

# ALWAYS REFORMING

Church  
Government



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# ALWAYS REFORMING: Church Government

*Responsibilities & Blessings*  
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Have you ever paused in view of the gospel to consider how generous God is? Usually when we think of God’s generosity, our minds will consider all the possessions He has graciously given to us—our food, or clothes, or house, or car. Often we will thank Him for our family and friends, our relatively good health, or maybe some enjoyable weather. As Christians, it is nearly impossible to forget the generosity of His free salvation in Christ—that He has saved us from our sins all apart from our own doing, adopted us into His family, and blessed us with *“every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places.”*<sup>i</sup>

While all of these things are most certainly awesome gifts of a generous God, I want us to see that the gospel drives us deeper into grace-inspired gratitude. You see the gospel reveals that we have all—every one of us—sinned against God. It declares that the wages, the just results, of our sin is eternal death in Hell.<sup>ii</sup> In other words, when we think about what we deserve—what we *should* get—the gospel reveals that every person on this planet deserves...Hell.

Now think of what that means. It means that everything in your life at this very moment that is not *literally*<sup>iii</sup> Hell is in reality an undeserved gift of God’s grace to you. Since nothing in our lives is literally Hell, in light of the gospel therefore, everything becomes a testimony to God’s unfathomable generosity. Everything is deserving of praise because everything is an undeserved gift because everything is not literally Hell. Only with this gospel re-orientation

can we properly obey Paul's command to *"rejoice always"* and *"give thanks in all circumstances."*<sup>iv</sup>

This gospel perspective enables us to recognize that every good thing in our lives is actually an undeserved gift of God's goodness. With this new mindset, life takes on a whole new light of profound gratitude, for even that bad thing over which we complain cannot compare to the agony our sins actually deserve.

It is this attitude of gratitude that I pray will saturate this reforming study of our church government, for church leaders are a special gift from God. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul tells us that one important gift our victorious Savior has given to His church is *"shepherds and teachers"* in order to *"equip the saints for the work of ministry for building up the body of Christ."* In order to make His church mature and united in love, Christ has given His bride the gracious gift of elders, that is *"shepherds-teachers."*

I know that the idea of a plurality of elders within our church can easily be looked upon with suspicion, if for no other reason than because it is completely unfamiliar. Yet, my prayer for today is that God would grace us to adopt an attitude of gratitude. Last week, I wanted us to see that elders are biblical. This week, I want us to see that elders are good. They are a gift for our good that demonstrates God's goodness. My desire is that we would joyfully come to embrace this edifying gift of God's love by reforming our church's structure.

This morning as we continue our study, we will focus our attention on the office of elder. Last week we looked at the biblical evidence. We saw that the consistent pattern of the New Testament—no matter the church's size or age—is a plurality of elders in a single church. Yet, what exactly is an elder? What do they

do? What are their responsibilities? What are some of the benefits of having a plurality of elders in one single church? My goal for today is to answer those questions from God's Word.

## WHAT ARE ELDERS?

Within the New Testament, we find two church offices that presently apply to local churches. These offices are elders (or pastors or overseers) and deacons. In his book, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, Pastor Thabiti Anyabwile says, "Deacons and elders make up the two enduring offices of the New Testament church. While deacons serve the practical or physical needs of the church, elders serve the overall spiritual needs of the church."<sup>v</sup>

In the New Testament we see three different terms used interchangeably that describe this church office. First we see the word 'elder.' In Acts 14:23 we read, "*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.*" In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul writes, "*Let the elders who rule well be considered of double honor, especially those who labor in preaching and teaching.*" As we saw last week, there were elders in the church at Jerusalem<sup>vi</sup>, in the churches of Asia Minor to whom Peter wrote<sup>vii</sup>, and in the churches spread across the Roman world to whom James wrote.<sup>viii</sup>

Yet, in addition to the term 'elder' we also find the term 'pastor' or 'shepherd'<sup>ix</sup> and the term 'overseer' or 'bishop'<sup>x</sup> used throughout the New Testament. In Ephesians 4:11, Paul says that Christ has given as gifts to His church "*pastors and teachers.*" In 1 Timothy 3:1, Paul writes, "*The saying is trustworthy: If anyone aspires to the office of overseer, he desires a noble task.*"

We know that these three terms—elders, pastors, and overseers—are all meant to address the same office because the New Testament uses them interchangeably. We see one clear example of this in Acts 20.

