Deacons continued the function of the Seven in helping the elders focus on shepherding. We’ll work through this more in the coming weeks. For now, the point is to see these roles, distinct from the saints, functioning in the early church to ensure the ministry of shepherd-leaders would continue. Writings from the early church fathers consistently reveal these roles formed the leadership of the early church. Ok, you might be saying, “Thanks for the history lesson, Ben. But why does this matter?” This brings me to the final and main point for today,

The Roles of Elders & Deacons Serve to Guide the Church to Fulfill its Primary Function

This is why we need to understand these roles. Look at 1 Timothy 3:14-15. Paul says, “I hope to come to you soon, but I am writing these things to you so that, if I delay, you may know how one ought to behave in the household of God, which is the church of the living God, a pillar and buttress of the truth.” This immediately follows Paul’s description of elders and deacons, and includes everything written since the beginning of chapter 2. Note how Paul is giving the purpose for writing these things and three aspects of that purpose. First, there is a way people ought to behave in the church, or more literally “the assembly” of God’s people. “Behave” refers to a person’s way of life, not just our individual actions. Second, he calls the church the household of God, using a term that could mean a family unit or a building. I’m persuaded this is intentional with the familial concept pointing to relationships in the church, and the building concept to us being God’s temple. In 1 Timothy 2:8, Paul began this section of material by saying he desires these things “in every place,” showing he is primarily referring to local congregations. So, Paul desires us live well in relationships within the local congregation of God’s people because we are the dwelling place of God’s Spirit. Finally, Paul uses specific imagery to share the responsibility and function of God’s gathered people. Pillars hold the roof up and a buttress, or foundation, provides fortification. If you have toured buildings influenced by Greco-Roman architecture, you’ll notice how sturdy they are and how your eyes are constantly drawn upward toward ceilings adorned with ornate and elaborate designs. Ephesus, where Timothy was when Paul wrote this letter, was home to the temple of Diana, or Artemis, one of the Seven Wonders of the Ancient World, which offered a striking example of this. The temple featured one hundred columns around sixty-foot tall supporting its magnificent roof, which was a spectacle for the world to marvel at. That is the picture Paul is painting. John Stott says, “Here then is the double responsibility of the church vis-à-vis the truth. First, as its foundation [or buttress] it is to hold it firm, so that it does not collapse under the weight of false teaching. Secondly, as its pillar it is to hold it high, so that it is not hidden from the world.” (John Stott, *The Message of 1 Timothy and Titus*, p. 105). And what is that truth? Look at verse 16, “Great indeed, we confess, is the mystery of godliness: He was manifested in the flesh, vindicated by the Spirit, seen by angels, proclaimed among the nations, believed on in the world, taken up in glory.” The truth is the reality of Jesus’ incarnation, the Spirit’s attestation to the sufficiency of His atoning death on the cross, the marveling of the angels at this work of God, the proclamation to and belief in His work by the nations, and His exaltation at the right hand of God. This is our great confession as the people of God. And Paul calls it our confession of the mystery of godliness, which means our confession that godliness exists because of Christ and only in Christ. This truth is far more awe inspiring than any marbled temple ceiling, leaving people breathless when understood. Consider the lofty calling, family! Our way of life in the local congregation of Christ’s gathered people upholds and displays this truth for the world to marvel at. Because Christ did not die for us to leave us in our sin. He died to make us victorious. He died to show His power over sin and death. He died for us to display His perfect patience and mercy. He died to give us faith so that we may truly live.

And Paul is saying the roles of elders and deacons, and the way of life carried out through those who hold these roles, serve to guide the gathered church in fulfilling its purpose of displaying the beauty of the gospel of Jesus Christ. This is purpose of God's structured household and the reason to ensure our leadership aligns with God's Word, so this flock will be a beautiful display of the glories of the gospel. That is why this matters, and why we are taking time to carefully evaluate this. Church is not primarily about what we do, but about who we are.

Conclusion:

As the worship team comes for our time of response, I want to encourage you to dwell on our lofty purpose as a church. Think deeply on our responsibility and function of displaying the truth of Christ to the world as we gather. And as you do this, I want to encourage you to consider what God is calling you to believe, desire, or do in light of that. Over the next few weeks, we will consider the distinct roles and responsibilities of elders, deacons, and the saints in this. And my prayer is that each person at GracePoint Church will see how we are called fill those roles. So, as you respond today, pray for this church to be a magnificent display the glories of the gospel. Ask the Spirit to provide elders and deacons to guide our church well. And ask for help to live in this gathered expression of Christ's church as He desires for you to live. Pray now for God to reveal what role you are called to fill because this series isn't just an intellectual exercise. There are great realities at stake in how we live as a church, and we want God to move powerfully in guiding our steps forward. Would you pray with me as we prepare to respond?