As Paul is skipping by boat down the western coast of modern-day Turkey, he lands at the port of Miletus near Ephesus. Verse 17 says, *“Now from Miletus he sent to Ephesus and called the elders of the church to come to him.”* There is the first term—‘elders.’ Yet while addressing this group of elders, Paul says in verse 28, *“Pay careful attention to yourselves and to all the flock, in which the Holy Spirit has made you overseers...”* Paul tells the ‘elders’ that have been made ‘overseers’ by the Holy Spirit. But then Paul continues, *“to care for [that is literally ‘to shepherd’] the church of God, which he obtained with his own blood.”*<sup>xi</sup> These ‘elders’ are called ‘overseers’ and they’ve been called ‘to shepherd’ the church of God. In one passage, all three of the terms are used for the same group of men.

In Titus 1, we see something similar. In verse 5, Paul tells us that the reason he left Titus in Crete was *“so that you might put what remained into order, and appoint elders in every town as I directed you.”* Then right after given qualifications in verse 6 for the office of elder, Paul switches terms and says in verse 7, *“For an overseer, as God’s steward, must be above reproach.”* The fluidity with which these terms can be interchanged demonstrates that they all refer to the same office within the church. An ‘elder’ is a ‘pastor’ who is ‘an overseer.’

But what do elders do? What are their responsibilities? We can break down their role into four overlapping categories. Elders lead, feed, protect, and equip.

## LEAD

First, elders are called to lead the church. They are given authority by God to lead and guide His people. In 1 Timothy 5:17, Paul says, *“Let the elders who rule well be considered of double honor.”* In 1 Timothy 3, Paul makes the connection between elder leadership within a local church and a husband’s leadership within the home. He says, *“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?”*<sup>xii</sup> Hebrews 13:17 says, *“Obey your leaders and submit to them, for they are keeping watch over your souls, as those who will give an account.”* Benjamin Merkle comments, *“The leaders, probably the elders, thus have a certain authority. Authority in the church is not equally divided among the members.”*<sup>xiii</sup>

In reference to 1 Peter 5, where Peter exhorts the elders to *“shepherd the flock of God that is among you, exercising oversight...not domineering over those in your charge, but being examples to the flock,”* Wayne Grudem comments:

The fact that they are to act as shepherds of the flock of God, and the fact that they are not to domineer (that is, not to rule harshly or oppressively) strongly suggests that elders have ruling or governing function in the churches to which Peter is writing. This is consistent with his charge that especially those who are younger should ‘be subject to the elders’ (v. 5).<sup>xiv</sup>

So elders lead the church.

Now it is always important to remember that biblical leadership is humble leadership, servant leadership that leads by example and exemplifies Christ. We see this in Hebrews 13. Shortly

before calling on the church to obey and submit to its leaders, the author of Hebrews calls them to remember the legacy of their lives saying, *“Remember your leaders, those who spoke to you the word of God. Consider the outcome of their way of life, and imitate their faith.”*<sup>xv</sup> Elders lead by example, not by demanding respect or barking commands like the pattern of this world.

Nevertheless, if we are going to understand the role of elders, we must first recognize that they have been appointed by the Holy Spirit and given legitimate authority to lead the church. Scripture doesn't burrow down into the details of how this authority plays out. It doesn't give us a list of examples demonstrating the extent of the elders' governing authority. In many of the practical life-situations of a church, the Scriptures are quiet about the details in this regard.

For that reason, elder leadership can only be properly exercised in an environment of trust. The congregation, in being called to “obey” and “submit” to its leaders, is ultimately called to trust them, to trust that they are striving to be faithful to God's Word, to trust that they are laboring sacrificially for their ultimate good. Pastor Mark Dever says it like this, “A church member's basic attitude needs to be either to trust the leaders or replace them. But don't say that you acknowledge them and then not follow them.”<sup>xvi</sup> Unless a congregation willfully decides to trust and submit, effective leadership is nearly impossible, and ultimately exasperating. Trust is absolutely essential.

And this is one great benefit of having a plurality of elders in a single congregation: It is often easier to trust a decision that has been reached by a group of wise, gifted leaders as opposed to a single individual. Every person, no matter how mature, has areas of weakness. No person, apart from Christ, has perfect wisdom. A



plurality of elders is able to combine their collective wisdom, wrestle together with complex and difficult situations, and usually arrive at a conclusion that is wiser than any of them would have reached alone.

Trust is hard, especially in areas of importance where the answer isn't abundantly clear. Yet, think how much easier it would be to submit—as Scripture requires—to a difficult decision in an uncertain situation if you know that it has been carefully examined by the multiplied wisdom of multiple men gifted by God and appointed to lead, men who know they will have to give an account to God for that decision.

Brothers and Sisters, as we slowly move forward down this path of reformation, prayerfully look around our church to see if, maybe, God is raising up potential elders from among us. Do you see a man who is currently a leader, a man whom you trust to search God's Word and lead by example? It could be that God has given us that man as a gift to serve as an elder in our church.

## FEED

The second primary role of the elders is to feed the church through the teaching of the Word. In many ways, the teaching of the Word is the elders' primary task in leading the church. An elder's authority is inextricably connected to the Word. Pastor Mark Lauderbach puts it plainly, "An elder with no Bible is an elder with no authority."<sup>xvii</sup> Elder leadership is tethered exclusively to Scripture, and therefore teaching the Word is of primary importance. We can see this in several ways.

In Acts 6, when the church was on the verge of a split because of perceived cultural preferences in the distribution of food to widows, the Apostles call on the church to appoint deacons so that

they can continue to focus primarily on teaching God's Word. In verse 2 they say, *"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."*

In 1 Timothy 3, the unique qualification that is only required of an elder is that he must be *"able to teach."*<sup>xviii</sup> Titus 1:9 states that an elder *"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."*

Speaking to Timothy as he begins to close out his final letter, Paul highlights the priority of the Word by saying, *"I charge you in the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who is to judge the living and the dead, and by his appearing and his kingdom: preach the word; be ready in season and out of season; reprove, rebuke, and exhort, with complete patience and teaching."* In Hebrews 13:7, the leaders the church is called to remember are *"those who spoke the word of God to you."*

The shepherds of the church are tasked with feeding the sheep a healthy diet of God's Word. This responsibility is non-negotiable. As Benjamin Merkle says, *"The importance of solid, gospel teaching in the church is vital to the church's existence. The Word must be preached, and it is the task of elders to preach that Word."*<sup>xix</sup>

## PROTECT

Yet, an elders role doesn't stop at merely leading and teaching, as shepherds elders are also called to protect. We see this

when Paul is addressing the Ephesian elders in Acts 20. He says, *“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, remembering that for three years I did not cease night or day to admonish every one with tears.”* A shepherd-pastor—an elder—is watchful and alert, understanding that God has tasked him to protect the flock under his care.

Elders protect the flock by caring for them compassionately, pursuing them when they wander, and carrying them when they fall. When we consider the important role of protection, we begin to see the wonderful blessing of multiple shepherds to a single flock. A plurality of elders means greater protection and multiplied care. A church with 2 shepherds (or three or five) is protected from danger with greater diligence than it would be if only one man were watching them.

## EQUIP

A fourth responsibility that elders are given is to equip. Benjamin Merkle says, *“The role of the elder as teacher is important, not just for the health of the church in the present, but also for the growth of the church in the future. As a result, it is not enough for the elders simply to be teachers; they also must be purposefully equipping the next generation of elders to minister alongside them or to plant new churches in the community.”*<sup>xx</sup>

In 2 Timothy 2:2, we see this responsibility to equip in Paul’s instructions to Timothy. Paul commands saying, *“what you have heard from me in the presence of many witnesses entrust to faithful men who will be able to teach others also.”* Like Timothy, elders are

to be equipping future leaders to lead, training up a next batch of shepherds to faithfully lead, feed, and protect the flock.

Yet, beyond simply equipping future leaders, the elders are tasked with equipping the saints for the work of the ministry. This is why, Paul says, Christ has given His church ‘shepherd-teachers.’<sup>xxi</sup> Instead of simply doing all the work of the ministry themselves, God has given the church elders so that they can equip the saints to do that work. Equipping through personal discipleship and instruction is at the heart of an elder’s responsibility.

## A GRACIOUS GIFT OF GOD

These are the primary roles an elder is called to fulfill—to lead, feed, protect, and equip. I hope that you are beginning to see the great blessing there is in God giving a single church multiple men who are entrusted with these sacred responsibilities. With a plurality of elders there is combined insight to lead wisely, multiple teachers to feed faithfully, various vantage points to watch attentively, and diverse coaches to equip continuously. Instead of being an insignificant, theological idiosyncrasy, a plurality of elders is a profound blessing. It is a gift of God’s goodness to the church.

In his booklet, *A Display of God’s Glory: Basics of Church Structure*, Mark Dever lists some of the many advantages there are in reforming our church government to include a plurality of elders. He says,

“A plurality of elders should aid a church by rounding out the pastor’s gifts, making up for some of his defects, supplementing his judgment, and creating support in the congregation for decisions, leaving leaders less exposed to unjust criticism. Such a plurality also makes leadership

more rooted and permanent, and allows for more mature continuity. It encourages the church to take more responsibility for the spiritual growth of its own members, and helps make the church less dependent on its employees.”<sup>xxii</sup>

Brothers and Sisters, there is a reason that our infinitely wise God has provided this pattern of church government throughout the New Testament—it is good. The church is precious to God, Jesus obtained it with his own priceless blood; therefore, it only makes sense that the only example of church government he provides throughout the New Testament is for the church’s eternal good.

## HOW SHOULD WE RESPOND?

And so, how should we respond? Let me point out three ways in closing.

First, *respond by praying that God would raise up elders within our church.* With sanctified spiritual selfishness (if there is such a thing), pray that we would have a plurality of elders leading us. After all, nearly four years into my service here, it should be obvious to everyone that I am not perfect and that I have weaknesses. Think about how beneficial it will be then—not only for me, but for *you*—if my weaknesses were filled by the strengths of another and my limited perspective expanded by the wisdom of others. That would be awesome! Pray that God would raise up elders because it is for your good, your maturity and growth, that God will give them.

Pray also that they will be trustworthy men, characterized by humility and a shepherd’s heart. Pray that God would steadily grow your willingness to trust, to submit, to obey the spiritual leaders God will raise up to watch over your souls. After all, effective spiritual

leadership in any church rests delicately upon a congregation's willingness to trust.

First of all, pray!

Then second, *keep your eyes open for the men God will raise up*. Look around our congregation with discerning eyes. After Easter we will examine the qualifications of an elder, but ask yourself, is there already a man or two who is informally doing the work of an elder? Is he a humble leader the church already seems to trust? Does he display a passion for God's Word and an ability to teach and defend sound doctrine? Does he live an honorable and godly life? Are there a few men who are in an unofficial capacity already shepherding our church, tenderly caring for and faithfully protecting its members? Keep your eyes open. It could be that God in His great kindness has gifted us with these gifted men, so that they can serve us in this leadership role.

Second, keep your eyes open.

Third, *cultivate an attitude of gratitude*. Every day, in countless ways, God is demonstrating His goodness by showering us with undeserved gifts. In light of the gospel, every single thing in our life, is completely undeserved and therefore a testimony to God's great kindness. Gratitude, thankfulness, joy should saturate our lives completely.

Brothers and Sisters, let us see that our victorious King has showered us with all the spiritual blessings of His saving work. Paul is clear that he has given "pastors and teachers", that is elders, as gifts to His church. In His instructing love, He has provided a consistent pattern throughout the New Testament of every church having a plurality of elders. He would not do so purposelessly. Let us, therefore, trusting in His wisdom and grateful for His gifts, embrace

this reforming work with an attitude of gratitude. And let us rejoice know that God will provide the men we need to serve us in this role of elders.

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<sup>i</sup> Ephesians 1:3

<sup>ii</sup> Romans 6:23

<sup>iii</sup> This is one of those rare instances in which the word “literally” isn’t used figuratively but literally!

<sup>iv</sup> 1 Thessalonians 5:16,18

<sup>v</sup> Thabiti Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 49.

<sup>vi</sup> Acts 15

<sup>vii</sup> 1 Peter 5:1

<sup>viii</sup> James 5:14

<sup>ix</sup> This term occurs in its noun form in Ephesians 4:11 and in its verb form in Acts 20:20 and 1 Peter 5:2

<sup>x</sup> Acts 20:28; 1 Timothy 3:1-2; Titus 1:7; Philippians 1:1

<sup>xi</sup> Acts 20:28

<sup>xii</sup> 1 Timothy 3:4-5

<sup>xiii</sup> Benjamin L. Merkle, *40 Questions About Elders and Deacons*, 89.

<sup>xiv</sup> Wayne Grudem, *Systematic Theology*,

<sup>xv</sup> Hebrews 13:7

<sup>xvi</sup> Mark Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory: Basics of Church Structure*, 45.

<sup>xvii</sup> Quoted in Thabiti Anyabwile, *Finding Faithful Elders and Deacons*, 49.

<sup>xviii</sup> 1 Timothy 3:2

<sup>xix</sup> Merkle, *40 Questions*, 93.

<sup>xx</sup> *ibid*, 93-94.

<sup>xxi</sup> Ephesians 4:12

<sup>xxii</sup> Dever, *A Display of God’s Glory*, 27.